

## Der Keller

Th. Bernhard

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This is the second installment in the author's autobiography. We are still in Salzburg, his hometown. At fifteen he makes the momentous decision to drop out of the Gymnasium he has entered to please the ambitions and hopes of his maternal grandfather the writer Johannes Freumbichler and instead become an apprentice to a grocer. This is the most important decision of his life, and it probably saved it from destruction. He had hated school before, and he had hated the Gymnasium, and dropping out gives him an exhilarating sense of freedom, he finally becoming master of his own life. For the first time he does something voluntarily. He has only one desire and that is to choose the *entgegengesetzte Richtung*. To do something totally opposite, not to go forward in a similar direction, but choose the totally reverse, to turn one-hundred and eighty degrees. He seeks out the *Arbeitsamt* where he is received by a friendly woman who picks out of a filing cabinet various positions as an apprentice for him. But whatever she chooses he rejects, only when she reluctantly picks up a filing card giving the address of a position at a basement grocery store in the infamous *Scherzhauserfeldsiedlung* a crime-infested district known for the poverty and despondency of its hapless inhabitants, does he accept. This is really the lowest he can go, and he relishes it.

The Gymnasium was some kind of learning factory, a bestial factory, where nothing useful was taught and in which he consequently learned nothing. Now as a humble apprentice in a grocery store in the despised slum of Salzburg, a *Schamfleck* of the city, he finally finds himself useful. He loves being useful, he does all the chores not only with enthusiasm but also with joy. He must be a star apprentice learning everything there is to learn quickly and willingly. He does it all out of his own volition. The owner of the store comes from Vienna, incidentally just as the young protagonist himself, and has had his dreams to become a musician foiled by the war. Bernhard's maternal grandfather was his first teacher. From him he learned solitude, to be apart from society, to be self-reliant, to dwell in the world of the spirit. From his grocer and his tenure at the store he learned something else, equally valuable. He learned to be in society, to be part of it, to make contact with people, to live in a real world with all its contingencies. He finds himself good at associating with people, the secret of making contact consisting in a combination of intensity and detachment. He was all the time surrounded by people, and he loved it. He felt part of a crowd, and he felt useful, and he learned a lot.

The district in which he worked were apart from the city separated by meadows which he got to cross commuting from his home to work. When he thirty years later returns as he is writing his memoirs, he is appalled that the meadows are gone, instead they have been built over by modern soulless apartment buildings. There is misery in that district, those who live there are trapped, those who try to leave eventually return. The only way to get out is to die, and they die. No one really knows the truth of that, because no one wants to listen to that kind of misery. And the author makes a lengthy philosophical digressing

laboring the point in his customary repetitive way, that the truth can never be known.

In his happiness he opens up to further happiness, and that happiness is music. He starts to sing, and his grandfather sees to it that he gets proper instruction. He visits a lady who takes great interest in him and his talent, and goes regularly, paying the fee out of his meagre earnings. His family, except of course his grandfather who has always played the role of the good fairy to him, scoff at his doing something so useless as music. He lives with his mother and his stepfather, the later supports them all, that breed of half-siblings, while his mother cooks for them all, and his grandfather seeks refuge in a small room always getting up early to work on his grand pointless opus. But not only does he take singing lessons, the lady is married to a professor of music that teaches him the theory of music, to which he takes as if it would be higher mathematics. Thus going to the couple he gets both to learn things and to study things, what more could he hope for? And his grandfather has hopes for him as well, although he himself is not that interested in singing, he would not mind if his grandchild would become a famous singer. And the years go by, and the author pursues his humble but useful life learning to be part of society and to connect with people. But other things surely are in store for him.

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