

The Death of the Adversary

Der Tod des Widersachers

Presented by: Heinrich Detering

Based on the writer's own experience, *Der Tod des Widersachers* (The Death of the Adversary) tells the story of a young Jewish man who witnesses Hitler's rise to power, goes into exile and joins the resistance in the occupied Netherlands, where he is discovered and murdered. Keilson transforms this plot into a psychological parable about the dynamics of power and hatred.

Der Tod des Widersachers was first conceived as a novella in 1944, together with a series of poems on the same topic, under the impression of Stauffenberg's assassination attempt on Adolf Hitler. After the war, Keilson turned it into a novel. After painstaking revisions, it was published in 1959. Translations into Dutch, English and other languages followed. After *Das Leben geht weiter* (Life Goes On, 1933) and *Komödie in Moll* (Comedy in a Minor Key, 1947), it is the third novel written by the German-Dutch psychiatrist, poet, novelist and essayist Hans Keilson (born 1909 in Bad Freienwalde, Germany, died 2011 in Hilversum, Netherlands). The novel is set in a fictional framework: An exiled writer of the anti-Nazi resistance in Germany and then the Netherlands, who supplied activists with false passports and who was murdered by the Gestapo, has left behind a manuscript, written in German. In it, the narrator tells the story of his life and his companions. A Dutch attorney hands it to the fictitious "editor" who tries to find out the historical truth about the alleged martyr and hero. The manuscript itself – alternating between narrative and essayistic passages – tells of the upbringing of a Jewish boy in Germany who becomes an eyewitness to Hitler's rise to power, his way into the political resistance and into Dutch exile, the German occupation of the Netherlands and the narrator's life in hiding.

The story follows a loose chronological order. Between passages almost reminiscent of a reportage, gaps of several years are bridged with brief remarks. In addition, the plot is interspersed with reflections on moral values, on mutual concepts of the other as "the enemy", on the psychological interdependence of the persecutors and the persecuted. The "anatomy of hatred" (as *Time Magazine* put it in the headline of their review in September 1962) that unfolds as the narrative progresses focuses, on the one hand, on the motivations of the murderous dictator, the "adversary" – "His own destruction is what drives him" – and, on the other hand, the narrator's own motivation for attempting to assassinate him. As he explores his own psyche, he realises that he too is driven by a hatred that he must overcome. At the same time, his support for the underground resistance is vital for the persecuted Jews. When the secret police finds him and he shoots his murderer at the moment of his own death, the psychological and moral questions he has raised remain unanswered.

Guided by the intention to stylise the historical event into a parable of hatred and resistance, violence and counter-violence, the novel avoids almost all historical names and designations. Although it is clear that the story is about Hitler, the persecution of the Jews and life under Nazi

occupation during the Second World War, the narrators of both the framing narrative and the main story prefer abstract designations to concrete names. Nevertheless, the description of specific situations is remarkably realistic because of its focus on single, condensed scenes: While listening to a political rally on the radio, the narrator analyses the dictator's voice and rhetorical means. As an eyewitness to the dictator's triumphal procession after coming to power, he observes the inconspicuous details that reveal insecurity and inconsistency. The young man catches his father, who is secretly packing his suitcase to flee, and has a dramatic conversation with him; as the terror grows, his parents are deported and, as we learn by implication, murdered in the camps.

While the novel's socio-psychological reflections remained controversial in its reception, the series of vividly portrayed episodes from everyday life during the Nazi era is impressive. Keilson draws on his own experiences as the son of a provincial Jewish family, a student in Berlin, an exiled writer in the Netherlands and a member of the resistance movement, as well as on his post-war experience as a psychiatrist and co-founder of an organization to support Jewish orphans who had survived the Holocaust (Le Ezrat ha Jeled, "For the best of the children"). The novel is therefore not a thinly veiled autobiography, but rather a parable-like, at times almost allegorical story. Keilson has outlined the autobiographical background in a number of essays and in his last book, the short prose volume *Da steht mein Haus* (There Stands My House, 2011).

The second American edition of *The Death of the Adversary*, published in 2010, received enthusiastic reviews. In the *New York Times*, Francine Prose praised Keilson's "uncanny" understanding of both the persecuted and the persecutors, calling the novel "a masterpiece". According to the *Los Angeles Times*, the novel reads as if "Anne Frank survived the secret annex but was also still among us."

LANGUAGE: German / Deutsch

This title was not censored before publishing