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**Sabine Lichtenberger and Günter Müller (ed.). *Arbeit ist das halbe Leben...: Erzählungen vom Wandel der Arbeitswelten seit 1945*. Wien: Böhlau, 2012.**

**Dokumentation lebensgeschichtlicher Aufzeichnungen (ed.). *Kinder – Küche – Karriere: Acht Frauen erzählen*. Wien: Böhlau, 2013.**

**Theresia Oblasser. *Eigene Wege: Eine Bergbäuerin erzählt*. Wien: Böhlau, 2013.**

*Arbeit ist das halbe Leben...: Erzählungen vom Wandel der Arbeitswelten seit 1945* (“Working is Half your Life...: Telling the Transformations of the Working World since 1945”), *Kinder – Küche – Karriere: Acht Frauen erzählen* (“Kids – Kitchen – Career: Eight Women Tell their Stories”), and *Eigene Wege: Eine Bergbäuerin erzählt* (“My Own Ways: A Mountain Farmer Tells Her Story”) are among the most recent volumes of the series “Damit es nicht verlorengelht...” (translated as “Lest We Forget...” on the website of the Department of Economic and Social History of the University of Vienna), edited by the association for the “Dokumentation lebensgeschichtlicher Aufzeichnungen” (“Collection of Biographical Records”) in Vienna. Both the collection and the series were founded in 1983 by the historian Michael Mitterauer, two years after the re-launch of the Mass Observation project in the UK (Sheridan 27), with the aim to document and archive the everyday lives of Austrians. The collection holds autobiographical manuscripts by more than 3,000 people, most of them born in Austria after 1900 (see Müller 2009, 93–94). Many of the contributions were elicited with the help of calls for contributions (“Schreibaufrufe”) that aimed at collecting material on specific topics. Günter Müller, the curator of the collection, stresses the close cooperation of the association with those who respond to such calls: every single submission receives a detailed personal reply, and the respondents are assisted in their attempts to keep alive their memories and experiences for posterity.

Müller emphasises that while the association offers support in writing one's life story, it does not wish to provide ready-made templates for such narratives. The collectors are, on the contrary, interested in keeping the contributions as immediate as possible, and ask the respondents to tap their own experiences rather than describing those of others. One aim of the collection is to archive the stories of those who would not usually write and publish their life stories, and many of the contributors have a working-class background. The collection not only aims at building an archive for scholarly research, but wishes to foster biographical reflection as well as education of both individuals and society in a broader sense (see Müller 2009, 102).

Selected contributions are published in the book series, either as monographs or as thematic collections of life stories. Since its launch in 1983, almost seventy volumes—ranging from the life stories of servants at the beginning of the twentieth century and childhood memories of the First World War over collected narratives that deal with eating and drinking habits to the life narratives of single mothers—have been published by Böhlau.<sup>1</sup> In the preface of the first volume, Maria Gremel's *Mit neun Jahren im Dienst: Mein Leben im Stübl und am Bauernhof 1900–1930* (“A Maid-servant at the Age of Nine: My Life on a Farm 1900–1930”), Michael Mitterauer argues that the series wishes to contribute to writing the history of everyday life, and emphasises the didactic usefulness of individual life stories for mediating a lively picture of the past to contemporary readers (see Mitterauer 9–10). The books are accompanied by editorial prefaces and/or afterwords, in which the narratives are put into their socio-historical context, their genesis is explained, and historians or sociologists discuss the prevalent topics of the respective volume from a scholarly perspective. According to Müller, the books are not only used for educational purposes or as the basis for historical and sociological research, but are popular with readers of all ages (see Müller 2007, 438).

