

Research Paper

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Ingeborg Bachmann as a journalist

Correspondent reports from Rome and radio entertainment in Vienna¹⁾

Abstract: Ingeborg Bachmann (1926-1973) was the ›girl wonder‹ of postwar literature in the German-speaking world. Today, the Ingeborg Bachmann Prize, with its famous annual reading competition in Klagenfurt, Austria, is still considered one of the most important literary prizes in the German-speaking world. Less well known is the fact that Ingeborg Bachmann was not just a poet, storyteller, and novelist, but also a journalist, reporting from Rome for various radio stations and newspapers. She was also employed as a »Script Writer Editor« for the American broadcaster Rot-Weiß-Rot in postwar Vienna in the early 1950s, when the city was still occupied by the four victorious powers in the Second World War. In addition, she worked in the features segment and on radio entertainment.

»Later, so much happened that one could hardly have dared to dream of: university studies, travel, work on newspapers and magazines, and later a permanent job in radio.«
(Bachmann 2010²: 302)

It is fascinating not only to discover Ingeborg Bachmann's journalistic works, but also to place them in their historical context. After all, the young Bachmann began to work as a journalist in a period dominated by a paradigm shift in West German and Austrian journalism following the Second World War. This effect

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is seen both in her political reporting from Rome, the *Römische Reportagen*, and in the episodes she wrote for a radio entertainment series called *Die Radiofamilie* – two poles of her journalistic work that reflect the issues of the age in different ways.

Paradigm shift in German journalism in the post-war period

Ingeborg Bachmann learned the role of a journalist on the job^[2] (cf. McVeigh 2016: 77) at the American occupation radio station Rot-Weiß-Rot in Vienna, where she was employed as a Script Writer Editor (cf. McVeigh 2011: 344) between 1951 and 1953 (cf. Albrecht/Göttsche 2002: 4). The early days of her journalistic career thus fell in a time in which the media landscape in West Germany and Austria was being reorganized in line with the English-speaking and American model, with the aim of giving the profession a different self-image in terms of its role in society, based on a democratic basic order. The goal was to break free from the propaganda and conviction journalism of the Nazi era, so that society could ›learn democracy.« Ideally, the reader or listener should experience how the Nazis' Volksempfänger radio was transformed from an organ for Hitler's statements into a medium that offered fact-based reporting, controversial debate, and a way to experience and analyze art. Since then, the extent to which this objective has been achieved in specific details has repeatedly been the subject of historical journalism research (cf. Blöbaum 2014: 159-165; Pöttker 2014: 144-145).

Ingeborg Bachmann was more than aware of the opportunity with which she was presented. Looking back, she described the horrors of Nazi rule as the end of her childhood: »There was a specific moment that destroyed my childhood. The day Hitler's troops marched into Klagenfurt. It was something so appalling that this day became the beginning of my memory: through a pain that came too early, of such strength that I would perhaps never experience again« (Bachmann 1983: 111). The almost-20-year-old portrayed the end of the war and the liberation from the Nazi dictatorship in her war diary, published after she died: »This is the most wonderful summer of my life. Even if I live to be one hundred years old, this will remain the most wonderful spring and summer. The peace is hardly noticeable, they all say, but for me, peace is peace!« (Bachmann 2010: 23).

2 Joseph McVeigh describes how the broadcaster RWR held a library of American standard reference works on compiling radio programs, which all deskmen used (cf. McVeigh 2011: 347).

Objectivity and democratic discourse

This reference to the historical context throws up various questions: How strong was Ingeborg Bachmann's understanding of journalism in line with Anglo-American concepts? Is there proof of her focus on facts or of her goal of creating the greatest possible transparency in society through her journalistic texts?

