



Messkirch: MARTIN HEIDEGGER -- June 1976



by h. miles groth

The road between Freiburg and Messkirch passes near the Feldberg in the Schwäbische Alb. On the way, through the Schwarzwald, one can stop in Donaueschingen for a short downhill walk to a small stone spring which is the visible surface above the source of the Donau. Soon the Baden-Württemberg state road ends, and after Tuttlingen one follows a narrower country road to Messkirch.

Perhaps Martin Heidegger was named after the patron saint of the town church, St. Martin. His father was sexton there after earlier employment in the town as a cooper. It seemed likely, then, that Heidegger would be buried in the church cemetery.

As the driver and I approached the church walls and gate in Messkirch, it was soon possible to see the still figure of an old woman sitting at her window in the second story of a house beside

St. Martin Church. The driver had told me earlier that dialects could differ a great deal between towns out here in the highlands country. Asking directions might be to no avail. I waited in the car and saw some preliminary conversation and, finally, a single gesture indicating a place beyond town, farther on the road that had brought us into Messkirch.

The driver returned and, as we drove in the town itself looking for someone else to ask for more specific directions, admitted that he had been able to discern only that Heidegger was buried in another cemetery. The old woman had known Heidegger for years and years. Again we stopped, briefly inquired, and soon were directed to the town cemetery within walking distance of the church.

As we approached, the park-like atmosphere of the grounds was welcom-

PHILOSOPHY TODAY

WINTER 1976

259

ingly cool. Inside the gate, past a low wall and a few steps up from the limit beyond which only walkers are permitted, *Kastanien* line the regular blocks of earth under which the town's people lie.

We began to look for Heidegger's grave. Soon an old caretaker approached us, sensing surely that both of us were not from town. He was most gracious and talked with us all the while we stayed there. I asked if he had known the philosopher, Professor Heidegger. The pause for exchanging languages, between the driver and him, and to me, seemed somehow longer than I would have expected. But the reply was simply: "Ah, yes, Martin . . ." Yes, of course he had known him, since they were both children; and he still knows the younger brother, Fritz, who is two or three, maybe four, years younger than Heidegger, his only brother and sibling.

As far as he knew, we were among the first to visit the graveside since the funeral three weeks earlier, with the exception of a group of Japanese who had visited briefly without speaking a week earlier. I was perhaps the first American. I asked what sort of man Martin Heidegger had seemed to be to this old friend and now caretaker. Heidegger was "der Einselgänger", he thought, one who went his own way, a loner. He had not been seen often in the town and seldom met or was seen by his neighbors. He had lived near Todtnau with his wife, in a mountain retreat, south of Freiburg.

Martin Heidegger now lies buried between his parents, on his left, side by side, Friedrich and Johanna (née Kempf), and his younger brother's wife, Elisabeth, to his right. There is little room left now in this section, only enough for Heidegger's wife and his brother. Friedrich had died when his

son, Martin, was 35, and Heidegger's mother died the year *Sein und Zeit* was published.

Mass had been celebrated by Heidegger's nephew, for whom the philosopher had written a very important text on the occasion of his ordination. Dr. Bernhard Welte, from the Albert Ludwig's University where Heidegger had taught for so many years, had spoken the eulogy to a group that far exceeded the number of people Heidegger had wished to be present. A radio bulletin had announced his death on May 26, but reportage in the newspapers was withheld for two days, at Heidegger's request. Even so, many people had been at graveside when a simple black painted wooden cross was placed in the ground at the head of the grave. On it one can read only "1976 / Martin Heidegger / 86J". The cemetery groundskeeper had a strong feeling that the headstone would be very simple.

There had been no rain in Europe for nearly a month and the weather was quite warm, the sun shining every day. Over the length of Heidegger's grave had been placed pots full of blooming flowers, covering every part of the still mounded earth. I asked the caretaker if I might water the flowers and, given permission, I did so. We soon began the drive back to Freiburg.

Soon behind us, Messkirch, like the many small southwest German towns, was an assemblage of orange-colored roofs and, its surest indication, a church tower.

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I learned that the *Feldweg* is now a street. What it was when Heidegger was young has passed away under efforts at modernization. Now a street "läuft aus dem Hofgartentor zum Ehnreid."

A *Feldweg* was simply the path that led between the many divided areas

• PHILOSOPHY TODAY •

of farming land apportioned to a country town's residents. One's *Feldweg* was the path between other cultivated parcels of garden or cropland belonging to many others that led to one's own field, one's own space for working the ground and tending what appeared from and through the earth. It was one's own way: certainly determined by the peripheries of other places, bounded by the farthest reaches of other plots of ground kept fertile by other keepers, kept from falling fallow by their own work; but it was also the way to reach one's own area directly.

Perhaps at night one would find that he had walked a great distance away from the field or even from town. To find one's way home, along roads and smaller trails and paths, one looked for the *Wegmarken*: the smooth-ground stones planted in the ground, flat like a perennial moss; or sometimes one growing higher out of the grass, elaborated by some craftsman into a monument to travelers, passage, home and what one would always have to be brought to mind for recollection, in again finding one's way home. The *Wegmarken* were also border stones, boundary markers, perhaps to be found along one's *Feldweg*, if passage took place in the open fields. At night, when nearly all the other keepers were gone, these stones were always there to remind (*andenken*) one of the way.

To all the personal vulnerabilities one must feel and in the face of the many other vicissitudes of life, Heidegger seems to have turned with an attitude of *Gelassenheit* ---of: yes, it will

come to me. Yet, it was to *thought* that Heidegger ultimately and above all turned. This was the matter with which he was concerned. There was no hurry about it. Indeed there could be no rush. Heidegger was always with thought: from the first steps on the *Feldweg* beyond the *Schlassgarten*; while looking out over the edges of Insel Reichenau in 1917 at the eventide; at his desk.

It will come. But one must wait for a time. . . .

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Passing through Neudingen on our return to Freiburg, its Schwabentor and Martinstor, we passed many smooth carved stones along the road, *Wegmarken*. I was reminded of the Basque sculptor, Eduardo Chillida, with whom Heidegger collaborated in St. Gallen on the text, *Die Kunst und der Raum*. An associate of the Gallerie Erker's director spoke of Heidegger as a shy man, one who seemed always to have something on his mind that was beyond the immediate but who at the same time seemed to be looking very carefully at what was at hand. He was going to be missed there. One of Heidegger's former students whom I met in Freiburg spoke of him as one who "listened with great intensity," perhaps, I thought, to be likened to the *Wegmarken* themselves.

Heidegger now lies under the opulent shade of many chestnut trees near Messkirch, "away from everything," and, so, as he knew, nearest to all things.

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