

ERNST WIECHERT

EIN DEUTSCHES WEIHNACHTSSPIEL

THE PLAY

Introduction

IN FORM *Ein deutsches Weihnachtsspiel* is reminiscent of a medieval song-drama, as Jakob Ayrer or Kaspar Stieler, two of the earliest devotees of the genre, understood the term. In the seventeenth century a "Singspiel" was a theatrical production with music. Several references in Wiechert's Christmas play indicate that many, if not all, of the lines were to be sung. The meter of Wiechert's play is also doggerel, a very popular verse form of the late middle ages.

According to Hans Ebeling, one of Wiechert's earliest biographers, the author intended to have *Ein deutsches Weihnachtsspiel* performed by Radio Cologne in 1936. At least four of his other plays were put on in this fashion.¹

The archaic elements in the form of the play seem appropriate. With other neoromantics Wiechert shared the conviction that the Golden Age lay behind rather than before us. The earliest writers of "Weihnachtsspiele" – the oldest example that has come down to us is from the twelfth century – could presume that their audience did not have to be convinced of the meaningfulness of the celebration of the birthday of Jesus. In Wiechert's twentieth-century version, on the other hand, references to the mercenary mentality of the people, to drunken spectators, and to the rising tide of fascism read like an elegy to a less problematic age. By way of example, the following is from the scene at the Christmas fair; the prose translation is my own.

1. They were: *Das Spiel vom deutschen Bettelmann* in 1932 over Radio Leipzig with music by Fritz Reuter and Wilhelm Kempf f; *Das grosse Totenspiel* in 1933 over Radio Munich with music by Walter Egk; *Die goldene Stadt* in 1935 over Radio Leipzig with music by Erwin Kroll; and *Totenmesse* in 1943 over Radio Munich with music by Professor Haas (cf. Ebeling, footnote no. 1, p. 78).

1. Ausrufer:

Hereinspaziert, wer noch spazieren
kann!
Ich bin der deutsche Weihnachtsmann!
Mit Einheitspreis für jung und alt!
Ich komme aus dem deutschen Ein-
heitswald !

2. Ausrufer:

Der Hampelmann zeigt, was er kann,
Kein Haus mehr ohne Hampelmann!

Knabenchor:

O Tannenbaum, o Tannenbaum,
wie grün sind deine Blätter..

3. Ausrufer:

Nur hier die richtgen Gaben sind für
Mann und Frau und Wickelkind!

1. Ausrufer:

Die Eisenbahn das Herz entzückt, wenn
man auf diesen Hebel drückt!

Knabenchor:

Du grünst nicht nur zur Sommerzeit,
nein, auch im Winter, wenn es schneit.

2. Ausrufer:

Für jedes Haus ein Grammophon,
mit Platte "Stunde der Nation"!

1st Barker:

Walk in, if you still can!
I am the German Christmas man!
With one price for old and young!
I grew up in the woods of one Germany!

2nd Barker:

See what the jumping jack can do,
no house should be without one !

Boy's Chorus::

O Tannenbaum, o Tannenbaum,
wie grün sind deine Blätter..

3rd Barker:

Here is the only place to buy a gift, for
your husband or wife or the little kiddies!

1st Barker:

This toy train will warm your heart!
Just give this lever here a start!

Boy's Chorus::

Du grünst nicht nur zur Sommerzeit,
nein, auch im Winter, wenn es schneit.

2nd Barker:

A phonograph for every home and
a record, "Germany's finest Hour"!

Ein deutsches Weihnachtsspiel (The Play)

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Undertones of Wiechert's later rejection of the concept of a personal benevolent divinity, which aroused the righteous indignation and wrath of many during the forties, can also be perceived in this play. The following is from the first scene:

Die Mutter: (bitter u. hart)

Das ist derselbe Herr, der den Vater erschlug, als sie ihn holten von Acker und Pflug.

Das ist der Herr, der wie Vieh uns treibt, damit den Völkern ihre Kurzweil bleibt.

Das ist der Herr, von dem die Pfarrer lügen, damit wir uns besser ins Hungern fügen.

Hab ihn nie gesehn, diesen grossen Herrn, und weder seine Maria noch seinen Stern.....

The Mother: (bitterly)

That is the same Lord who slew your father, when they took him from his field and plow.

That is the Lord, who is driving us like cattle, for popular amusement.

