JAKOV LIND (1927–2007) was born Heinz Jakov Landwirth into an educated Jewish family in Vienna. After the 1938 Anschluss, Lind and one of his sisters were sent for safety to Holland, from where they were join their parents in Palestine; this proved impossible, and following the occupation of Holland, Lind, who was already fluent in Dutch, had no choice but to go into hiding. Taking the name of Jan Gerrit Overbeek—“sailing under a false self,” as he would later describe it—he worked on a barge traveling up and down the Rhine. When the Allies began to bomb the industrial cities of the Rhine, Lind/Overbeek moved to Germany, where he was employed by a Nazi government ministry in Berlin. The end of the war allowed Lind to join his family in Palestine, but it was not long before he returned to Europe, studying drama in Vienna and, in 1954, settling in London, where he began work on the stories that were published in 1962 as Soul of Wood. Lind’s other books in German include the novels Landscape in Concrete and Ergo and, in English, four volumes of autobiography, two novels, and numerous stories. Lind was also a playwright and film director, as well as a talented visual artist. In a eulogy delivered at Lind’s funeral, Anthony Rudolf described Lind as “A coyote, a trickster…. A wicked smile played around his mouth, while witty aphorisms and deep insights tripped off his lips. He emanated inner strength—and an electric intelligence that we all wanted to emulate.”

RALPH MANHEIM (1907–1992) translated more than one hundred books, primarily from German and French. His first major commision was Mein Kampf, which was published in the United States in 1943. Among his prizewinning translations are
The Tin Drum by Günter Grass, Castle to Castle by Louis-Ferdinand Céline, and A Sorrow Beyond Dreams by Peter Handke. After his death, the PEN/Ralph Manheim Medal for lifetime achievement in translation—which he won in 1988—was renamed in his memory.

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SOUL OF WOOD
And Other Stories

JAKOV LIND

Translated from the German by
RALPH MANHEIM

Introduction by
MICHAEL KRÜGER

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“There is a plague called man”:
On Jakov Lind

When the thirty-five-year-old Jakov Lind published his first book, *Soul of Wood*, in 1962, he had already had enough experience for many books—and many lives. Lind’s situation was unlike that of most German-speaking writers of his generation. Christa Wolf, Günter Grass, Hans Magnus Enzensberger, Heinrich Böll, and many others born between 1925 and 1929 were drafted in the last years of the war; the names of some of them show up on the membership rosters of fascist youth organizations for reasons that, in a number of cases, remain mysterious even now. Lind, by contrast, was forced to travel a road so arduous and adventurous that it defies belief. It is a miracle that he survived at all—a miracle that he himself performed—and the story of this miracle is the story behind all of Lind’s books. Looking at his life, we have to throw out our everyday concepts of stable identity. Lind survived because he knew how to wear a mask, and in one of the bravura performances of his life, he even put on the mask of the mortal enemy, who in his racist madness wanted only to destroy him.

Lind spent his childhood in Vienna, where he was born on February 10, 1927, as Jakov Landwirth, the son of Eastern European Jews. It’s important to emphasize this Eastern Jewish
background, because it was the Ostjuden in particular who, in middle of the nineteenth century, began a westward migration to the great cities of the Hapsburg Empire: Vienna, Prague, and Budapest. They set out with a sense of promise far in excess of the welcome they would receive—a phenomenon that W.G. Sebald has named “complex illusionism,” seeing it in such very different writers as Arthur Schnitzler and Peter Altenberg, Hermann Broch and Joseph Roth, Karl Kraus and Elias Canetti. (Looking at the last books of Roth, you might also call it “overidentifying.”) The flight from the shtetl to the city—the only reason that these cities were to develop a modernism comparable to that of other European metropolises—was followed by flights of intellectual achievement that would bring German-language literature and European culture to a level it has never attained since. Kafka, Freud, Schnitzler, Broch, Roth, Canetti, Musil, Kraus—we associate these writers with a Jewish Renaissance whose existence seems next to miraculous today but that the generation of Lind’s parents took for granted. For assimilated Jews, the appearance of Hitler may have been enough to remind them of their background, but Lind’s parents belonged to a group whose “attachment to Austria,” as Sebald has noted, was of a special order:

For a time, Theodor Herzl indulged himself famously in a vision of Vienna as a new Jerusalem, and, had such a thing been possible, he would have been ready to baptize the entire Jewish community of Vienna in St. Stephen’s Cathedral, to usher in a Jewish-Christian state utopia.

Alas, the transformation of Austria into the “holy land” no more came about than did the conversion of the average Aus-
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trian into a philo-Semite. The opposite is closer to the truth. Because anti-Semitism grew stronger, not weaker, the Zionist movement quickly took root in Vienna, and even Lind’s parents emigrated to Palestine. The tight connection, in these years, between the fate of the Jewish circles that grew up under the Hapsburg monarchy and the fate of Europe as a whole is a subject that has still not been sufficiently explored, although there was no missing it by 1938 at the latest. And yet even today we stand bewildered by how rapidly and smoothly this once liberal region of Central Europe could submit to Hitler’s demented bidding, how easily and unblinkingly it rejected modernity—for us the prerequisite for understanding humanity and the world. Lind was a well-traveled citizen of the world, and yet his connection to this vanished world always defined him. Asked who were the models crucial for his writing, he would answer exclusively with names drawn from it. Bertolt Brecht and Thomas Mann were never mentioned.