The three volumes reviewed for this essay focus on the working lives of Austrians after 1945. The twenty contributions in *Arbeit ist das halbe Leben* were selected from submissions solicited by a call for autobiographical accounts that focused on one's working life—as the editors of the book explain in the preface, this vital aspect had been neglected in many of the contributions made to the collection in the final decades of the twentieth century. The contributors, eleven men and nine women, were born between 1923 and 1951, so for many of them, the beginning of their working lives coincided with the immediate post-War era in Austria. The accounts focus on the writers' vocational training and different stages of their careers. Many writers pay particular attention to the time of their apprenticeship (as a printer, locksmith, or nurse) and frequently contrast

the working conditions and the quality of their training in their post-war youth and the respective conditions when they retired. We learn, for example, about the inside of factories and windowless offices, or the constant cold that accompanied Stefan Reitgruber's work as a mechanic in a car factory as well as Gertrude Litschauer's nightshifts at the "Steinhof" mental home. The comparisons allow for grasping the transformations that have taken place in the second half of the twentieth century not only as far as vocational training and working conditions in several fields of occupation are concerned, but also in respect to more general changes in everyday society that have taken place in these decades, such as the shift from grocery shops to ubiquitous self-service supermarkets, or the gradual motorisation of the population: being able to afford a moped, or even a car, is presented as a huge leap forward by many of the writers. Many accounts refer to the changes in weekly working hours and workers' rights brought about by trade union activists. Since the call for this collection was published in the pamphlets of the Austrian Federation of Trade Unions (ÖGB), it does not come as a surprise that many of the contributors used to be trade union activists and workers' council members.

The accounts of varying length are supplemented by a brief editorial introduction, set apart from the main text by the use of italics, which informs the reader about the author's year of birth, sums up their life course in a few lines and adds details about the author's writing activities. The introductory notes also add information about the authors' marital status. The writers' private lives are largely absent from the accounts. At the end of the volume, pictures of some of the contributors in their working environments are included which, together with the glossary that explains obsolete, specialist or colloquial terms allows the reader to get a vivid insight into the realities of the working lives of a broad spectrum of blue-collar workers and salaried employees in the second half of the twentieth century. The collection definitely attains one of the aims of the "Lest We Forget..." series, namely to acquaint contemporary readers with the living conditions of previous generations, and to trace the changes in post-war Austria from a novel perspective. The volume is further a step towards defying the social illegitimacy of working class milieus which, according to Didier Eribon, is perpetuated as soon as the working classes are talked about from the outside (see Eribon 98).

The volume *Kinder – Küche – Karriere*, which comprises eight longer life narratives by women, further illustrates that the post-war working lives of women were by no means confined to the domestic sphere. Though private and family life is given more room in this volume than in the previous one, only one of the women, Barbara Waß (who has become the author of a number of autobiographical books), did not return to her job as a kindergarten teacher and household help after her wedding in 1965.

The other women either kept their jobs when they married or returned to some kind of employment at a later point in their lives. The accounts, which focus on the decades between 1950 and 1980, provide detailed insights into the education and jobs of women in very different careers, ranging from a tailor to a primary school teacher to a programmer and a psychologist. Descriptions of how the women tried to reconcile work and family life are complemented by meticulous accounts of living conditions and household routines, including the preparation of food and cleaning procedures—the acquisition of the first washing machine presents a highlight in almost all of the life stories collected here. The descriptions of domestic work illustrate that, though the women who tell their stories often had a taxing job outside of their home, they were still largely responsible for the household, as well as the wellbeing of their children.

The life courses of the women presented are not only characterised by (at least for the twenty-first century reviewer) unimaginable hardships and constraints (how does a family of three live in a room of eight square metres for four years?), but admirable resourcefulness and adaptability as well as purposefulness. Traute Molik-Riemer describes very vividly how neither the birth of her son when she was only twenty-one nor the close quarters of the first room she shared with her future husband prevented her from studying for her A-levels and becoming a model as well as a graphic artist. The extremely readable accounts—as the introductory editorial notes for each contribution tell us, many of the women turned to (creative) writing at some point in their lives—do not only convey a sense of the obstacles women were confronted with in the decades covered here, but of the avenues that were open to them, and those they created for themselves. What we must not forget when we read these fascinating life accounts of ingenious women, however, is that they are not necessarily representative of the life courses of women in post-war Austria in general: as Jessica Richter and Brigitte Semanek point out in their afterword to the volume, the labour force participation rate of women had fallen to about 30% by the beginning of the 1970s (323), before it rose again in the course of the 1970s. Also, the stories express the perspectives of individuals who were confident enough about their life courses and careers to put them into words and make them public.