In German and literature studies, Bachmann's journalistic texts, and particularly her correspondent reports for the *Westdeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung* newspaper in Essen and for Radio Bremen (*Römische Reportagen*) from Rome in 1954-1955, are often prematurely written off as functional texts, »of significance under neither poetological nor literary aspects« (Albrecht/Götttsche 2002: 173). It is time to adopt a different point of view – one that takes into account the specific perspectives of journalism studies as an academic subject. After all, the fact that the style is unobtrusive and adheres to the format specified by the broadcaster is not necessarily a sign of poor quality. On the contrary: One could argue that – specifically because she strived to adhere to journalistic quality standards and to commit to the goal of objectivity – Ingeborg Bachmann met the criteria for a good journalistic text. In some cases, this can mean that the author deliberately takes a step back – in contrast to literary works. Who is reporting is not, or at least should not be, important; what matters is that the reporting is guided by objectivity. The fact that Ingeborg Bachmann published her correspondent reports from Rome under the pseudonym Ruth Keller, for example, fits in perfectly with this,³ allowing her to differentiate between her work as an author in literary and journalistic texts. In light of this, her use of a pseudonym may have been an attempt to »neutralize« herself as an author, i.e. to speak not with the subjective voice of a literary figure, but as an observer of political or societal processes, serving the readers or listeners.

Early days at Rot-Weiß-Rot radio in Vienna

In fall 1945, Ingeborg Bachmann moved to Innsbruck to begin her studies in philosophy, which she then continued in Graz and, from September 1946, in the Austrian capital, Vienna. In 1949, she completed a doctorate under Viktor Kraft, an exponent of philosophical neopositivism. Her dissertation, *Die kritische*

3 Ingeborg Bachmann's pseudonym may have been a reference to Helen Keller, the American social reformer and women's rights activist who lost her sight and hearing at an early age, yet learned to write and became an author (cf. Dreier/Schneider 2002: 99). This hypothesis does not seem so far-fetched to me. For example, in her speech at the award of a radio play prize for the war blind in 1959, Bachmann considered »seeing« and »hearing« not only in their literal sense, but also in terms of their metaphorical significance for art (cf. Bachmann 2010²: 275-277).

Aufnahme der Existenzialphilosophie Martin Heideggers [The critical acceptance of the existential philosophy of Martin Heidegger] was thus explicitly a work ›against‹ Heidegger, Bachmann said later (cf. Bachmann 1983: 137).

The Wiener Kreis group, whose members included her doctoral supervisor Viktor Kraft, Rudolf Carnap, Moritz Schlick, and Otto Neurath, was also close to the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein. Bachmann was a proven authority on Wittgenstein's philosophy, having covered it in various essays and radio pieces in 1953 (cf. Bachmann 2010²: 103-127). Neopositivism is based on an academic worldview that uses the means of formal logic to recognize facts and scientific method, rather than using mere experience and metaphysical approaches that cannot be verified in the same way (cf. Hoell 2001: 41). As the emergence of the news paradigm in the English-speaking world is derived from a similar source in the history of thought (cf. Stensaas 2014: 45ff.), extending the primacy of scientific objectivity to other fields, such as journalism, can be seen as a sign of Ingeborg Bachmann's affinity with it.

At the same time, Ingeborg Bachmann was making contacts in Vienna's literary scene, soon joining the circle of writer and theater critic Hans Weigel – who would later become her mentor – at Café Raimund. There she met literary figures such as Ilse Aichinger, Milo Dor, H.C. Artmann, Friederike Mayröcker, and many more. But as well as her status as an up-and-coming literary figure, Ingeborg Bachmann also had to earn a living. Alongside smaller commissions for newspapers and magazines (cf. McVeigh 2016: 69ff.), she therefore also began working in the administration of the American occupying authority – first in the office of the News and Features Section of the Amerikanischer Nachrichtendienst (AND) and then, from fall 1951, at the radio station Rot-Weiß-Rot (RWR), which was located at Seidengasse in the 7th district of Vienna, in the American sector of the occupied city (cf. McVeigh 2011: 75, 344; Lennox 2004: 19).

