

A mediator between worlds

Nevfel Cumart, German-language poet of Turkish descent, on his art and social commitment

by Sabine Mahler

BAMBERG

Nevfel Cumart is the best-known German-language poet of Turkish descent. He was born in Lingenfeld and took up studies in Bamberg. In the meantime he has received numerous prizes for his literary work. Today he lives in Stegaurach at a small distance from Bamberg.

Mr. Cumart, you did Turkish, Arabic and Islamic Studies. How did you come to writing and publishing poetry?

That began before my time in Bamberg. I started writing poetry at the age of 17. My first volume of poetry was published when I was still at school, but the impulse to publish did not come from me. Friends and teachers had made a small publishing house aware of me that was very keen on publishing a volume of my poetry. Later on, a Turkish literary critic discovered me and recommended me to a publishing house in Frankfurt. It's possible that I as a youth would never have taken the initiative by myself.

Mr. Cumart, you are a German poet of Turkish descent. To what extent do the two different cultures influence your work?

I write my literature exclusively in German. That's the language that I master best. But the content is, both linguistically and literarily, also shaped by Turkish culture. I find it enriching to be able to draw from both cultures. In various critiques of my work this "colouring" of my literary work has been addressed. In one review it is even called "the Turkish seasoning".

You have received the Pax Bank Award for inter-religious commitment as the first Muslim ever. What does this distinction signify for you?

I was delighted about this prize because it is an acknowledgement of my work, which has not only to do with pure literature. A considerable part of my presentations takes place at grass-root level. I am also very often at schools in social trouble spots where there are also many foreign youths. What I do there in the form of readings, lectures and creative writing workshops I sometimes call "basic youth-culture social work". That, of course, is



not so titillating and won't get you invited to talk shows.

Do you see yourself as a mediator between the worlds?

A large part of my work and my commitment has certainly to do with mediation and understanding of people from different origins and cultures. In newspaper articles I am often referred to as a bridge-builder. To be such a thing was not my professional aim. Actually, I have grown into this role from an early age because I grew up in a housing estate with four large blocks of flats where about 300 Turkish families lived. Many fellow-countrymen came to us when they had some kind of problem. And as I was the only one in the family who spoke good German I often had to help out. Translating in doctors' practices, hospitals, before the court and in the offices of authorities belonged to my everyday engagements when I was young. There is nothing I don't know regarding the problems, worries and afflictions of migrants here in Germany. In this way I was pushed more and more into the role of mediator and translator.

In your poems you openly treat your own life; your father appears and also your daughter is present in your material over and over again. Does that not make you vulnerable?

You are perfectly right. Many of my poems are authentic and biographical. I give insights into my life and that of my family. And whenever one exposes oneself, one makes oneself vulnerable. But I stand by what I say and tell myself that no-one knows more about me than I do. And besides, I have under control how much I divulge about myself, for the decision lies with me which poems I publish and which not.

Can you give us a hint of what is in your up-and-coming volume?

I just brought out a new book with the title "Strandgut" (flotsam and jetsam) which presents the culmination of a very interesting project: in five vocational schools in Bavaria for two days each I gave creative writing workshops for youths from different subjects. The central idea of the writing project was that youths of German and non-German descent write literary texts about themselves and their life, their future and also their feelings about

their homeland and about current problems in society under the professional supervision of a writer. A project of this kind and scale has never been carried out in vocational schools till now.

You often give readings in schools, not only in grammar schools but also for so-called "underdogs".

What are the reactions to a poet in such schools?

Although it is often very demanding, I like going where other literati don't go. Of course it is simple to give a reading to a more advanced class in a grammar school. But I'm convinced that literature should also go where it is otherwise never or only rarely encountered. That also includes elementary schools and special schools where very many foreign pupils are to be found. In some cases the pupils there have never heard a single reading. For that you have to have the knack of reaching out to the kids by giving them your time and attention and using their "lingo". As I succeed in doing this, I am able to win them over for my poems and their contents after an initial defence reaction.

How do you find time for writing with all these additional activities?

There you have made a very important point that has been troubling me for some time. As I carry out so many presentations and pursue several other projects, I do not get around to writing as much as I would like to. For that reason I am looking forward to the summer vacations. We shall be spending a part of the vacations in a small Greek village on the sea. There it is very quiet and has little to distract one.

What is your next large project?

I am working on a German-Turkish volume of poetry that is to appear this winter. I have lyrical landscapes of humanity from the homeland of my parents in mind, if I may express myself a little poetically. Lyrical portraits of Turkish relatives, including some who are already dead, is to form the focal point of the book. It would be nice if I were to succeed in creating a lyrical family legacy. As such it will once more be a very personal volume.