

# **The man I know, Peter Weidhaas, and the Frankfurt Book**

## **Fair**

### **Rex How**

One day in March of 2000, I arrived at Frankfurt. I had an appointment to meet a friend for a date we'd set up 6 months earlier.

In March, Frankfurt is much colder than in October, when the annual book fair is held, because it is the chilly Springtime. My visit only lasted for two days. In one of the afternoons, my friend and I sat and talked near a glass window in a hotel with the sunshine streaming in, and this left me with many warm memories.

This friend had just retired from a job he had worked at for 25 years. I felt this tall guy looked different from the past. He's was wearing a leather jacket, while he always used to wear suits. Two or three days before my arrival, he had hurt his right arm so he could only move slowly.

But he shared with me some news. Just a few months earlier, at the turn of the Millelium, a French media selected the people who had influenced Eurpoe in the past 20 years. Among them, there were three Germans. One was the former German Chancellor Helmut Kohl, the second was the 1999 Nobel Prize-winning German author Gunther Grass, and the third one was him, Peter Weidhaas.

Peter Weidhass retired in 1999 and the Frankfurt Book Fair held a massive retirement party for him. The headlines of German newspapers and magazines read: "Mr. Book Fair Retires!" and "The Godfather of the Book Fair Steps Down!" . He really deserved the French media's selection. In his job as the director of the Frankfurt Book Fair for 25 years, he not only turned it into a Mecca of publishing events, but also influenced the culture of the publishing worldwide.

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Peter was born in 1938. When he was a teenager, it was just after World War II had ended. Germany was beginning to rebuild their economy so German fathers were extremely busy working and didn't have time to take care of their children. They had to rely on tradition for children to obey their orders. Peter grew up in this kind of

environment, so he “hated everything that had happened in this society but had no courage to do anything about it.” He became a rebel student at school and was finally expelled. He wanted to look for the direction of his life, so he began reading. Reading a lot. Reading helped him find the meaning of life and it also made him fall into another depression, one of self-suspicion and self-hate, because the fact of the Holocaust, that the Nazis killed so many Jews during World War II, began to weigh heavily on him. He started to feel the incredible burden of his own culture’s original sin. He couldn’t understand it and became angry. Why did his country Germany and his fellow German citizens become involved in these terrible crimes? In the end, he fought his family, country and language. Finally, he left Germany on a long self-exile in Europe for many years.

His wandering lifestyle brought him many difficulties but there was romance, too. Many years later he recalled, *“At the end of a very busy day, when you put your weary head on your pillow, you still don’t know what tomorrow will bring...maybe you’ll wind up in Northern France at a monastery in a single room, sleeping on a French-style bed together with 12 dark-skinned lumberjacks or...maybe you’ll be in a Italian holiday villa, sleeping with three Italian girls who you met on the beach and they chose you as their lucky bed companion, or you have to run away from a cottage because a group of frenzied Turkish soldiers have come to check on what strangers are there, or maybe you’re at the Seine River in a cheap hotel that only cost a few bucks so you can spend the night in Paris.”*

During those times, he worked at a bookstore as a clerk and also did a little construction work. He was crazy in love with a Danish girl so he followed her back to Denmark. Because he wanted to settle down there, he joined her family’s business, a book printing house. At last, they didn’t get married but because he worked in printing, he had the chance to get involved with the book publishing business.

After that, his crazy research odyssey ended and he decided to return home to Germany. It was 1968 and there was a huge wave of counter-culture sweeping Germany and the world. However, the once angry young man chose a different way from the others and entered the mainstream of the society, joining the Frankfurt Book Fair as an assistant for an exhibition. The company sent him to South America to work and after that he came back to Germany. Then, in 1974, he became the director of the Frankfurt Book Fair. He evolved from a vagabond to a man who would be building the biggest book fair in the globe and one of the most powerful men in book publishing world. Also, he evolved from a man who totally rejected his own culture

and country to a man who speaks for Germany and its culture.

He wrote all these things down in his lively autobiography, which was originally called, “Writing Your Anger In The Dust of the Bookshelves.” When I published his Chinese edition, the Chinese title of it was “Angry Book Dust.”

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The first time I met Peter Weidhaas was in 1989 and I was in charge of the China Times Publishing Company. At that time, Taiwan wanted to clean up the book piracy problem that tarnished our reputation. The Taiwan government revised a law to protect foreign writers’ copyrights. The economy of Taiwan was strengthening so those in the publishing community wanted to increase their contact with international publishing society. New businesses, such as copyright agencies, also started in Taiwan. The GIO came to talk with me at that time and wanted the China Times Publishing Company to organize a Taiwan Pavilion at the Frankfurt Book Fair.