The station Rot-Weiß-Rot, which overcame initial problems with acceptance among the Austrian population to become the country's most popular broadcaster (cf. Wagenleitner 1991: 142), was an American military station from its inception in 1945 until its end in 1955. It was answerable to the Information Service Branch (ISB), whose role was to support the military commanders of Austria's American zone in the culture and media sector (cf. Feldinger 1990, 27-28; McVeigh 2016: 29). In 1950, the broadcaster launched a psychological offensive to boost the radio station's acceptance among the Austrian public. The key aim was to make the station more popular among listeners than the Austrian broadcaster Radio Verkehrs AG (RAVAG), which was located in the Soviet sector. The Cold War was already underway, and the Americans were hoping that entertainment was the way to win over the Austrians to their democratic values (cf. McVeigh 2004: 57). To achieve this, they were looking for young, ›unspent‹ Austrian staff who could make the relaunched medium more attractive (cf. Wagenleitner 1991:

139). Ingeborg Bachmann was one. Her colleague at the editorial office, Peter Weiser, later remembered Ingeborg Bachmann's crucial role in shaping the three-person editorial office team (which also included the journalist, writer and later culture politician Jörg Mauthe) through a talent for organization and an »unerring« sense of the medium of radio: »Inge, as she was called, as she was still far from being Bachmann, imperceptibly took over the reins of the script department. [...] We gave her every manuscript to read and took every one of her objections into account; we discussed every new project with her, and when she brought forth her own ideas, we tried to implement even the craziest of them. She, who never listened to the radio herself, had an unerring sense of the possibilities of this medium, which she sounded out in their full depth, as well as of its limits, which she prevented us from crossing« (Weiser 1982: 103-104).

At the coffee house, Mauthe and Weiser worked with Ingeborg Bachmann to develop the radio family *Floriani*, for example. It »was to become Austria's most listened-to radio show for many years« (Weiser 1982: 104). The radio series covered the experiences of a fictional Vienna family, reflecting on current political and social issues as it did so (see below). Ingeborg Bachmann herself reported on her work at RWR in a letter to poet Paul Celan, emphasizing how successful her work was among listeners: »I sit in a room with two other men and two secretaries; with these two men, I work on plays for the radio, alongside that I occasionally have to write a radio play myself, compile the weekly film reviews, and read and assess countless, almost exclusively poor, manuscripts. What I effect is not always bad, what we present to our listeners is actually quite daring for Austria, from Eliot to Anouilh, but, remarkably, we are actually successful with it« (Bachmann 2008: 37).

According to Peter Weiser, Ingeborg Bachmann used her lunch breaks from her job at the editorial office to »write poetry.« In 1953, the author left her job at RWR and moved to Italy. Weiser says laconically: »Then she went. She had become world famous. Through the poems she wrote in her lunch break« (Weiser 1982: 104).

The Römische Reportagen [Roman feature stories]

In 1953, Ingeborg Bachmann resigned from her position at the broadcaster Rot-Weiß-Rot and moved to Italy in order to concentrate more intensively on her work as an author. Through her contact with Gustav René Hocke, who worked as a correspondent in Rome for papers including Munich's *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, Ingeborg Bachmann was given the opportunity to produce weekly radio features on social and political issues for Radio Bremen. Looking for someone to deputize for him during an extended period abroad (cf. Kogel 1998: 84), Hocke recommended his young colleague to the then Chief Editor of Radio at Radio Bremen, Hans

Herbert Westermann, for the program *Zeit im Funk*. She spoke Italian, was »very professional, knows the country, writes excellently, and is in need of money,« he argued (Kogel 1998: 85). Westermann quickly agreed. He »did not hesitate and employed Ingeborg Bachmann on the spot, particularly as he had found out that the young author already had some experience of radio, which she had gained as a script writer and later deskman at the Vienna radio station Rot-Weiss-Rot« (Kogel 1998: 85).

