

Die Kälte

Th. Bernhard

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Life is not easy for the author. Hardly has his beloved grandfather died, the person to whom he was closest to all, when it is the turn of his mother, whose friendship had been rediscovered and revived after the death of her father. Her process of dying is long and drawn out and very painful. She suffers from cancer of the uterus, but as is said in the book, her heart is strong, and she is stuck with life for a long time, although she would have preferred to let go. On top of that, in the midst of his mother's dying, the lungs still give him serious troubles. Having just escaped with his life from the hospitalization bringing him close to death, he acquires a shade on his X-rays after having spent time at the sanatorium. This indicates tuberculosis, the dread above all others for many generations of youth, and results in a call to the sanatorium Grafenhof, which opens up this fourth installment.

At Grafenhof he is not really accepted by the other patients. He is not one of them. They spend their time to spit into bottles to have it inspected, but the author is unable, much to the frustration of the staff, to produce any mucus. Eventually he does so, but not very much. His stay is gradually extended, from a couple of months to almost a year. Many patients spend most of their remainders of their lives there, only at the very end are they farmed out to some local hospital to get the dying out of the house. At times the dying takes place too abruptly, and there is no time to hide it, and the body has to be taken away in some discrete manner. He makes the acquaintance of a young man, a few years older than himself, (remember the author is still in his teens), a musician enabling him at last to share his own love for music, especially that of singing. His friends gets discharged as clean and healthy and the author, who has despite of the misery in which he is mired, rediscovered and revived his own will to live, hopes that he too will be discharged. He is in fact, discharged as a free and healthy young man, only soon to be discovered to be affected after all. He is subjected to some new, painful and experimental therapies, such as the inflation of his body, through a pneumatic tube inserted in the same. He is after some stay at a local hospital returned to Grafenhof, where he now is considered somewhat of a celebrity due to the advanced treatments he has been the subject of. The regular inflations of his body is resumed, however ineptly. He learns to despise the staff, in particular the head doctor, whose arrogance terrorizes staff and patients alike, and is the basis for many an unacknowledged mistake. The ineptitude of doctors in general begins to sink into him and he starts secretly plan for his escape which he finally succeeds in effecting.

Bernhard has no father, or rather he does not know his father. Nothing about his father is revealed to him. The subject is forbidden in his family. His mother uses him as a means of revenge against the memory of the father. As a young child he is forced to go himself and pick up the state allowance for fatherless children, his own father refusing to honor his obligations. In this way he humiliatingly learns how little he is worth, when his worth is converted into money. Some things he manages to glean nevertheless. His father is

dead, dying in Germany, Frankfurt an der Oder, to be precise, at the end of the war. He also has learned that his father had five children after him. This is not very much, and those snippets of information only provoke his curiosity even more, intensifying his frustration. Not only his mother refuses to yield anything more, the topic is also a forbidden one among his grand-parents. Once he gets in contact with a woman who remembered his father from her school. He makes an appointment to meet her, but before it takes place, she suffers a horrible traffic accident and dies. He also manages to get in contact with his paternal grandfather, a man who apparently reaches the advanced age of 104 and dies about the time the author writes the end of his memoirs. From him he does not learn very much either. The grandfather does not seem to have much contact with his son, but he gives him a picture of his father, and the author is struck and disturbed by how much his father resembles him (or maybe the other way around). He brings the picture home. His family is aghast that he has sought out the relatives of his father, people who also live in Salzburg, and his mother snatches it away and puts it into the fire. His father is totally erased from the family awareness and it leaves in the author a hole, desperate to be filled.

Being away from hospitals and sanatoriums, he is in dire straits. He had educated himself to become a shop assistant, even passed the necessary examination, but this route is barred to him. As he has been diagnosed with tuberculosis he is potentially contagious and has no business in a store, especially not one in which victuals are being sold. His dream of becoming a singer has likewise floundered. As suffering from a disease of the lungs he is not only thought unable to sing, but actually forbidden. When he during his stay at the sanatorium escapes to sing in a choir at a nearby church, something bound to be discovered, he is severely admonished. So what will he do as a grown-up man? His family is not willing to take responsibility for him. Their interest in him is limited. He learns of the death of his mother through the newspaper. While he was in the hospital or in the sanatorium, none of them had any contact with him, while his mother was dying, which might have been understandable, and apparently the death of his mother will not change matters.

September 19, 2015 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden* ulfp@chalmers.se