Finally, *Eigene Wege: Eine Bergbäuerin erzählt*, is the second part of the autobiography of Theresia Oblasser (the first part, focusing on her childhood, was published as volume 58 of the series in 2006), a mountain farmer from the province of Salzburg. In *Eigene Wege*, Oblasser focuses on her adult working life and on her artistic awakening as writer and poet. While the structure of the book is loosely chronological, Oblasser also arranges her memories and reflections thematically in places. Her

retrospective narrative is supplemented by extracts from her diary, which she started to write in the 1980s, as well as by a strictly chronological biographical table added at the end of the narrative. In this table, the most important events of Oblasser's life, including the births and deaths of her family members (among them two stillborn children), the dates of her journeys abroad as well as the titles of her publications are listed. It reads like a table of contents to her life (in German-language publications, the table of contents is often found at the back of books) and presents a contrast to the actual table of contents (included at the beginning), which, by the introduction of expressive chapter headings ("Wörter, deren Sinn ich neu entdeckte"—"Words whose meaning I discovered anew") alongside more descriptive ones ("Das Jahr vor der Hochzeit"—"The year before my wedding") foreshadow the writer's creative disposition.

Born in 1941, Oblasser reflects on what it means to be a woman in the social structure of her extended family at a remote farm in the mountains of the Salzburg province, how her life is defined by her role as daughter and wife of farmers and how the roles ascribed to her by tradition and the expectations of the people around her were ultimately not enough for finding any fulfilment in life. What Oblasser, whose inside life is explored in far greater detail than in the accounts contributed to the volumes discussed above, and who frequently reflects on the writing process itself, has in common with many of the other life writers is her willingness to educate herself in adult life and participate in a variety of training opportunities and adult education classes. Oblasser not only co-founded a creative writing group in the 1980s, but became politically active when she discovers that farmers' wives would not receive an old age pension of their own. She changes her perspective on the farming environments she grew up in in the course of an educational trip to Nicaragua in 1991, but despite her dissatisfaction with some of the traditional, religious and cultural conventions she finds herself confronted with, Oblasser presents her identity as firmly rooted in her native parish of Taxenbach. Like the accounts of many of the other life writers' collected in the volumes discussed above, her story is minutely keyed into the spatial and regional particularities of her surroundings; the realities of living in a remote farmhouse in the mountains are rendered comprehensible, I believe, even for readers who are not familiar with the region (as the reviewer is somewhat). The glossary at the end of the book once again explains regional as well as linguistic particularities.

The three books discussed here all contribute to the larger projects of writing history, and writing lives, "from below", and through their richness of detail, and individualised narratives with clearly distinguishable voices, they definitely appeal to both general readers and historians, sociologists

or literary scholars. The varied target audience is probably responsible for the only small point of irritation that the books caused the reviewer: the extent of editing of the autobiographical texts is not entirely clear. In the preface to the first volume, Mitterauer stresses that Gremel's life account was printed exactly as it had been written by her, which explains the inclusion of her statement that she will not send her account to any publisher, but only writes down her memories for her own use (11). The introductory paragraphs in the collected volumes, however, sometimes explain that the accounts present only extracts from longer narratives that were chosen for their thematic suitability. It would have been interesting to learn more about the length, and form, of the 'original' accounts, as well as the extent of—if any—linguistic and stylistic changes that were made by the editors. Also, it is not clear whether the biographical table added at the end of Oblasser's narrative is still meant to be part of her autobiographical account, or whether it already belongs to the interpretive and navigational paratext added by the editor or the writer of the afterword. But other than that, there is a wealth to be learned from these books, and they have the potential to transform the reader's perspective on everyday life, as well as her ideas about (Austrian) twentieth-century social and economic history.

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#### NOTE

<sup>1</sup> For a full list of titles, see [http://www.boehlauverlag.com/Damit\\_es\\_nicht\\_verlorengeht\\_.htm](http://www.boehlauverlag.com/Damit_es_nicht_verlorengeht_.htm).