Lind attended the Zwi Perez Chajes Gymnasium in Vienna and was a proud member of the Zionist youth group Barak (meaning “lightning”). The family decided to move to Palestine in 1938: the parents went first; the children, Lind and his sister, were to follow. But after Hitler’s annexation of Austria later in the same year, other travel schedules prevailed, and Lind was lucky to escape to Holland that December as part of a refugee children’s transport which had to cross through the Reich. Imagine: an eleven-year-old traveling without parents through a land that was already gearing up for genocide, on the way to Holland, a country in which he knew no one and whose language he did not understand. As if that were not enough: five years later, in 1943, when Lind was sixteen and Holland had been occupied for years, he went back to
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Germany with forged Dutch papers. The Viennese Jew had become a certain Jan Gerrit Overbeek, traveling on a Rhine tugboat right though Germany. Hold on! we want to exclaim, barely willing to credit a young man taking such risks, but then Lind, having fallen out of his once secure and protected life, having fallen out of time, takes things even further: reliable sources tell us that in the last year of the war he worked as a courier in a department of the German ministry of shipping. Presuming one can speak of a writer as lacking a homogenous identity, it’s at this point that Lind must have lost his. Lind later wrote:

As Jan Gerrit Overbeek, I felt safe for the first time. It is crazy, walking around freely when one really should be sitting in a concentration camp. Crazy, perhaps, but a craziness that made me content, and happy.

Lind was in Hamburg at the end of the war, and the three volumes of his autobiography describe his subsequent adventures: emigration to Palestine (again with forged documents), his disappointment with life there, his return to Vienna, and his move to London. Looking back, he describes this odyssey as follows:

I had, consecutively, been a sailor on a tugboat, an assistant to a spy, an employee in a food rationing office, a fisherman in the Mediterranean, a road worker in Jerusalem, a beach photographer in Tel Aviv, an orange picker in Nathanya, an air traffic controller in the Israeli air force, a short story writer, a small newspaper publisher in Vienna, a private detective, a film agent in London, a
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traveler in Scandinavia, France and Italy—and all this was a part of my apprenticeship as a writer. Every day was exam day...

I remember Lind turning up in Berlin in the early sixties. He was brawny, his hands looked like they’d held more than just pencils, and he had the kind of mustache that Nietzsche made popular in the nineteenth century (and which in today’s German literary scene is reserved for Günter Grass). He was a passionate and sought-after lover and spontaneous storyteller who dished up tales that we—born at the end of the war—listened to in amazed disbelief. At home at the dinner table, after all, we had always heard that it was impossible to escape the clutches of the fiendish SA and SS—that to avoid the fate of the Jews, one had had to conform—and now here we were in the presence of this brilliant talker, a Jew who had worked for a living in the Nazi shipping ministry. In all the thirteen years I had been going to school in Berlin, I had never known a Jew, but what Lind embodied was so utterly different from what we had been taught to think of as Jewish, that we were speechless: “We couldn’t even spit,” as they used to say in Berlin. I really didn’t care, I have to confess, whether in literature Lind was a Kafka chronicling the Second World War or a painter of broad-brush grotesques: with the publication of Soul of Wood, this author had become one of “my” writers. Our friendship endured for more than thirty years.

“There is a plague called man,” reads the epigraph of Lind’s second book, Landscape in Concrete. In the complacent Adenauer era, this view of the world was fascinating to us. Lind’s books didn’t belabor “the humanism of modesty” that we were taught in school or conjure a new sanctification of art. They
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showed us a black world in which concepts like reason, virtue, and happiness were factored out.

German critics called Lind a “brilliant analphabetic” back then, which wounded him deeply. Perhaps this was one of the reasons why Lind, who was already living in London by that time (near Canetti, who always defended him) henceforth wrote all his books in English.

And there was another reason. In an “Open Letter” written in New York on March 18, 1967 Lind told the young German writers of the day what he thought of them: namely, (almost) nothing:

Having something to say, means in German: advocating a humanistic point of view. And, in a land of philistines, who occasionally come down with rabies (twice in the last fifty years, even), that says all kinds of things. Whoever writes German and doesn’t say precisely what the condition of the German soul is (and he needn’t mention a thing about what else in the wide world is happening), whoever doesn’t say it in German, or doesn’t want to, well, that person has nothing to say... Provinciality is the reason, not the result of a self-pity that tries to explain away this fog with excuses about the climate. The atmosphere in Germany was always unfavorable toward literature with universal content, but really good writers of German—like Kafka, Musil, Broch, and Freud—never let it bother them.

This philippic was Lind’s farewell to Germany. He lived in London, in New York, and traveled. Summers he spent painting in a tower in the little village of Deia on Majorca, where
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Robert Graves also lived (and is buried). From there Lind looked out onto the sea in all directions, but despite many honors and prizes, he never laid eyes on his “homeland” again.

Lind died in February 2007 in London, in his eightieth year. He left behind a disturbing philosophy of “eat and be eaten,” a black narrative from the blackest times of the twentieth century, when peace was a only a pause between wars.

—MICHAEL KRÜGER

Translated by John Hargraves
SOUL OF WOOD