

Das Blatt

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Germans in America

(For our first Book Conversation in 2008, we discussed chapter I of Franz Kafka's first novel, Amerika (1912). We thereby commemorated the arrival of Germans in the New World at Jamestown in 1608. AGS member Erika Joyce presented the introductory lecture on the history of German immigration to America until Kafka's time, the early twentieth century.)

The Jamestown Germans of 1608, Protestant dissenters from the Rhineland, had joined English settlers for the transatlantic venture. They had been recruited for their special skills in metalwork and building trades. From 1626, a steady flow of German immigrants arrived in the Dutch colony on Manhattan Island. The first large group of German immigrants arrived in 1693 at the invitation of Quaker William Penn, Governor of Pennsylvania. They were 13 Mennonite families from Krefeld who followed a promise of religious freedom and farmlands. More Protestant and pacifist dissenters followed and settled as Pennsylvania Germans (mistakenly called "Dutch") all over the state, from the Mohawk Valley in the north to the Piedmont in the south.

Despite the perilous voyage and the harsh conditions on arrival (many were indentured), German immigration continued throughout the colonial era until it reached nearly 100,000 at the start of the Revolution. Many of the "Hessians," sold by their princes to the British to fight overseas, deserted to the rebellious colonist side or were taken prisoner. (Some were put to work paving the cobblestone streets of Alexandria.) They all stayed on and became Americans.

After a pause during the Napoleonic wars, German immigration hit new peaks: farmers, artisans, and skilled workers fled poverty, hunger, and lack of opportunity to establish new, largely German-speaking communities farther West in Ohio, Illinois, Missouri, and Wisconsin. Special groups were the 48ers: well-educated Germans, such as Carl Schurz or Friedrich Hecker, who fled or were exiled after the failed revolution of 1848.

During the Civil War, immigration came to a halt but reached new heights during the last three decades of the 19th century. Fast steamships replaced sailing vessels; many were specially built for mass transport of European immigrants. Rapid industrialization and Bismarck's "Kulturkampf" brought unskilled laborers,

factory workers, the unemployed, and many Catholics to America. And there were single men and women now instead of the previously dominant families and whole communities. Not all reached their goal of Western settlement but got stuck in the slums of New York City, the immigration arrival hub. And many returned to their European homelands after a few years: an amazing one in five immigrants were such "Rückwanderer." (Note. The German TV documentary series, "Germans in America," was shown at the Goethe-Institut on April 7th and 14th.)

-- Erika Joyce

Franz Kafka's Amerika

(Kafka was well informed about the possibilities and pitfalls for European immigrants. Several family members had gone to America and set up successful businesses here. As with all families, letters went back and forth, and some of the successful emigrants even came on homeland visits to tell their stories.)

The first chapter of *Amerika* recounts the tale of 16-year-old Karl Rossmann, who is forced to go to New York to escape the scandal of his seduction by the family housemaid. On board, as the ship is arriving in America, he meets and becomes friends with a stoker who is about to be dismissed from his job. Karl pities the stoker's maltreatment and decides to help him; together they go to see the captain of the ship. Lo and behold, Karl's uncle (whom Karl does not recognize) is in a meeting with the captain. However, the uncle recognizes his nephew and takes him away from the stoker. Karl stays with his uncle for some time but is later abandoned by him after making a visit to his uncle's friend without his uncle's full approval.

References to immigration abound in this story, and Karl Rossmann exhibits many attitudes and experiences typical of the waves of immigrants from German lands. Like his fellow immigrants on the ship, he lacks English language skills, which heightens his distrust of foreigners. This fear of the foreign is shown in Karl's explicit xenophobia. Karl is aware of his precarious situation as a newcomer to the unknown, overpowering, huge American continent.

Karl's fairy-tale rescue by a rich and powerful uncle recounts the German myth of America as the land of unlimited possibilities. The uncle also confirms the myth, in a clear warning to Karl, when he attributes his success to his complete break with German family connections. Another reference to immigration history

is to the German exiles after the failed revolutions of 1830 and 1848. Those exiles stood up for lofty principles, just as Karl fights for justice and individual human rights when he involves himself in the case of the stoker. Yet in typical Kafka fashion, the good fight in principle is compromised by immoral action in practice when Karl knowingly lies to support the stoker's weak case.

