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Kaspar Schnetzler: Der Fall Bruder. Neues aus New Hampshire: Book Review

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V. BOOK REVIEWS

Kaspar Schnetzler: Der Fall Bruder. Neues aus New Hampshire. Ein Kleinroman. Zürich: Gute Schriften Nr. 409, 1975. 104pp.

In his first novel the young Swiss author Kaspar Schnetzler demonstrates a quite remarkable talent. Choosing the framework of a detective story--the search for a disappeared student named Gordon Schuster--Schnetzler ably leads the reader into the dark and complex area of Germany's Nazi past, her "unbewältigte Vergangenheit." As a matter of fact, his story illustrates how hard, even impossible it is for some Germans to cope with their experiences of the Third Reich.

Except for flashbacks the story takes place in Danberg, N.H., in the early 70's. Schnetzler uses this distance in time and space to show that the kind of bitter despair experienced by the main character Else Bruder may resist all the forces said to be "healing." All events connected with this case are seen through the eyes of Danberg's sheriff Don Gould. As a thoughtful observer of human nature he is able to penetrate the mere facts of a detective problem; he soon realizes that the case of Gordon Schuster might actually be the case of Else Bruder. His intuition proves true: Else Bruder had killed Gordon. Although after her forced emigration to the U.S. she had found a quiet life as a bookseller she had never stopped brooding over the question why a decent family such as hers should and could be destroyed willfully by other people. When she finally returned to Germany for a visit she was faced with some Germans' denial of any collective guilt, and this experience deepened her despair to the point where she killed Gordon Schuster, a student at Danberg College and the son of former neighbors in Germany who, as Nazi followers, had contributed to the demise of her family. In her usual, composed manner she explains that she wanted to state an example of what it means to have to live with a death devoid of any sense. She is honest enough to concede that her killing Gordon does not help anybody, that it is itself without sense although not without reasons. This very admission proves that her situation is desperate, without resort.

Within the small space of this "Kleinroman" (short novel) Schnetzler is giving convincing portraits of the main characters Else Bruder and Don Gould. The description of the small New England town with its people evidences Schnetzler's gift of using detailed observations--probably made during a stay in the U.S.--as a modest, yet effective background which empha-

sizes the emotional depth of Else's experiences. In an unpretentious way, the young author created a thought-provoking story that rings true and that contributes to grasping the frightfully devastating effects of a totalitarian regime on individual human beings. In short: Schnetzler fills the cliché of the "unbewältigte Vergangenheit" with moving life.

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Piero Bianconi, Albero genealogico (Cronaca di emigranti).
Lugano: Edizione Pantarei, 1969/1973. 147 pages, Fr.14.--.

Der Stammbaum, Chronik einer Tessiner Familie. Deutsch
von Hannelise Hinderberger. Zürich und Stuttgart:
Werner Classen Verlag, 1971. 183 pages, Fr.18.80.

"C'è più distanza effettiva tra l'infanzia e la vecchiaia di mia madre che tra lei bambina e gli uomini delle caverne" (There is more real distance between the childhood and the old age of my mother than between her as a little girl and man in the stone age), the author exclaims, as he observes from the new power dam, which has been constructed in his native Verzasca valley in the canton of Ticino, how a great part of the rural world of his ancestors is being submerged for ever. In such surroundings his mother had not been allowed by her parents to use a match, when she had to light the fire in the kitchen stove, because to profit of such an article of luxury would have been an inadmissible waste of money, but she had to run to a friendly neighbor in order to catch there an ember from their hearth. In her old age, however, she simply had to turn on an electric switch when she wanted to cook the "minestra" for her supper.

Beside the author during his visit to the new power dam in the Verzasca valley, stands his son, a geologist to whom this modern world of technology is quite familiar, whereas the old man, lost between the ages, describes his state of mind as follows: "Non appartengo più al mondo dei miei antenati, né ancora a quello di mio figlio, sono isolato tra un passato ormai estraneo e un presente che per me è futuro" (I don't belong to the world of my ancestors any more, but also not yet to that of my son, I am isolated between a past which looks strange and our present time which to me is like the future.)

We choose these two quotations from the Italian original text for two reasons, first to show Piero Bianconi's powerful language and second to explain why in our minds his narration