

Translation by Kenneth Kronenberg

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### **“The aspiring poet”**

I attended *Gymnasium* during the Hermann Schiller era. Director Schiller, dubbed by us “the Terrible” in contrast to our great poet, was one of those school tyrants who made students *and* teachers tremble. His sarcasm, arrogance, discourtesy, and haughtiness drove several teachers from their posts and made students’ lives hell. In addition to being director of our *Gymnasium*, he was also professor at Giessen University, where he lectured in pedagogy. He had published a two-volume *History of the Roman Imperial Period* and a *Manual of Practical Pedagogy*. He was in especially ill repute with us because whenever students needed to be severely punished, he summoned them to his office and, for pay, had a hireling beat them while he looked on.

In addition, our teachers were mostly young, having just served their year of volunteer duty in the military, and many of them had adopted a less than agreeable barking military manner, to which we were forced to submit. It was therefore understandable that we students banded together more closely than would have been the case under more usual circumstances. We lived in a state of constant self-defense, and it was natural that we would form small groups in which we not only worked together but poured out our hearts to one another. At the time there was a fairly large number of such groups which, because we lived in a university city, tended to imitate student associations, got together in the back rooms of restaurants, wore colorful caps and bands in the manner of the corps and fraternities, and demolished large quantities of beer. Naturally, all this was strictly forbidden, and there was a big to do each time such a secret association was betrayed or revealed in some other way, and its members would be severely punished or even expelled.

One day, a number of us Giessen students got together in my room, and because I had read an essay about Alfred Meissner’s poems during which I had recited by heart his magnificent “In a mountain desert,” my friend Friedrich Kraft suggested that we should get together every Saturday afternoon and hold readings. We might even found something like a literary society. We wouldn’t have too much trouble finding enough members, and we would limit ourselves to drinking coffee and eating sandwiches at our meetings. Kraft stressed that as *Gymnasium* students we shouldn’t hold any secret meetings or drink beer, wine, or hard liquor.

We met for the first time three weeks later at the Kraft brothers' home. They lived in the Westanlage in the attic story of a three-story house that stood on the spot where the Zum Lamm guesthouse now stands. It belonged to Attorney Kraft, the father of the two

brothers. From the windows one was afforded a view over the green parkland, where two rows of magnificent linden trees delineated a footpath that ringed the entire inner town. At the first meeting, in which approximately 15 boys took part, Friedrich Kraft, who was just as central to the enterprise as his brother Udo, suggested that each of us who had a particular talent should contribute to our meetings. Georg Balsler declared that he'd had enough of our damned school essays but that he was prepared to offer drawings

I wondered whether we might put together a sort of journal. Everyone who had presented work would submit it in writing to the editor, and all essays, stories, and poems would be copied and compiled in an issue. I suggested that we take turns copying the submitted articles each month. My suggestion was accepted by acclamation.

At the meeting that took place eight days later it became evident how right our choice of members and colleagues have been. Otto Urstadt a model student at the *Gymnasium*, read a very clever essay titled "Tellheim's concept of honor in Lessing's *Minna von Barnhelm*," which we then debated back and forth. We predicted that the author would one day become a *Gymnasium* teacher or director of a *Realschule*.<sup>1</sup> Our prediction was partially right: he did in fact teach at the *Gymnasium* in Giessen, but went on to become Ministerialdirektor [undersecretary] in the Hessian capital. After Urstadt's reading, Friedrich Kraft recited a few English poems he had translated, and his cousin Otto Nodnagel followed with a chapter from his humorous story "Orpheus in the underworld," which was very witty if somewhat bizarre and occasioned raucous laughter among us. I myself presented a short unassuming novel whose subject was the sister of Napoleon I, Princess Elisa Bacciochis, and her love for the violinist Nicolo Paganini. The readings were accompanied by much cross-talk, praise and criticism, corrections and amendments. By then, the Krafts' sister and a cousin had served coffee and sandwiches, and while we did our best, Udo Kraft made it clear that he was against placing frivolous stories like that of his cousin on the same level with more serious works. But Urstadt replied to the effect that humorous stories served as refreshment next to such dry narratives as his own. We debated the matter back and forth for a while and then accepted Kraft's suggestion that we found two journals, a serious and a humorous one. Then we got down to the question of the title, and we decided on, *The Friend of Art, or a Literary Journal* and *The Educated Coffee Sisters*.<sup>2</sup>

From then on we met every week -- with the exception of vacations. It was very important to us that our association actually accomplish something. After a short time, our numbers swelled to twenty, including not only more or less talented poets and writers but composers and painters as well. None of us was older than sixteen, at most seventeen, but we were all interested young people and enthusiastic about our work. Eventually, our contributions filled two thick octavos, which we had bound. One outstanding participant was the later attorney and notary Georg Balsler, who supplied both journals with numerous drawings; he also painted the ceiling of the Krafts' apartment with Greek gods and goddesses notable for their scanty dress.