Every Monday, the editorial office agreed a topic with their new Roman correspondent by telephone. Once written, Ingeborg Bachmann dictated her text by telephone to a typist at the editorial office, where it was edited by the Chief Editor. He was mostly pleased with her work (cf. Kogel 1998: 85), says Jörg-Dieter Kogel, who rediscovered the program manuscripts at Radio Bremen. Kogel found the texts in the broadcaster's archive in 1997 and published them together with a postscript under the title *Römische Reportagen*. The texts »brought Westermann nothing but joy and hardly ever work. A dash here and there, that was all the editors had to do« (Kogel 1998: 85).

Strictly speaking, the *Römische Reportagen* were not reportages at all: They were really »feature-style« reports. A »colorful,« »feature-style« beginning usually transitioned into a more functional, fact-packed, reporting text that outlined the current political situation in Italy for listeners in West Germany. The choice of topic was guided by German foreign policy interests – including the Bonn-Paris conventions, which governed the end of the Occupation Statute of Germany and the country's entry into NATO, the influence of Italian communists on politics, and the Trieste question.⁴ Also covered was a criminal case that shook Italian society – the Montesi case, in which big names from politics and Roman high society were involved in the murder of the Roman girl Wilma Montesi (cf. Bachmann 1998: 9-77). The case was to inspire Federico Fellini's famous film *La dolce vita* in 1960 (cf. Althen 2006: 39). Alongside political issues, a few of Bachmann's reports also covered more entertaining subjects, like the latest model from the Fiat plant and an art competition organized by film star Gina Lollobrigida.

Assessment of the *Römische Reportagen* [Roman feature stories]

How should the »Roman reports« be categorized? It is notable that they are in no way written in a poetic style. They are completely objective, with a reporting style, and enriched with numerous facts to back up what is said. Examining the reports based on the analysis criteria for the quality of journalistic

4 A dispute over the division of the territory of the city and surrounding area of Trieste between Italy (Zone A) and Yugoslavia (Zone B) in 1954.

texts – relevance, topicality, communication, and objectivity (cf. Krings 2008: 129-134) – reveals that they are usually met in exemplary fashion. The ›feature-style‹ beginnings are the only indication of the author's talent for writing, for example the start of her piece in the program *Zeit im Funk* on December 3, 1954, where she said: »In Rome, the first traces of Christmas are becoming visible. Crowds gather outside the shop windows on Corso and Via Veneto. Yet there is little sign of excitement about the upcoming celebration. A remarkably tenacious fall mist hangs over the eternal city, and the people have sums swirling in their heads. There is not much left for gifts« (Bachmann 1998: 30). The piece then transitions into a reporting style, with Bachmann continuing: »The balance sheet does not look good for the masses. Prices have risen enormously over the year, by around fifteen to twenty percent. All the treasures of the earth are arrayed on Rome's luxurious displays, but only a tiny proportion of the population can afford them« (Bachmann 1998: 30).

In the *Zeit im Funk* program on August 11, 1954, she becomes even more precise and almost obsessed with facts, reporting »that seventy percent of Italian workers earn less than DM 200 per month. For an hourly wage, a large proportion of the population can buy only, for example, 100g of butter or 1kg of spaghetti or 1kg of bread or 125g of beef or 1kg of fruit« (Bachmann 1998: 13-14).