That is the Lord, about whom pastors lie, to help us forget our hungry stomachs.

I have never seen this great Lord or his Mary, or his star.....

Mutter und Kind: (singen)

Nun schenke Gott den Reichen einen schnellen Tod,
damit wir können streichen ihre Butter auf unser Brot!
Wir brauchen keine Tempel, vor dem die Priester stehn,
und brauchen auch keine Stempel, weil wir selber stempeln gehn.
Wir brauchen auch keine Sterne, denn wir schlafen in der Nacht,
ganz wohl und auch ganz gerne, weil das Wohlfahrtsamt uns bewacht.

Mother and Child: (sing)

May God grant the rich a quick death,
so that we can smear their butter on our bread !
We need no temples, with priests by the door,
nor a party seal, if we are on relief.
We don't need any stars, because we sleep at night,
tuckered quite nicely and quite tight,
by our German State Charity.

In the mid-thirties these undertones could still be silenced, and the play finished in accordance with the precepts of the New Testament. After his imprisonment, however, Wiechert, in *Das einfache Leben*, rejected the concept of a personal benevolent god in favor of an "iron law of nature" that incorporated both good and evil. This point of view was not unlike that of his

great contemporary Ernst Barlach. Both rejected the Christian conception because of the existence of evil and sickness in the world, and neither considered the God of the Bible omnipotent. Wiechert's indictment of God for the mass murders of the last war stands in sharp contrast to his political position: in this sphere his quarrel was not with gods but with the Nazi party and those who maintained it in power.

The only reference by Wiechert to *Ein deutsches Weihnachtsspiel* is found in one of his autobiographical writings, *Jahre und Zeiten*.² He writes of "das Weihnachtsspiel" as appearing during the same three-year time span as *Die Majorin*, *Die Hirtennovelle*, *Wälder und Menschen*, *Der Todeskandidat*, *Der Vater*, *Das grosse Totenspiel*, and *Die goldene Stadt*. Within this framework the writing of the play can be dated between 1933 and 1935. The Desch chronology lists "das Weihnachtsspiel"³ as 1934. Mrs. Lilje Wiechert, Ernst Wiechert's widow, also concurs that the play was probably written in 1934.⁴

However, of the seven plays by Wiechert that have come down to us there is another, *Der armen Kinder Weihnachten*, published in 1946, which would also qualify as "ein Weihnachtsspiel." But *Der armen Kinder Weihnachten* is clearly modeled after a beautiful fairy tale which bears the same name in Wiechert's two-volume collection of *Märchen*. These were written during the last winter of the war. This piece, it would seem, found its more

2. Desch ed., IX, p. 661.

3. Ernst Wiechert-der Mensch und sein Werk (Munich: Kurt Desch, p. 286).

4. With regard to its origin, Mrs. Wiechert wrote me the following in December, 1964: "Leider kann ich Ihnen nur die Jahreszahl geben, wahrscheinlich 1934. Und wie es entstand? Ernst Wiechert hat diese Art von Fragmenten neben Anderen geschrieben, intuitiv und aus bedrängtem Herzen in einer bedrängten Zeit Er sprach selten über seine Arbeit und musste sehr vorsichtig sein in allem was er schreib. So ist dieses fragmentarische Spiel aus einem inneren Zwang und ganz still entstanden."
("Unfortunately I can give you only the date, probably 1934. And how it [the play] originated? Ernst Wiechert wrote fragments of this sort and others intuitively and with a heavy heart during an oppressive age. He seldom spoke about his work and had to be very careful with everything he wrote. This play-fragment was thus a product of inner compulsion and originated without much ado.")

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appropriate form in the original *Märchen* rather than in its later dramatic rendering.

Furthermore, neither *Der armen Kinder Weihnachten* nor any of the other pieces listed above expresses any overt sentiments against the National Socialist regime, while in *Ein deutsches Weihnachtsspiel* the conflict between Nazism and Christian belief is the heart of the play. Although he did not criticize the government in any published work, Wiechert was already under surveillance by the Nazis as early as January, 1934, as a letter he addressed to a functionary in the "Hitlerjugend" movement shows. From the same letter it is also clear that Wiechert was already hostile to the regime, but realized that he no longer could say (or write) what he felt: "auch für mich wird wieder die Zeit kommen, in der ich sagen möchte, was ich sagen will, aber dazu muss man Geduld haben, und es hat keinen Sinn, eine Saat vor der Zeit zu beginnen."⁵