Anyone who attends the Frankfurt Book Fair for the first time always feels shocked. In that era, the paper book publishers were very lively and exciting, it was even more true. So, overwhelmed by so much information and impression, I , as the organizer of “Taipei Publishers’ Community”, went to have a meeting with Peter Weidhaas.

We gradually got to be acquaintance to each other from the meetings he had every fifteen minutes during Frankfurt Book Fair. Later, we knew each other more. Later, we became friends. We always met at the book fairs around the world. During the book fair time, it always was tiring and exhausting. So, to see each other and have some drinks together became quite a relax for us. We exchanged thoughts about our works and lives. It was so interesting to see the difference and similiarities through the comparisons between Eastern and Western cultures. What most impressed me happened in 1995, when I was bothered and exhausted by some power struggles in my company. On the way to a restaurant to have dinner together, Peter suddenly began talking the power struggle he had been facing in his company. He told me that no matter how he looked great and got applauded from the outside, actually he had to fight very hard with his company’s board members to get survived. That night, we talked and drank a lot. Actually, I learned a lot from him, from how to organize a successful book fair to how to organize my own bookselves at home. He even taught me how to solve difficult love problems.

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Peter always said, “The pressures of a book fair’s director are beyond one’s imagination.”

The pressures of the book fair involve time and space. With regard to time, every book fair lasts four or five days or, at most, one week. A whole year’s preparation is only for a few days, which puts a lot of stress on the person doing this job. Another issue is the allocation of the stands. Every one joining the exhibition hopes that they can get the best position in a limit area so this also raises the tension of the job.

Beyond time and place pressures, political pressures also enter into the equation once the book fair gains success. In addition to its economic gains, making money, there is also a cultural impact and influence which will attract many types of people who want to get involved in the book fair. So Peter said,

“There are even some book fairs that are only organized to make some people into stars, so each book fair’s director, whether the book fair is small or large, faces great pressures.”

For Peter, there are two sides to the pressures of being the director of Frankfurt Book Fair. One comes from the outside, from America and Britain with their strong powers. American publishers have immense influence and always ask for special advantages at the Frankfurt Book Fair but Peter believes the Frankfurt Book Fair should be a level playing field for all and that the fair should be shared equally with publishers from around the world. In recent years, some book fairs sprung up and tried to challenge Frankfurt Book Fair, that made the issue even more complicate. Another problem comes from the inside, because his personal achievements are too strong and so is the influence of the Frankfurt Book Fair, so there are always others competing and waiting in the wings to assume his position.

Now, looking back, we can see that Peter as host of this book fair has achieved a few successes. Firstly, he could survive these great pressures and pass smoothly through his 25 years as Frankfurt Book Fair director (during which time, two of his colleagues couldn’t handle the stress and committed suicide). Secondly, he could effectively deal with strong cultures like the Americans and the British and continuously attract them to join the book fair and make the Frankfurt Book Fair into the book fair of book fairs. Thirdly, he made it that every culture has an equal opportunity to join the book fair. Fourthly, he had a highly efficient team running the show so every year the book fair had over 100 countries and 7,000 publishers joining it and an attendance of some

250,000 people. The exhibition covered 8 stalls but the whole book fair only had 50 workers handling it.

Of course, there was a price to pay. Before his retiring, I often saw two of his left fingers shaking slightly. After his retirement, I noticed his left hand was no longer shaking and I told him about it. He said “Yes” happily.

Once I asked him, “How can you survive under such great pressures?”

He replied, “I was exiled from my society and then decided to return to it, so I can’t let the society beat me up again and have me go into self-exile once more.”

This could be the basic reason. But I believe there’s another one. The book fair position is very suitable for his personality. At every book fair he attended around the planet, I’d always see him at the bar in a hotel drinking his favorite vodka. At that time, you can see his true reality. He is a hero in the publishing world, but, he is also nothing but a vagabond who just wanders around the world with the romantic thoughts on his mind.

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In the first year of his retirement, I met him for the first time to have a lunch instead a 15 minutes’ appointment at the Frankfurt Book Fair. I asked him how he felt. He said for the past 25 years, that this was the first time he could truly have the chance to see his own book fair. In the past 25 years, he was confined to his meeting room to meet people every fifteen minutes most of the time. When he entered the fair, he was always in a hurry to meet his next appointment and never had the opportunity to stop and experience the book fair. Now he can easily walk through the crowds to enjoy the busy excitement like a ordinary person, stopping at whichever stand that attracts him. He pointed to books on the table and said that whenever somebody recognized him, they gave him books.