Our meetings lasted for almost two years, and I got into a serious fight at one of the last ones. I read a poem that I had written as follows:

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<sup>1</sup> Approximately equivalent to secondary school.

<sup>2</sup> Kaffeschwester -- literally "coffee sisters" (coffee lovers)

Marie, Marie my woman Marie,  
Wipe the tears from off your face,  
Soon will my body turn to dust, Marie,  
And then all will be good.

In your forbearance forgive again  
Before I leave from here,  
Heavy fault, it was my curse:  
I broke your heart, Marie.

Though the chain be heavy, Marie,  
That into my ankle presses,  
It torments me still more, Marie  
That I have crushed you, too.

When the bell tolls dully  
And I kneel at the block,  
Hum it to me as a funeral dirge:  
You are dishonored, Marie.

Farewell, my fate is hard, Marie,  
My rest will soon be sweet,  
When I am buried there, Marie,  
Cover my grave for me.

Then will an Angel  
Climb down in the dawn  
And bow his head to you –  
May God protect you, Marie!

Well, the storm broke as soon as I concluded: “What kind of a poem is that,” yelled Udo, the most courageous and upright of us. “I never would’ve believed you were capable of writing such a thing.” “That’s what everyone says, I replied. “Whenever I accomplish anything, I’m always told, ‘I never would have believed you were capable of that.’ People seem to think that I’m an idiot.” “Well yes, if you write poems like that,” interjected August Montanus. “That’s not what I mean,” explained Udo, “I meant that I never would have believed that you could write such repulsive stuff in verse.” “I don’t understand much about poetry,” our artist Georg Balsler added, “but how many Maries are there in this one? Marie, Marie, Marie! Who are all of these Maries?” “No one,” I said. “And it’s full of bad rhymes,” declared our composer Otto Nodnagel. “So what,” Urstadt asked. “A charming little poem by Heine may have eight lines with not a single pure rhyme. Anyway, you can find hundreds of impure rhymes in German literature.” “Where did you get this wretched stuff?” asked Udo. “Nowhere,” I replied. “A criminal who declaims in rhyme to some Marie!” Udo repeated. “And why shouldn’t he declaim in rhyme?” Urstadt asked. “I’m sure that thousands of criminals declaim in rhyme in all the literatures of the world.” At this point, Friedrich Kraft tapped his cup with his coffee

spoon. "Silentium, please! Let us vote on whether to accept the poem we just heard for publication in *Friend of Art*." Everyone voted yea with Urstadt abstaining.

Then one day we decided on a name for our society that all us could agree on: the Amicable Association of Aesthetic Coffee Sisters. And under that name we continued our proceedings. There was only one impediment -- how could it have been otherwise -- and that came in the form of the school tyrant Schiller. One day the Kraft brothers were summoned before the faculty of the *Gymnasium*. The director of the institution presided, and he asked Udo whether it was true that he and several other students belonged to a secret association. Udo, a man of firm principles and a fanatic love of the truth, replied "Yes, an association, but there is nothing secret about it as far as I can tell." The director smiled derisively, "As if student associations could be anything other than secret." "Anybody is free to attend our weekly meetings, Udo replied. At this point Dr. Klopp interjected, "And I'm sure that you drink something tasty at these meetings." Udo nodded enthusiastically. "Well then!" the director exclaimed. "And what exactly do you drink, if I may ask?" "Coffee," Udo responded calmly. "Coffee? And I assume that you make this coffee yourself?" "No, my sisters and my cousin take care of that." "And what is in this coffee?" "Sugar," Udo added. "Sugar? And what else?" Udo looked the school tyrant straight in the face, "A spoon, Herr Direktor!" The faculty broke out in loud laughter. "And exactly what do you do at these meetings? You can't just drink coffee the whole time? Or do you drink something else as well?" the director resumed his interrogation. "What do we do?" Udo continued. "We do all sorts of things. For example, we read essays to each other or passages from our great poets. But the most interesting part is our own work, which always leads to heated discussion. That's always extremely interesting, Herr Direktor. In the name of my brother, who is here, and all of the members of our circle, I invite you and the other faculty members to attend our meetings." "Yes, well, it would be better for you to spend your time on schoolwork than on immature discussions and coffee. You may go," the director added. And Udo picked up his cap and left the room. His brother followed him out, completely shaken. "We're not going to have an easy time in school," Friedrich remarked.