When it comes to classifying her political position, in the *Römische Reportagen* Bachmann appears on the conservative line of the ›Adenauer Republic‹ (Konrad Adenauer was the first Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany, 1949-1963), for whose people she was reporting. The Italian communists are not shown in a favorable light (cf. Bachmann 1998: 32-34, 39-40) and cementing a position in the Western alliance is considered an urgent goal for both Italy and the Federal Republic of Germany, as reported on *Zeit im Funk* on September 20, 1954 and October 4, 1954, for example (cf. Bachmann 1998: 17, 23). No doubt this is driven both by her experiences during the Nazi period and by her professional socialization by the Americans in postwar Vienna (cf. McVeigh 2016: 190-222). It is noticeable that she often promotes a rejection of totalitarianism of all kinds – be it left or right. The topic of *Zeit im Funk* on December 3, 1954, for example, is whether the Italian army can be considered reliable. Bachmann reports: »Will it [the Italian army] prove reliable in an emergency – be it in armed conflict, or in the case of a communist coup attempt? Is it really a reliable cornerstone of parliamentary democracy, of a state with free institutions and a multi-party system that must see any totalitarianism as treason – totalitarianism from both left and right – as soon as it violates the provisions of the constitution?« (Bachmann 1998: 31).

From today's point of view, the opinions of the author, who would go on to join with writers like Günter Grass and Heinrich Böll to campaign for the election of later German Chancellor Willy Brandt (SPD) and sympathized with his politics (cf. 1999: 130; McVeigh 2004: 67), seem unusually conservative. It is undoubtedly

important here to consider Ingeborg Bachmann's entire biography and her political development towards a more left-wing attitude in the West Germany of the 1960s. Yet remembering that she learned radio journalism at an American military broadcaster in the early 1950s and was influenced by the circle of the anticommunist writer Hans Weigel at the time, makes the picture clearer and understandable from a historical point of view (cf. McVeigh 2016: 190-222).

Die Radiofamilie [The radio family]

There are numerous legends surrounding how this radio soap about the experiences of the Austrian Floriani family in postwar Vienna came about. After all, it was to go down in media history as one of Austria's most successful programs ever. The program was broadcast first every two weeks, then weekly, until 1960. When RWR radio ceased broadcast in 1955, *Die Radiofamilie* was taken over by Österreichische Rundfunk due to its enormous popularity among listeners. According to Bachmann's colleague at the time, Jörg Mauthe, Bachmann and he suddenly hit upon the idea for the program while sitting in their favorite café one day. The American German Studies expert Joseph McVeigh, who discovered the typescripts of the program and published them under the title *Die Radiofamilie* in 2011, also investigated the story of how it came about, and attributes the proposal for the *Die Radiofamilie* to RWR's American radio officer at the time, William Stricker (cf. McVeigh 2004: 62). However, says McVeigh, Stricker gave the team of Mauthe, Bachmann, and Weiser complete freedom in creating the episodes. Peter Weiser later recalls that the three editors were extremely conscious of the series' educational character. »It will,« he predicted at the time,« become a political series, without the listener realizing that that is what it is; it will be a series that shapes society, without the listener realizing that that is what it is; and it will be a funny series, and that will be the only thing that the listener realizes« (Weiser 1994: 26).

When it came to the topics covered, the writers were instructed that the episodes should to some extent reflect current events through the everyday lives of this ›typically bourgeois‹ Vienna family. »*Die Radiofamilie* [was to] be able to reflect small and large events of the time with a hint of irony, perhaps even pastiche: the four Allies, the Cold War, denazification, the start of reconstruction, the gradual end of illicit trade, the emerging trading of political office, the increasing visibility of corruption and – the consolidation of the regained Austrian identity« (Weiser 1990: 252).

The editors Jörg Mauthe, Peter Weiser, and Ingeborg Bachmann also wrote the episodes. Eleven episodes can be attributed with certainty to Ingeborg Bachmann as the author; she collaborated with Jörg Mauthe and/or Peter Weiser on

four more (cf. McVeigh 2011: 402-404). It is interesting to note here that the authors were treading new journalistic ground with their series in postwar Vienna. And »so, every program, every series we came up with became an attempt to enter uncharted political or literary territory, an expedition to as yet untouched levels of education and entertainment« (Weiser 1982: 102).

