

## Die Ursache

*Th. Bernhard*

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This is the first autobiographical installment in a pentaology. It eschews the authors childhood memories and drops you in *media res* with Bernhard struggling in school to keep head above water. He practices the 'Geige' by himself in a room, and his practice is invariably infused with thoughts of suicide. Why he is concerned with the ending of his life, and how seriously, does not emerge from his account, it seems more to be an expression of a general malaise than relating to any specific trauma. As is typical with Bernhard his prose is repetitive, but it has a seductive rhythm, so you get swept away. As a consequence of this regular rhythm the different passages flow into each other making up a continuous whole, a thread not broken, although as with the fibres of a rope, not consisting of sustained strands, but of shorter ones intertwined, just as generations connect with each other, making up a continuous history with no breaks. Thus although the short book is divided into chapters, there are only three of them, and the divisions seem a bit arbitrary. This makes the reading also a bit demanding, as there are few breathing places, it all comes out with no time to catch your breath.

Bernhard grew up with his maternal grandparents, and especially his grandfather meant a lot to him, maybe the most of anyone he met in his childhood, more so than his mother. His father seems to have been unknown to him. His grandparents were of radical stock. Artistic by nature, revolutionary by political inclination. They all stem from Salzburg, where most of their relatives reside. But with his relatives Bernhard seems to have had little to do, in spite of his grandmothers dutiful promptings. Clearly they are too bourgeois, too distant, and among them he feels to be an outcast.

Playing the violin is something his grandfather wants him to do, and he does many things his grandfather wants him to do. Although he is not devoid of musical talent he has no patience nor any inclination for sustained disciplined effort, especially not when it comes to the formal aspects of music, much to the exasperation of his teacher. Salzburg, which until recently had been spared the ravages of war, is at the end of the same, sought out as a target for allied bombing. This necessitates repeated visits to the shelters, severely interrupting regular instructions, eventually making it impossible. During one of those raids, his violin is destroyed, which means that he will for ever be liberated from the onus of regular solitary practice (and thus also from his obsessions with suicide?). Nothing bad that does not bring anything good with it. On the other hand, he has also been taking English lessons from a lady who has fled from Hannover. He likes that very much. But one day her house is hit by a bomb and she expires. No more English lessons.

The ravages done by bombs cannot but fascinate a school-boy of the age of Bernhard. Sebald complains that there is almost no literature that treats this traumatic part of recent German history. A touch of this is nevertheless to be found in this memoir. The Old Town is hit. Familiar landmarks reduced to rubble or twisted out of any recognition. This is scary, but also in some grotesque way exciting.

But the war ends, and with that his school is transformed into another one, under a new guidance as the old rector was a Nazi and has been replaced, or killed, or simply died, it is not so easy to remember which. But the new rector is hardly any better, the same oppressiveness. After the war there is an element of chaos, infrastructure being damaged, a border where there previously was none. The need for papers, passports, because his mother and step-father lives on the other side of the border, in Germany, and there are some illegal crossings.

His grandfather wants him to attend Gymnasium. This means a lot to him. But as always Bernhard does what his grandfather tells him, An obedience not based on fear but love. He wants to make him happy, even if he himself suffers. But how much suffering is he prepared to put up with? Studies at the Gymnasium does not agree with him, he is cut out to do other things, and the rupture is bound to be imminent, but the first volume of his series runs out before the final step is being taken,

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