Udo was an upright German man, afraid of nothing, not the devil himself. He was a conscientious and excellent student, except in mathematics. As a result, he was treated shabbily by the mathematics teacher, a certain Dr. Kratz. One day, Udo passed him on the street without greeting him. As a result, he was summoned before the faculty, where Dr. Dettweiler asked him whether he had perhaps not seen Dr. Kratz on the street the previous day. "Certainly, Udo responded with conviction in his voice, "of course I saw him." "But you failed to greet him," Dettweiler continued. "No," Udo stated loudly. "Did you do that on purpose?" "Yes, Herr Doktor." For this, Udo received several hours of detention, but that pleased him greatly because he was convinced that he had shown Kratz a thing or two. He himself eventually became a *Gymnasium* teacher, and during World War I he volunteered for the front despite his advanced age and fell at Anloy.

One afternoon, two teachers appeared at our meeting. Friedrich Kraft greeted them with a humorous introduction and invited them to join our association. They were young people who were completing their first year at the Giessen *Gymnasium* and at the time were teaching in the lower classes. They claimed to have been sent by the director. Udo pulled out the handwritten notebooks and placed them before the two teachers. One of

them, who taught Latin, read “An essay about Antigone’s blame in Sophocles’s tragedy of the same name,” and clicked his tongue. The other one, who taught history, didn’t say anything, but the two of them had drunk three cups of coffee and eaten most of the sandwiches by the time they left. From this we concluded that they had had a good time. Before they left they shook hands all around and admonished us not to neglect our school assignments in favor of our “child’s play.”

Next to Heinz Schäfer, who never contributed, I was closest to Otto Nodnagel, whose father was the director of the Giessen *Realschule*. He was a not particularly attractive person with a very long nose, and he enjoyed passing himself off as a genius. He liked to dress conspicuously and showed everyone the same level of haughty contempt. Nonetheless, I owe him much of my musical knowledge, and we spent time together almost every day. Otto later became a music teacher in Königsberg and Berlin, composed a quantity of songs and orchestral works, and published several books, among them *Beyond Wagner and Liszt*. He also wrote a novel, which was not well received.

While our “Aesthetic Coffee Sisters” was still meeting something terrible happened that frightened and terrified all of us. Otto Nodnagel’s brother, Paul, who wrote under the pseudonym G. Ludwigs, got hold of a pistol and ended his life. We had long been friends, and if I remember correctly he sent in a few contributions for our literary journal. At the time, he was living in Darmstadt, where his father, who had been the previous director of the *Realschule* in Giessen, had been called to work in the Ministry of Culture. Paul Nodnagel was only 16, but even at that age his activities as a writer were exemplary, and he was in correspondence with well-known poets, scholars, and publishers, none of whom had the faintest notion that their correspondent was only 15 or 16. In Darmstadt, Paul had joined up with Wilhelm Walloth who had become involved in a stupid and ridiculous legal suit against Realist authors<sup>3</sup> -- Otto Nodnagel, who had originally wanted to study law, was so upset by this suit that it made him give up on the law completely and dedicate himself to music. G. Ludwigs published a piece about Walloth in the literary journal *Die Gesellschaft* in which he defended the slandered author of the great novel *Tiberias* [1889] and acquitted him. Walloth published a moving obituary in *Die Gesellschaft* after G. Ludwigs’s suicide. Shortly before his death, Nodnagel had written me that he was done with Realism, and that German art and literature would continue to blossom under the banner of Symbolism. But he would have been bitterly disappointed because the movement ran aground and led to nothing. He also wrote me that he was having a nervous breakdown, and it was clear that he knew what was ahead of him. And so he resorted to a pistol to escape his horrible anxieties.<sup>4</sup>

After about two years of hard and diligent work, the members of the Amicable Association of Aesthetic Coffee Sisters broke up. Though our meetings, recitations, and discussions may have been dismissed as the child’s play of immature students, I must say that they helped us enormously. No *Gymnasium*, no *Realschule*, no *Volksschule*<sup>5</sup> could have given us what we gave ourselves: an unshakable belief in our talents, an

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<sup>3</sup> Known as the Leipziger Realistenprozess, an obscenity trial that took place in 1890.

<sup>4</sup> Walloth was known for the homoerotic themes of his plays, which often ended in the suicide of the main character. It is not unlikely that Nodnagel's relationship with the older author was more than literary.

<sup>5</sup> Approximately equivalent to elementary school.

understanding for every type of critique, and an indifference to the ridicule and hostility that shadow everyone who stands out in any way.

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