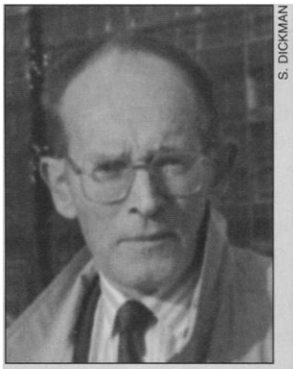
A Grim Exorcism at Leipzig University

Rector Cornelius Weiss is taking tough measures to repair damage done by four decades of totalitarian rule

Leipzig—AT FIRST GLANCE, UNIVERSITY OF Leipzig rector Cornelius Weiss seems an unlikely choice to run Germany's third-oldest university. Although trained as a physical chemist, Weiss, now 57, never achieved much recognition for his research, never had any experience in administration, and never rose far in his profession—he remained stuck at the lowly grade of lecturer at what until last year was known as Karl Marx University. But when democracy came to East Germany last year, the faculty decided that Weiss—known locally to rock fans for his love of touring with his son's rock-and-roll band—was just the person to rebuild the university. His key quality: a lifelong, public rejection of communist ideology and an unimpeachable reputation for honesty.



S. DICKMAN

ULSTEIN BILDERDIENST

Reforming rector. *Weiss is weeding out secret police collaborators on the university staff.*

Since his election to the post of rector in February 1991, Weiss has set about weeding out faculty members who actively supported the old regime, as a first step toward restoring the shattered traditions of a once-proud university. The University of Leipzig used to be one of the world's great universities for science. Still standing is the laboratory built in 1897 by Wilhelm Ostwald, Leipzig's homegrown Nobel laureate, in the days when the university was the cradle of synthetic organic chemistry. Chemists Otto Linde Erdmann and Ernst-Otto Beckmann spent their careers at the university; physicists Edward Teller and Werner Heisenberg also spent fruitful years in Leipzig between the wars. But that is all in the past: Since the war, the university's reputation has been not for turning out innovative scientific thinkers but for mass producing communist propagandists at its "journalism school," popularly mocked as the "Red Cloister."

Meeting with *Science* last month to talk about the problems of rebuilding intellectual and scientific life at the universities of the former East Germany—and his own sudden rise to fame—Weiss was still not quite playing the part of rector. A wiry chain-smoker, Weiss still looks happier in an old lumberjack shirt than in the suit and tie of his newly acquired occupation.

Granting agencies and private companies in the West are pumping in funds to combat one of the university's most visible problems: a badly crumbling infrastructure. "Sometimes they send equipment without us even asking for it," says Leipzig theoretical chemist Fritz Dietz. "In less than 2 years, we've traded in our broken-down typewriters" for the use of a supercomputer in Dresden, says Dietz. But Weiss believes that far more is needed to restore the University of Leipzig's reputation. Among the destructive effects of 40 years of totalitarian rule, he lists the extreme conformity of thought generated by strict selection of staff and students, the paranoia of living in a society in which everyone was constantly watched, and the schizophrenia of being forced to profess public belief in a system that plainly did not work. The spirit of free inquiry—essential to creative intellectual life—has been crushed by communism and the secret police, he explains, and now it must be won back.

To provide the beginnings of a cure, Weiss offered a simple program in a 5-minute speech to the university council before voting began to choose the new rector. "I called for a reform of the university from top to bottom," he recalls. "Structure, personnel, and above all a renewal in the head—a spiritual and moral renewal. And I demanded the resignation of everyone who had been in power under the communists." That speech, Weiss says, won him the election.

Weiss' pledge to remove all those who held—or abused—power under the communists was particularly popular. As former East German citizens learn more about the corruption of their former leaders and, in particular, of the all-powerful role of the secret police, the Stasi, public anger is growing. The Stasi, with its $1.8-billion annual budget, 85,000-member staff, and network of 180,000 informers, is now believed to have kept detailed files—containing information on everything from reading habits to love affairs—on more than a third of the former nation's 16.6 million population. Its victims—those who lost their jobs, were sent to prison, were not allowed to attend university or to travel to the West—are now demanding justice as the first stage of renewal.

Weiss is bringing justice to the University of Leipzig with a grim ritual, repeated every second Wednesday in his office. On those days it is converted into a courtroom. At 2 p.m. sharp, a committee made up of faculty members and respected members of the community meets in a marathon session to confront faculty members accused of having collaborated with the Stasi. The evidence comes from Stasi files confiscated in 1989.

Among the files are dated and signed reports by informers within the university on the most intimate activities of their colleagues. Many of these reports led to arrest and even imprisonment. But now the tables have turned. Unless those accused of collaboration can offer evidence in their defense or point to extenuating circumstances—or unless they came forward last year when they were given a chance to confess and thus receive more lenient treatment—they are handed dismissal notices, effective immediately.

This process, says Weiss, who chairs every session, will continue for the next 2 years, until the huge backlog of Stasi files has

been worked through. Based on the results from the first 500 files, Weiss thinks that a full 10% of the 3000 faculty and staff members to be investigated will turn out to have been collaborators, much more than the national average of 2% to 3%. The effort to cleanse the university of Stasi collaborators is seen as an unpleasant but necessary task, administered by clear rules; there is no punishment for those who simply went along with the old regime, but everyone who did "active harm" to others must go, so that an attitude of trust can be rebuilt in the university.

