

"Between Two Worlds - A Time At Camp Catawba" (Wheeler Sparks co-author), in: REAL (Yearbook of Research in English and American Literature), Bd. 26, (Hrsg. Stefan L. Brandt, Winfried Fluck und Frank Mehring), Narr Verlag Tübingen, 2010. ISBN 978-3-8233-4181-9

Leseprobe

In North Carolina, amidst a vast expanse of virgin wilderness, a curious abstraction sleeps: the remains of Camp Catawba. A small dirt road winds from Blowing Rock, population 1476, up the mountainside and onto the shoulders of the Blue Ridge Mountains, where several decrepit cabins teeter beneath the trees. The overgrowth is anything but subtle; glass shards jut from vacant window panes and doors swing like shadows from loose hinges. And yet, for all the rotting wood, it is not so difficult to imagine a place that once teemed with life. The grounds are still awash with a transcultural history that hangs over the cabins like the dense foliage; the story of exile and the search for home are at once conspicuous and palpable.

I, Wheeler, was on the open road in mid-October driving south from Washington, D.C. toward Blue Ridge Mountains, and that alone was a beautiful thing: the sun rose and cast its golden light across the farmlands of rural Virginia and I felt the surge of excitement that comes from escape; for the coming ten days I was free from routine, family, city life, plans, futures, career. In the foothills of the Blue Ridge, I would join friend and colleague Jens Barnieck to explore the remnants of this forgotten camp, a portrait of German exile founded by a Jewish refugee during the Second World War. The story had shown me reflections of my own passions as a result of expatriation, and though I am not German (and my only personal experience with the War is through grandfather's memoirs), my head swam with expectation.

The GPS fell into confusion as I veered off the highway toward New Market, a one street-light town, and onto the bucolic back roads of its sleepy south side. The dirt paths wound beneath a wooded canopy of autumn leaves and over pregnant hills that rose and fell in a seaworthy cadence. I found the appropriate route but would not have known so if not for the hand-painted wooden sign nailed hastily to a nearby tree trunk. Further still, the path emerged from its shady curtains onto a grassy knoll where several disconnected homesteads nestled into the hill's slope. Here was the residence of Charles A. Miller, author of a book on Camp Catawba. As a boy, Miller had spent his summers amidst aged woodlands and fresh mountain streams of Camp Catawba.

Earlier that year, when he introduced Jens to the Camp's story, Miller had expounded upon his childhood experiences with professorial insight: "In Germany, did you ever come across an institution called Odenwaldschule? Catawba was modeled a bit after the reform ideas of that boarding school," he declared. "The founder was a Jewish refugee from Nazi Germany, Vera Lachmann." Then, yielding a more intimate tone: "We had a wonderful time there." A pause settled over him for memory's sake, then he continued as before, "Vera would stage plays from Aeschylus to Molière or Schiller, reciting Greek epics to the campers. We performed concerts directed by Tui St. George Tucker, a composer in residence. You may not be familiar with her name."

Indeed, Jens was familiar with neither Tui St. George Tucker nor Vera Lachman, but the conversation piqued his interest. In Camp Catawba, the singularity of several complex identities fused: a German poet and an avant-garde American composer who together directed an arts camp for children; an American arts camp based upon the ideals of a pre-war German boarding school; a manifestation of German exile in the heart of the Blue Ridge Mountains.

Even more compelling, the camp seemed to have played an integral role in the childhood of many young Jewish immigrants. And yet somehow, despite its German roots, the camp boasted a legacy uniquely American as well.