

Habe, Hans

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German Generation Gap

Christopher and His Father, by Hans Habe, translated from the German by Michael Bullock (Coward-McCann. 320 pp. \$6.95), concerns an ex-Nazi film producer and his anti-Nazi playwright son. J. P. Bauke is chairman of the Department of Germanic Languages and Literatures at Columbia University.

By J. P. BAUKE

IN THIS fast-paced novel about a German movie mogul and his questing son Hans Habe taps the apparently inexhaustible theme of two generations in conflict. With more impasto than finesse, he confronts a "good" young German with his Nazi father and finds that the case is not as clear-cut as either of them thinks. Before he dies the old man sees the light of democracy dawn; his son, in turn, overcoming his self-right-

eousness, acquires a deeper understanding of the past and even a certain respect for his father.

The senior Wendelin, created in the spitting image of Viet Harlan, the notorious producer of *Jud Süß*, leads the shadowy existence of a has-been even after he is acquitted by a German court and allowed to work again. When his attempt at a comeback founders he retires from life, contemplating the relationship between ability, ambition, and opportunism. Christopher meanwhile atones more actively for his father's cooperation with the Nazis by taking refuge, under a pseudonym, in a *kibbutz*. His education continues in Poland and Hungary, where he gathers documents implicating prominent West Germans in war crimes. His search for identity ends when his first play, an answer to his father's anti-Semitic film, is a success in a Munich theater, where his father helped him to stage it.

Habe moves Christopher rapidly from

bed to bed and from country to country, with time out for discussions about, and between, Germans and Jews. A cocktail party in Paris is limned as effortlessly as the Hungarian countryside, or an Arab attack on an Israeli farm truck. Apart from Christopher and his father there is a large cast of characters who remain on the periphery, especially the women interested in the blond and blue-eyed hero. Exceptions are a famous German writer, author of a classic novel about World War I, and a pianist of Russian-Jewish extraction who refuses to play before German audiences. These two, of course, were well known before Habe put them in his novel.

BUT if *Christopher and His Father* does not approach the power of some of the author's earlier books, notably *The Mission*, the main reason is not the writing. In fact, this is a well-made tale, as expertly composed as one would expect from so experienced a novelist. Its basic flaw is its concern with being nice to everybody. The Nazis are bad and their influence in present-day West Germany is pernicious, but Christopher and his peers will yet save the country from its wicked course. The Jews are not perfect either, as evidenced by the Jewish actor who is petty or unforgiving enough to walk off the stage because he has to share it with a former Nazi. Thus plus and minus are neatly balanced, and all criticism loses its edge. What may look like tolerance, or even wisdom, in the pages of this novel is nothing more than a fictional variation of that editorial sentiment "Let's all be good together!"

It is difficult to understand why the book should have evoked some indignant reactions in Germany. Like Wendelin the Elder, Habe has indulged his "instinct for what flatters the public without rising above its horizons."