The episodes were voiced by popular Austrian actors and directed by Walter Davy. *Die Radiofamilie* consisted of Hans Floriani, a judge at the higher regional court, his wife Vilma, and their children Helli and Wolferl. The black sheep of the family is Uncle Guido, a former Nazi, now reformed, whose bizarre business ideas are usually doomed to failure. He is conceived as a kind of comic figure used to demonstrate the changes of the new era and what they mean for people's personal lives. His wife, Aunt Liesl, usually tries to bring him back down to earth and talk him out of his craziest ideas (cf. McVeigh 2011: 400).

Analysis of the ›Uncle Guido‹ character

To illustrate this point, it is worth briefly quoting a scene that looks at Uncle Guido's views during the National Socialist period and how he sees those views today. What makes this section of dialog so interesting is that it describes Uncle Guido's implied enthusiasm for ›Germanness‹ as an aberration that he himself has now recognized and amended. At the same time, it is made clear that the character of judge Hans Floriani, his half-brother, has always been on the ›right‹ side, because he lost his job under the Nazis and is therefore the ideal character for the democratic listeners of the postwar era to identify with. Vilma Floriani's interjection that they should not talk about all that any more subtly demonstrates a behavior that was typical of the time and with which the listeners would have been very familiar. The message appears clear: There were Austrians on the right side (judge Floriani) and Austrians who had allowed themselves to be seduced by the Germans (Uncle Guido). Yet this latter group have the opportunity to accept their mistake and change, as long as the ›decent‹ Austrians help and support them. This is exactly what happens in the Floriani family, who try again and again to lead the somewhat overexcited Uncle Guido back onto the straight and narrow. After all, he is still family, even if he did make some political mistakes back then. As a result, social harmony is maintained, yet the right conduct is still demonstrated. The whole thing is presented in a casual, chatty tone, ensuring that the piece remains amusing entertainment, rather than an educational text.

»GUIDO: (not to be deterred) There has always been something Faustian in me, a German destiny, yes ...

HANS: Please don't remind me about your German destiny. You know I'm sensitive about that. Always have been.

GUIDO: (slightly hurt) Please, please, all it was is that, at the beginning, I believed that they would sort of overcome the nihilism of the 20th Century. To be candid, how would you have reacted if they hadn't chucked you out in 1938? You have to admit that people were very – how shall I put it? – open to it then, and wasn't I one of the first to emphatically step away from it, wasn't I? And did I ever turn my back on you all, even for a moment? No, so...

VILMA: (resigned) Please. Just leave it. We know already.

GUIDO: But the Faustian thing, that must be allowed, in a higher sense, in a Goethe sense, I mean.« (Bachmann 2011: 16)

At the same time, the dialog is more sophisticated than it appears at first glance, and has more irony in it than one would expect from an entertainment program. The fact that the author uses the philosophical term ›nihilism‹ is unusual in itself. Guido's claim that he was one of the »first« to »step away,« is reminiscent of the assurances of many former Nazis who were quick to reject the ideology when it was no longer convenient – only to prove his own incorrigibility in the very next sentence by claiming that referring to a German cultural nation must be »allowed.«

Conclusion

Although the authors are not named here either, Ingeborg Bachmann thus shows herself to be a political thinking chronicler of the postwar present, who confronts the public with ethical questions such as their behavior during the dictatorship. This clearly demonstrates that both of the genres examined here in which Ingeborg Bachmann worked as a journalist – as a political correspondent delivering topical reports from Rome and as the author of an entertainment program – are really about creating a public sphere in order to give the recipients the chance to take part in the democratic process by making decisions based on the information available to them. However, it is also clear that the ideal of objectivity as a benchmark for reporting is forced to prove itself time and again in different periods. Even Ingeborg Bachmann as a journalist is subject to the *zeitgeist*: She was involved in communicating the American view of the Cold War in Vienna through her media pieces⁵ and she reported for and in the interests of a public service medium in Germany during the Adenauer years, which is considered a conservative era from today's point of view.

5 Joseph McVeigh, for example, described *Die Radiofamilie* as a »humoristic propaganda program« for the USA (McVeigh 2004: 61).

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