Kafka's interweaving of fact, fiction, history, stories, myths, traditions, and symbol is masterful. However, the reason for Karl's emigration (that he is expelled by his family as a black sheep) is far more a literary myth than reality. And while servant-girls in the Old Country were routinely sexually abused by their employers, the obverse – maid raping the master's son – must be considered a Kafkaesque twist of historical fact. For example, Karl is obsessed by memories of his father at the same time as he attempts to rid himself of this domination as symbolized by the lost/ stolen/ forgotten suitcase. When the novel opens, passengers view the Statue of Liberty holding aloft not a torch but a sword: fitting symbol of the enigma that is America for the new immigrant. Is this statue a reference to the Goddess of Justice or to the Angel forbidding entry to paradise?

The eager discussants observed other "Kafkaesque" features in Karl's story. Karl is the first of the "K" heroes in Kafka's novels, followed by Josef K. in *Der Prozess (The Trial)* and K. in *Das Schloss (The Castle)*. He gets lost in a maze of stairs and passages on the ship until, by sheer accident, he knocks on the stoker's door for help.

Sharon and Scott Higgins hosted the social hour. Members and guests—more than 30, with guests far outnumbering members—enjoyed cheeses on pumpernickel, fruit, cakes, and cookies and conversation on Kafka, immigration stories, and family histories. Kafka fascination had drawn a couple from near Annapolis and two Georgetown students and their professor who will be studying *Amerika* later in the semester. Kafka's novel will likely be checked out at public libraries, since many attendees were eagerly looking forward to reading the text of the evening.
-- Irmgard Wagner

Lunch mit Lyrik - January 26th, 2008

Despite a cold and frosty day, our January 'Lunch mit Lyrik' at Cafe Berlin on Capitol Hill was well attended, and nearly everyone had selected an appropriate poem on "Winter" to read aloud. The poems ranged from Goethe and the classical period to the romantic poets such as Eichendorff and Geibel, and to modern poets such as Rilke, Trakl and Ringelnatz. We listened to the beginning and end

of Schubert's *Winterreise* as well as to poems by little-known and anonymous authors. Some of the winter poems were serious, others witty and humorous; some dealt with winter in nature, others with winter of the soul or the approaching end of life.
-- Erika Joyce

Drama -Reading Group: *Biedermann und die Brandstifter*

We spent several sessions during the fall of 2007 reading aloud and discussing the play *Biedermann und die Brandstifter* by Swiss playwright Max Frisch. Originally broadcast as a radio play, the stage version was first performed at the Schauspielhaus in Zurich in 1958.

In six scenes and an epilogue, Frisch tells the story of Gottlieb Biedermann, respected businessman and solid middle-class citizen, whose self-deception leads him and his wife to disaster and overcrowded hell. Being fully aware of the danger of arsonists in his town, Biedermann nonetheless gives shelter to a trio of exceedingly shady characters who promptly install themselves in his attic, stack countless barrels of gasoline under his roof, and calmly prepare for Biedermann's doom. Posing as a trusting good fellow, Biedermann absolves himself of his own bad conscience and avoids any responsible action.

Meanwhile, a pseudo-Greek chorus of firemen stands ready in the background, warning Biedermann not to accept what he sees as unavoidable fate but what is indeed his own folly. Fate, they argue, is an abdication of human dignity and personal responsibility, but Biedermann is not able to confront himself honestly and will, therefore, never recognize the truth.

Frisch called this work an 'instructional play without a lesson', meaning that his audience should draw its own conclusion individually. Could Biedermann have avoided catastrophe if he had acted differently? Will the mistakes of history be repeated indefinitely? Critics have seen Frisch's play as a political parody which denounces the cowardice of a rigid bourgeoisie unwilling to block the way against any type of totalitarian government. In a broader sense, Frisch's parable depicts the human condition in general and asks the question whether we as individuals or as a society will ever be prepared to take full responsibility for our actions.

Everyone present during our readings at Pimmit Library in Mc Lean clearly delighted in the author's sharp wit and the constant use of the grotesque and burlesque in his play. As we have done numerous times before, we concluded each drama-reading session with a brief hour of resuscitation at Ledo's Pizza nearby.