Among those who come before Weiss are colleagues who once mocked him for his refusal to join the party or accept its favors and so make his way upwards in the East German system. "'Good day, little man,' they would call as they rushed past me in the hallways," Weiss recalls with a trace of bitterness. But despite the mockery, Weiss refused to fit in, perhaps because his childhood was spent behind barbed wire in a Soviet gulag.

Weiss' father, Karl-Friedrich Weiss, was a scientist with knowledge of nuclear physics considered so valuable that at the end of the Second World War he was immediately taken into custody by U.S. forces. He escaped (on a stolen bicycle), only to be captured again, this time by the Soviets. The next 10 years were spent in a special camp built for nuclear researchers and their families. After being allowed back to Germany in the 1950s, Weiss—by then a committed Christian—says he could not follow his father's career because it would have meant "giving up my conscience." Success in Leipzig could come only by full participation in the totalitarian state. So, Weiss says, he abandoned thoughts of doing outstanding research and accepted the fate of an undistinguished lecturer.

Weiss sees the wounds of former times everywhere in the university. For example, the East German education system eliminated almost everyone who, like Weiss, thought differently. Even the students became a force of conservatism, which became obvious when "astonishingly few" of them took place in the crucial demonstrations, says Konrad Taut, a theologian at the university. "It is scary how effectively all critical opinions were silenced" under the communists, Taut says. "Their ideological machinery worked even better than that of the Nazis. Students were 'sieved' so carefully that they were politically paralyzed and unwilling or unable to think by the time they reached the universities. Virtually anyone critical was filtered out at age 15."

Weiss says he saw this filtering process in action time and again. For example, one student he knows was kept out of a state research program for molecular biology because she had named her daughter Sarah, a name which to the authorities "sounded suspiciously Zionist." Weiss himself says that he could have been arrested at any time and imprisoned for 3 years just for having a copy of a Western newsmagazine lying around his house. The charge would have been "possessing morally repugnant literature."

This atmosphere, says Weiss, has resulted in an inability to think independently. In ordinary life, "you had to be schizophrenic in order to survive," he says. "There was not a single person in this country who was not schizophrenic. Even the highest Party officials had antennas on their roofs so they could watch West German TV," but no one could admit to this in public, he says. Often, the state demanded that researchers, especially in physical sciences and computing, just copy what was already being done in the West. As an example, Weiss points to a state-ordained research topic in the chemistry department to determine how Kodak film was put together.

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Progress in the ideological struggle is hard to gauge, but at least Weiss can point to one area in which he has reawakened the critical responses of his faculty members: He says he has the feeling that hostility toward him is growing "from both the left and the right. In order to be fair to the victims, you have to be very tough when someone's guilt has been proven. This has made me lots of enemies, especially among former Party members. At the same time, I am making no sweeping judgments—to fire all the old communists, for example—which leaves the anti-communists dissatisfied."

Indeed, Weiss says he expects to be voted out at the end of his first term in 2 years, a prospect he views with equanimity. He is confident that this will be enough time to institutionalize the mechanisms of renewal that he has set in motion. But he predicts that the process itself—like coming to terms with the country's Nazi past—will "take decades." ■ STEVEN DICKMAN

Steven Dickman is a free-lance science writer based in Munich.

Coping With

Two and a half years ago, the structural biology community found itself caught in an unaccustomed furor. Charging that many of their colleagues weren't playing by the rules, disgruntled researchers had mounted a protest against those who published papers on the structure of protein or nucleic acid molecules without archiving the underlying data in a national databank established 18 years earlier at Brookhaven National Laboratory (*Science*, 15 September 1989, p. 1179). These holdouts, the scientists argued, were slowing the course of legitimate inquiry by withholding the core of their research work from those who wanted to verify or extend it. "The fact is, there were people not submitting data," says Helen Berman of Rutgers University. "The protein databank had to beg people to put their data in."

Since then, the situation has been reversed dramatically—but in some ways, not much has improved. Where once Brookhaven database director Thomas Koetzle could point to more than 70 protein molecules whose structures had been published but whose coordinates had not been deposited in the database, he now has to admit he has a backlog of 330 protein structures just waiting to be processed for the archives—about a year's worth of work. The irony is not lost on those who brought the original complaints. "There is an embarrassment of riches," says Richard Dickerson, a nucleic acid crystallographer at the University of California at Los Angeles and one of the first researchers to raise the alarm in 1989. "It really is a disgrace."

Over the past several months, crystallographers have called a flurry of meetings to correct the situation, and many prominent researchers in the field seem to agree that the prospects for eliminating the backlog within a year or so are bright. Along the way, however, structural biologists and other scientists in data-intensive specialties may find some broader lessons in the sudden reversal of the databank's fortunes. The story of the Brookhaven database is more than just another example of the law of unintended consequences. It is a cautionary tale for the managers of large scientific databases, who—especially when they are not active researchers in the field—can find themselves suddenly overrun by data when the underlying technology of their field advances rapidly.

Many crystallographers agree that