

THE GERMAN SOCIETY'S

Friday Film Fest Series



Der Hauptmann von Köpenick

Credits:

Director:	Helmut Käutner
Screenplay:	Helmut Käutner, Carl Zuckmayer
Photography:	Albert Benitz
Producer:	Gyula Trebitsch
Production Co:	Real Film
Production year:	1956
Cast:	Heinz Rühmann (Wilhelm Voigt), Friedrich Domin, Martin Held, Willy A. Kleinau, Hannelore Schroth, Leonard Steckel
Language:	German with English subtitles

Based on the play by Carl Zuckmayer
Precis by Karl Moehlmann

The Career of Shoemaker Wilhelm Voigt

Wilhelm Voigt was born 1849 in Tilsit (Ostpreussen), the son of a shoemaker. A precocious pilferer, he achieved his first prison sentence of two weeks at the tender age of 14. Between 1864 and 1891, he was arrested four times for theft and twice for forgery. In 1906, after his release from prison he moved to Wismar in Mecklenburg-Schwerin where he worked as a shoemaker until he was expelled. Subsequently he moved to Berlin to stay with his sister, but the Berlin authorities were just as unenthusiastic about his proclivities and expelled him in August of the same year. Luckily for our story, Voigt simply ignored the decree, setting the stage for his ultimate coup.

Acquiring the uniform of a Prussian officer in several second hand stores in Potsdam and in Berlin, on October 16, 1906 Voigt, posing as a captain, took command of a squad of soldiers in Plötzensee and occupied the city hall of Köpenick. He arrested Mayor Langerhans and confiscated the contents of the city treasury (4002 Mark + 37 Pfennige). Conscientious charlatan that he was, he commanded the police to keep order and then promptly fled to Berlin where he immediately purchased civilian clothes.

He was apprehended ten days later and sentenced to four years in prison. Emperor Wilhelm II, perhaps displaying a suppressed sense of humor, pardoned Voigt after less than two years on August 16, 1908. His prank had made him a celebrity and led to his appearing in traveling shows in Canada, the USA and France. The British topped it all with a statue in his honor at Madame Tussaud's in London. In 1909 he moved to Luxemburg for good, dying there at the age of 72 in January of 1922.



Even Germany had a good collective laugh about the incident, but some in the Fatherland reflected that Voigt's

conquest of Köpenick's *Rathaus* illustrated a serious defect in the national character. How was it possible that a soldier without any legitimate credentials except his uniform could so easily commandeer a civilian office? It seemed to be a painfully embarrassing reminder of the dominance of the military in the *Kaiserreich* (Second Empire), of civilian society's servile susceptibility to the symbolism of uniforms and finally, proof of the intimidating substance of the army's power. In hindsight, it might be seen as a portent of ominous things to come.

Play and Movie

In 1930 Carl Zuckmayer, inspired by Voigt's escapade, wrote "Hauptmann von Köpenick" as a three act play. The play in turn spawned three movie versions, 1956 with Heinz Rühmann (below, 1902-1994), with Rudolf Platte in 1960 for TV and in 1997 with Harald Juhnke.

In the play Voigt is born in Berlin-Wuhlheide, thus accounting for his Berlin accent. Zuckmayer also engages in a measure of artistic license concerning the motive of his protagonist. In real life, Voigt didn't touch the money. The driving motive for Voigt in the play is the passport which he needs to obtain to live a normal life again. He turns himself in to the police after they promise to issue a passport to him.

But it is the uniform, although acquired piecemeal by the real Voigt that is employed by Zuckmayer as a major expository and didactic device after his character acquires it in one piece in the play. The story of the uniform's previous owner is integrated into the narrative, thus launching a caricature of the imperial army and the unquestioning devotion to that institution by so many. The omnipresence of the military is seen to span the social spectrum from the uniform business to proud lieutenants in the military reserve. No one is exempt - in job interviews the crucial question is *Wo hamse gedient* (Where did you serve?) and even prison wards are swept up by the martial spirit, engaging in grotesque role

playing to celebrate the glorious victory against the French at Sedan during the Franco-Prussian War.

Discerning Dialogue (Quotes from *Der Hauptmann von Köpenick*)

"Sie glaub'n ja nicht, wie schön Deutschland ist, wenn man janz weit weg ist und immer nur dran denkt".

"Da hat nun mal der Mensch seine Muttersprache und wenn er nix mehr hat, dann hat er die immer noch."

"Ich hab' mir eben nach Hause geseht. Ich wollt' mir nicht in fremde Erde begraben lassen".

"Wenn eener mit `nem bunten Fell kommt und blanke Knöpfe, dann ist nichts mehr zu wollen. Nee, nee - so wie du aussiehst, so wirst du angesehen."

"Ne Uniform - das ist ein Stück vom Menschen, sozusagen die bessere Haut."

"Ohne Uniform sind Sie doch nur`ne halbe Portion."

"Also, ich sage immer: Vom Gefreiten aufwärts beginnt der Darwinismus, aber der Mensch, der Mensch fängt erst beim Leutnant an."

"Befehl ist Befehl." "Wenn so was is', dann heißt es einfach gehorchen."

"Das weiß doch jedes Kind, dass man bei uns mit Militär alles machen kann."

"So`ne Uniform, die macht das fast von janz alleene."

"Majestät haben gelacht. Da seh'n sie, was Disziplin ist. Kein Volk der Erde macht uns das nach."

"Wilhelm, du bockst an die Weltordnung. Das ist Versündigung."

Der Hauptmann von Köpenick Statue
Vor dem Rathaus Berlin-Köpenick