-- Erika Joyce

Paula Modersohn-Becker: Provocation and Innovation

Ellen Layman, a student in the Master’s program in Art history at George Mason University, gave this year’s AGS art lecture on Thursday, March 27 at the Goethe-Institut. She chose as her theme “Paula Modersohn-Becker: Provocation and Innovation.” Before coming to our area, Ms. Layman worked for 20 years in magazine publishing in New York City. After three years in London, she arrived in Northern Virginia and for the past 15 years has been working as a volunteer in the National Gallery of Art’s Image Collections Department. Currently, she is an intern-assistant to Professor Carol Matusch of George Mason University, who is curating the forthcoming exhibition, “Pompeii: Roman Villas around the Bay of Naples,” at the National Gallery. Ms. Layman “discovered” Modersohn-Becker on a visit to the painter’s home base of Worpswede near Bremen. Her interest was encouraged in a course on German Expressionism taught by Professor Egon Verheyen at George Mason. Professor Verheyen passed away in February this year, and Ellen Layman dedicated her lecture to his memory. He was a member of AGS, and a past president of the Baltimore chapter of AGS.

For the longest, Paula Modersohn Becker (1876–1907) was barely known even in Germany outside the Worpswede-Bremen area. Last year, the 100th anniversary of her premature death at age 31, brought a huge change. Three major exhibitions of her work in Bremen and Hanover and at least five new biographies suddenly placed her in the forefront of the German culture scene. She is now generally recognized as a pioneer of modernism in 20th-century German painting.

In her richly illustrated lecture (there are true advantages to PowerPoint!), Ms. Layman, integrating life and work, traced Modersohn-Becker’s development against the conventions of romanticism, realism, and beaux-arts stylization that dominated German painting around the turn of the 20th century. Crucial to her development were four study visits to Paris, the European art center at the time. Ms. Layman demonstrated how sculptures and paintings by Rodin, Maillol, Cezanne, Gauguin, Picasso and others changed Modersohn-Becker’s approach to art, and how she in turn changed the horizon and direction of German avant-garde art.

Most remarkable of all, while Modersohn-Becker anticipated Expressionism, Fauvism, and Cubism, she does not fit into any of these “schools.” More and more, in the brief time she had for painting, she achieved a style all her own. This is nowhere more evident than in

her numerous self-portraits. Many of them painted in the nude (extreme provocation!) or with a mask-like face, they take self-portraiture, quoting Rainer Maria Rilke, the poet, from traditional individualism—“das bin ich” (this am I)—to an existential level: “dies ist” (this is). Rilke, a close friend and contemporary who had known Modersohn-Becker in Worpswede and in Paris, expressed it best in his long poem dedicated to her memory, which he composed a year after her death: *Requiem für eine Freundin*. Ms. Layman quoted from Rilke’s poem where he attempts to render the essence of Modersohn-Becker’s “irritating”—provocative and innovative—art. Readers of German could follow the original from a handout.

Questions and comments from the audience revealed the deep impact of Ms. Layman’s presentation. Attendance of staff members of the National Gallery of Art and the Phillips Collection indicated that interest in Modersohn-Becker is rising in Washington art circles as well as across the Atlantic. Spirited conversation in small groups ensued, with the support of a spring-themed selection of refreshments hosted by Erika Joyce and Sharon Higgins. I would have loved to poll attendees to find out which in the plethora of paintings shown by Ellen Layman had made the strongest, most indelible impression on each individual.

-- Irmgard Wagner

American Translator Awarded Goethe Medal for Promoting Cultural Exchange through German Literature

An American translator was honored on March 26 in Weimar when he was presented with a Goethe Medal for making German literature accessible to native English speakers.

Created in 1954 by the board or directors of the Goethe-Institut, the Goethe-Medaille has been recognized as an official award of the Federal Republic of Germany since 1975. In 1992 the tradition began of presenting the award in Weimar on the day of Goethe’s death. The award is presented to non-Germans who have made tremendous strides in promoting the German language and international cultural exchange.

John E. Woods received the award from Goethe-Institut President Jutta Limbach. Woods, who translates German language literature into English, received this distinction for his 30-year career of intermediating between the two languages.

“Of note are the breadth of his translations and the depth of his knowledge of German literature. Woods’ translations include Döblin, Raabe, Dürrenmatt, Grass,

Ransmayr, Dörrie, Treichel and frequently Thomas Mann and Arno Schmidt,” the Goethe-Institut Chicago states on its Website.

”John Woods has managed not only to capture Thomas Mann’s irony; but, also to do justice to the multiplicity of styles implemented by Schmidt. Especially in America, where the market for literature in translation pales in comparison to the massive machine of English language publications, the success of Wood’s translations exemplifies the role that literary translators can play the ambassadors of culture,” it adds.

Since the first award in 1955, 317 individuals from 58 different countries have been honored. Two other Americans, Billy Wilder and Daniel Barenboim, have received this award in the past.