I looked at him, this prisoner who had been confined in a conference room for 25 years. Anything reaches its extremes has a special feeling all its own. That day I walked a little while with the prisoner into the crowds. On the one hand, I wanted to share his secret feeling, and on the other hand, I wanted to feel his feeling to the book fair more closely.

It’s true that in Peter’s hands, the Frankfurt Book Fair became a very unique book fair. It changed in quality because of the quantity. It’s a really huge one so it can’t be

compared to any other book fair. It's so big that not only is he the Godfather of Book Fairs but anyone joining this book fair unwittingly becomes a prisoner of the fair as they only have a limited amount of time, which is not enough time to see it all.

I've been going to the Frankfurt Book Fair for 17 years and I've gone through three stages in learning how to use this book fair. In the early years, I didn't have a firm idea about it and I didn't know many people to meet. So there was time and freedom to move and look around which always brought some surprising results. The second stage was that I became familiar with it and knew many people to meet. My schedule was always fully booked and everyday I was chasing after the rights I wanted to buy. (Most of them were the titles in English). After this stage, almost the same time as Peter retired, I also didn't want to become a prisoner of copyright chasing and buying. I arranged some more free time intentionally. And even if there were no surprises in my wandering around, that's still alright and I feel good.

It doesn't matter which one of the three stages is good or bad, it just depends on one's personal feeling and needs. That's why Peter said that everyone coming to the Frankfurt Book Fair can open a book fair of his own. It is true.

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In the past two years, I have been involved in the Taipei International Book Exhibition. And from the beginning, Peter strongly objected to my involvement. He said to me, "The book fair will swallow you up. You are a publisher and you don't need to do that."

I don't recall if I explained to him why I didn't listen to him. There are several reasons, but one of them was because of him.

I wanted to have more chance to observe this book fair's magician's experiences and personal thoughts.

Here's an example of what I mean:

In 2004, at the Frankfurt Book Fair, I discussed with him about how to cope with the people who have differing points of view about how should our book fair develop. "We must fight for them," he said. I thought I misheard him so I asked him, "Do you mean, 'We must fight AGAINST them'?" "No," he told me, "we must fight FOR

them.”

I asked him why. When there are different opinions, isn't it right that we should fight hard to convince each other?

He gave me an example. He said that during the Cold War, Russian and Eastern European publishers joined the Frankfurt Book Fair very actively. In order not to lose their face, so the Soviet government paid a lot of money to subsidize the Eastern European countries' publishers to join it. But after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the USSR, nobody supported those publishers and no one from that area could join the book fair. Two opinions arose about this. One was to just let the market function by itself. When they afford to come in the future, they can join the fair without any help. But Peter had another idea. He thought they should be more positive and proactive, that since Britain, America and Western European countries would certainly want to enter the Russian and Eastern European market in the future, the Frankfurt Book Fair should play a more positive and facilitative role between them. So in addition to giving support and help to the publishers in Russia and Eastern Europe, he also sent many professionals to Russia and Eastern Europe to hold seminars and forums to help local publishers there to learn how to work in a free market, or a capitalist way .

After that, there are many wonderful and successful publishers appeared in these areas. When he told me this, he was smiling and said, “I just met a Russian publisher at the book fair. He said that he has to thank me very much for all his business.”

Peter wanted to tell me that when our opinions differ from others, we had better help those people carry out a way which they didn't believe exist instead of just arguing with them and persuading them to agree with us. So we must fight FOR them, not AGAINST them.

His ideas not only helped me in thinking about how to do book fairs better but also how to be a better book publisher.

But of all his suggestions, I believe he thinks the most important point (as I do now) is not about work but about living.

Two pieces of advice he gave me have had a deep impression upon me:

He once told me to pay more attention in my relationship with my children “No matter how many important books you have published, don’t forget your children are THE most important publications of yours.”

Another time, last summer, he wrote to me urging me to take a vacation, “Listen to your adviser: Stop for a while your working activities and go with your family for holidays too – you deserve it and you need it (that you will feel only afterwards when you have relaxed!)”

I did listen to him and took a long vacation which I didn’t have for a long long time.



Once I heard from one of his interviews where he talked about all his years of traveling around the world, and how to face saying goodbye to people. Peter said, “We separate, so we meet again.” Actually, before this interview, I noticed that no matter how excited we were to see each other and talk together, when the time came to say good bye to each other, he always just said a very short “Ciao” or “So long”, and then turned around and left without ever looking back. After hearing “We separate, so we meet again.” I started to enjoy the feeling of separating with Peter.

It seems you will never see this man again.

It also seems you will see him tomorrow once again.

\*When Peter wrote a book helping us to understand the Frankfurt Book Fair better, I wrote this article to help readers to have a greater understanding of this writer.