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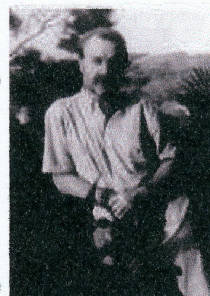


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OBITUARY - GERD BALKE

By Anthony Lawrence

It is my sad task to record the death of **Gerd Balke**, a German civil engineer and member of this Club — the man who set out to follow in the footsteps of the great Joseph Conrad by seeking success as a writer in a language not his own. He already had his foot firmly on the ladder when he died recently of a heart attack at the age of 51.



Gerd received his training as an engineer at the university in Wuppertal, Germany, and came to Hong Kong in 1979 to work as project manager with a British construction firm. He was involved in the building of the new electric power plant on Lamma Island and was highly regarded as a conscientious technical expert. There he met Laura, the Chinese girl who became his wife.

Later he was involved in seawall projects. However he seems to have inherited from a grandfather a keen interest in writing. And for reasons best known to himself, he wanted to excel not as a German author, but in English. He actually won a prize for a short story he entered in a competition in the US. He joined the Writer's Circle in Hong Kong from whom he had valuable encouragement. I met him when I was approached by the late Sally Rodwell, (an inspiring figure on the local publishing scene) to write an introduction to a book of interviews, *Hong Kong Voices*, that Gerd completed in 1989. But his heart was set on getting a novel published. His literary agent said: "When he talked on the phone you could know he was German, but when you read what he wrote you were looking at something really good in the way of English prose."

He finally won acceptance with a novel *Paradise Fermenting*. Minor problems of illustration and editing were being ironed out when Gerd and Laura both took part in an expedition with a group of other adventurous spirits, using jeeps and a van, along the famous Silk Road. Eighteen of the group were from Hong Kong and six from the Mainland. Gerd was the only westerner. First they drove from Chengdu up to Lanzhou, and then over mountains and desert to the borders of Pakistan. They covered 7,600 kilometres in 21 days and returned triumphantly on October 1, but thoroughly exhausted. That night Gerd suffered a heart attack and never woke.

"We so enjoyed that trip", Laura recalls. "And all became good friends. Two of them came all the way from the Mainland to attend the funeral service. He'd taken lots of notes himself and was going to write a novel based on the experience. In death, he had a smile on his face." ■

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