The Immortal Faust

The year 2008 marks the 200th anniversary of the staging of Goethe’s *Faust*. As expected, the theatres in Germany are having a field day with performances. As reported by *Die Zeit*. The week of 1 to 7 March, *Faust* was staged at 10 different theaters. The week of 8 to 14 March, *Faust* was staged at 9 theaters. They staged all three “versions/ parts” of *Faust*—*Urfaust*, *Faust Part I*, and *Faust Part II*, with *Faust Part I* in the vast majority. Also in the week of 8-14 March, an extraordinary event occurred: both *Faust Part I* and *Faust Part II* were performed on consecutive days: Part I on Saturday evening, at normal theater time; Part II on Sunday, beginning at 3 pm. (No information was given as to how much they cut from the text or how long the performance lasted.) The performances took place at The Meiningen Theater, in Meiningen, a small town in Thuringia, south of Weimar and across the Thuringian Forest mountain range. The Meiningen Theater has a long historic role since they promoted a particular style of performance. During Easter Week (March 16 - 23), not surprisingly, there were only five Faust performances. In the week of March 22-28 Faust was performed at 11 theaters. In Berlin alone it was staged at three theaters. As of this writing, 11 is the highest number of weekly performances for this infamous yet awe-inspiring old character.

Book Corner

Intriguing

... and practically *de rigueur* for Goethe fans is the new novel by eminent and often controversial author Martin Walser. At age 80, he has just published a biographical fiction about Goethe, which is really about himself. It is the well-known Marienbad episode: the 73-year-old Goethe’s last love for 19-year-old Ulrike von Levetzow. Walser explores the line between embarrassment and

joie de vivre (Lebensfreude); the (self-) judgment that condemns and prevents pleasure as “sich lächerlich machen”. (English has no real equivalent for this German expression.) If literary history has forgiven Goethe for his last embarrassing experience it is because the great poet managed to sublimate, in the truest Freudian sense, his passion in one of his sublimest poems: the *Marienbad Elegy*, which Walser’s novel prints in its entirety: all 23 six-line stanzas. (Martin Walser: *Ein liebender Mann*. Novel. Published by Rowohlt, Reinbek 2008. – 284 pp., 19.90 Euros.)

Irresistible

... is a new biography of Wilhelm Müller (1794-1827), who wrote the texts of the most famous Lieder cycles in the history of German music: *Die Winterreise* and *Die schöne Müllerin*. Schubert’s music is known the world over, yet the poet has remained unknown. Schubert and Müller were contemporaries but never met: Schubert lived unknown in Vienna, Austria; Müller, the Ur-poet of romantic wandering to unknown destinations, spent a sedentary life between Dessau and Berlin. However, he was known during his lifetime not for his wandering poems but for his ecstatic hymns to the Greeks fighting for liberation from Turkish rule: as “Griechen-Müller.” This book is irresistible because it comes with two cds: a recording of *Die Winterreise*, with baritone Florian Prey and pianist Wolfgang Leibnitz; and a reading of both poetry cycles by Gert Westphal. At the modest price of the book/two-cd set, it would make a lovely gift package. (Erika von Borries: *Wilhelm Müller. Der Dichter der Winterreise*. Eine Biographie. Published by C.H. Beck, Munich 2007. 320 pp. (and 2 cds), 26.90 Euros.)

Inexplicable

... for Jonathan Yardley of the *Washington Post* is the American publication in translation of Pascal Mercier’s novel, *Night Train to Lisbon (Nachtzug nach Lissabon)*: “yet another European bestseller (over two million copies sold worldwide) [that will be] met with indifference on this side of the Atlantic.” The author, in reality German philosophy professor Peter Bieri, writes excellent occasional essays on problems of everyday life in *Die Zeit*. In the novel, a professor of classics travels to Portugal in search of an author whose book he found by sheer coincidence in a book store. The author, long dead, fought in the resistance against Salazar. Because his sisters and close friends keep his memory alive, they bring to life for the German seeker Portugal’s immediate past, most particularly the Salazar dictatorship. Thus, the narrator is telling the history of a dictatorship, a theme very familiar to Germans, but from a new perspective. (Pascal Mercier: *Night Train to*

Lisbon. Translated from the German by Barbara Harshav. Grove, 2008. 438 pp, \$ 25.)

By the way,

Daniel Kehlmann's megaseller novel, *Die Vermessung der Welt*, the topic of our Book Conversation last December, is now in paperback version costs a mere 8.90 Euros, Rowohlt announced in a 6 March 2008 ad in *Die Zeit*.