The preceding might explain why the play did not find its way into print. Whether this "seed" containing an overt criticism of the government would have been doomed to wither prematurely is a matter of conjecture. Those unwilling to accept Wiechert's interpretation of the Christian ethic as a criterion for political policy would have considered the play and its symbols naive. However, the confrontation of Nazi ideology with Christian belief would, no doubt, also have moved many listeners in Germany during the mid-thirties. If the play had been put on, there is also little doubt that Wiechert would have placed his life in jeopardy. On April 16, 1935, he delivered a major address, *Der Dichter und die Zeit*, in the Auditorium Maximum of the University of Munich. This speech, which criticized the regime in a very general way with very veiled allusions and no mention of names or events, called forth a storm of reaction from the Nazi press and undoubtedly was a factor which led to Wiechert's imprisonment in Buchenwald.

5. Cf. my article, "E. W.'s 'Inward Emigration'" (The German Quarterly, January, 1965).
"I will also have a chance one day to say what I want, but it is necessary to be patient; there is no sense planting a seed too soon."

At variance with the Desch dating of the play, Hans Ebeling, who has constructed one of the two most detailed chronologies of Wiechert's works, lists *Ein deutsches Weihnachtsspiel*, presumably in consultation with the poet, as 1936, and relates that it was actually submitted to the "Reichssender Köln," the national radio station in Cologne. The piece apparently was never broadcast, but the fact that it was submitted is a tribute to Wiechert's courage – or to his rashness – and would indicate that he did not, at least in 1936, consider the play a fragment.

Dating the play 1936 brings it into close proximity to *Der weisse Büffel*, one of Wiechert's most significant novellas, begun during September of the following year. In this allegoric denunciation of Nazism, blind worship of the state and the misuse of power are condemned. Like Wilhelm Tell, the hero refuses to salute the symbol of the ruler. But unlike Schiller's man of action, Wiechert's hero attempts to find solace in a transcendental realm far removed from the political scene. *Der weisse Büffel* is, in this latter regard, a forerunner of *Das einfache Leben*, Wiechert's best novel.

The play itself offers no conclusive internal evidence for either date, 1934 or 1936, except for the fact that "der Fremde," the stranger who embodies the Christian message in *Ein deutsches Weihnachtsspiel*, is taken to task for not raising his hand in salute when Storm Troopers singing the Horst Wessel song march by. An event of this sort was perhaps more likely in 1936:

Die Strasse frei den braunen Bataillonen,	Clear the streets for the brown batalions,
die Strasse frei dem Sturmabteilungsmann,	Clear the streets for the storm troopers,
es schau'n aufs Hakenkreuz voll Hoffnung schon Millionen,	millions are already looking at our swastika hopefully,
der Tag für Freiheit und für Brot bricht an ...	the day of freedom and bread is dawning ...

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"Die Hand empor, du Lichtermann!
Die Fahne rauscht uns hell voran.

"Raise your hand, you simpleton! We are
marching smartly behind our flag.

Wo ist das Land, das dich gebar,
dass du nicht grüssest unsre Schar?"

Which country were you born in?
Why don't you salute our troop?"

However, two works written in 1932 and 1933 show that Wiechert was already concerned with the problems of antisemitism and political murder. *Tobias*, a novella written in 1933 (and first published with *Atli der Bestmann*, a neoromantic piece reminiscent of Joseph Conrad),⁶ had as its hero a political murderer who is brought to justice by his own conscience. *Die Gebärde*, written in 1932 according to both chronologies, condemns antisemitism from a humanitarian point of view. Thus no conclusive evidence can be offered for a precise dating of the play, although it might reasonably be presumed to have been written between 1934 and 1936.

Ernst Wiechert considered that most contemporary writers were all too prone to lay bare the ills of their age, like surgeons dissecting a patient. Once the patient was thus exposed, however, they had no balsam for his wounds. Wiechert's intention was to write for the heart as well as for the head—to offer solace and characters worthy of emulation.

In *Ein deutsches Weihnachtsspiel*, he attempted to come to terms with reality in Germany during the mid-thirties and to offer his readers the balsam of the Christian message.

6. In letter No. 44 Wiechert mentions the fact that he is rereading Conrad with "infinite pleasure."