THE GERMAN SOCIETY OF PENNSYLVANIA

Friday Film Fest Series

Schachnovelle

Directed by Philipp Stötzel

May 19, 2023
6:30 PM

Film, Food & Discussion

The German Society of Pennsylvania
611 Spring Garden St.
Philadelphia, PA 19123
Schachnovelle (2021)

**Director:** Philipp Stözl

**Screenplay:** Eldar Grigorian
   Philipp Stözl

**Production:** Tobias Walker
   Philipp Worm
   Christine Strobl

**Camera:** Thomas Kienast

**Length:** 112 minutes

**Cast:**
- **Oliver Masucci** as Dr. Josef Bartok
- **Albrecht Schuch** as Mirko Czentovic
- **Birgit Minichmayr** as Anna Bartok
- **Rolf Lassgard** as Owen McConnor
- **Andreas Lust** as Johann Prantl
- **Samual Finzi** as Alfred Keller
- **Lukas Miko** as Gustav Sailer

Based on the book by Stefan Zweig: Schachnovelle (1942)
Commentary by Karl Moehtmann

Kleist, and Nietzsche (Der Kampf mit dem Dämon, 1925) and five historical portraits in Sternstunden der Menschheit (1928). His Gesammelte Erzählungen, two volumes of short stories, were published in 1936, and his psychological novel Ungeduld des Herzens in 1939.

The “Schachnovelle”, written between 1938 and 1941, was published in 1942 in Buenos Aires and can be listed as the last completed work before Zweig’s death.

Eine unerhörte Begebenheit

In his conversations with Johann Peter Eckermann on January 25, 1827, Goethe defined a novella as “eine sich ereignete unerhörte Begebenheit”, a peculiar and as yet unheard-of event. In his Novelldichtung “Unterhaltungen deutscher Ausgewanderten”, he stresses “den Wert des Neuen, Ungewöhnlichen, Interessanten, weil es ohne Zusammenhang Verwunderung erregt und unsere Einbundungskraft einen Augenblick in Bewegung setzt, unser Gemüt nur leicht berührt und unseren Verstand völlig in Ruhe lässt.”

Zweig fulfills Goethe’s classical Novelldichtung with its basic requisite of an artistic rendering of a “unerhörte Begebenheit” when he describes the confrontation of two brilliant chess players on board a passenger ship on its way from New York to Buenos Aires. One player was the reigning world champion Mirko Czentovic, who had just finished crisscrossing the US for chess tournaments and was now on the way to Argentina for new challenges. He had already won a dozen chess prizes by the time he was 17, gained the Hungarian championship at 18, and had become world champion when he was only 20.

Czentovic was recognized as a prodigy of incomparable ability despite coming from a peasant background bereft of education or social advantage. Zweig describes him as a “schwerer, maußauer Bauernbursche aus dem Banat, dessen Unbildung angeblich von unbegrenzter Tiefe sei”. On the ship to Argentina, he agrees to play a chess match against the cocky millionaire McConnor, who is just an amateur. When Czentovic lures McConnor, who is being cheered on by group of friends, into a chess trap, a mysterious man touches McConnor’s arm to prevent him from making a fatal mistakes. “Um
Gottes willen! Nicht!” are his words.

“Wenn Sie jetzt eine Dame machen, schlägt er sie sofort mit dem Läufer c1, Sie nehmen mit dem Springer zurück. Aber inzwischen geht er mit seinem Freibauern auf d7, bedroht Ihren Turm, und auch wenn Sie mit dem Springer Schach sagen, vertreten Sie und sind nach neun bis zehn Zügen ertappt. Es ist beinahe dieselbe Konstellation, wie sie Aliechin gegen Bogotjubow 1922 im Potsdamer Großturnier initiiert hat.”

The expert advice given to McConnell by this mystery man forces the seemingly unbeatable Czentovic to agree to a tie. He identifies himself as “Dr. B.” and he sparks the enthusiasm of McConnell and his friends to the point that they urge him to play Czentovic alone in a single match the next day. When he wins that match, Czentovic demands an immediate rematch to which his opponent agrees.

In this rematch it becomes obvious that Dr. B suffers from a manic condition that playing chess can trigger in him. He descends into a “fieberge Verwirrtheit”, a chess fever that is clearly dangerous to his mental and physical health. The narrator, an Austrian emigrant, intervenes and forces Dr. B to abandon the match.

As is requisite in this genre of literature, we have the “unerhörte Begabung” of this strange meeting of these two chess players. It is certainly new, interesting, and unusual and arouses our astonishment and imagination. And the story is not lacking “Zusammenhang” because the background story that emerges when Dr. B talks to the narrator puts his chess genius and his pathological condition into an emotionally and psychologically gripping historical context.

The resonance we feel far exceeds anything prescribed by Goethe for the genre. This powerful resonance could explain why director Stölzl and his screenplay writer decided to create a full length feature film and narrate the story of Dr. B chronologically. The story begins in 1938 in Vienna shortly before Hitler forces Austria into the Anschluss. It is made manifest that Austria is not particularly unhappy, “angeschlossen zu werden.”

Das Nichts und das Fieber

Dr. Josef Bartok is a notary of several large wealthy monasteries in Austria and thus a target for the occupying Gestapo who wants to get hold of their assets and accounts. But Bartok refuses to provide information about his clients after his arrest. He is secluded in total isolation in a local hotel. The Nazis exploit the monotony and emptiness between interrogations as a form of torture to break him down.

“Und immer um mich nur der Tisch, der Schrank, das Bett, die Tapete, das Fenster, keine Ablenkung, kein Buch, keine Zeitung, kein fremdes Gesicht, kein Bleistift, um etwas zu notieren, kein Zündholz, um damit zu spielen, nichts, nichts, nichts.”

One day, waiting again to be interrogated, Bartok finds a book with 150 master chess games that he smuggles into his room. He begins to replay all these matches blindly without any chess pieces or a board. He discovers that this obsessive activity actually helps him, “das Nichts um mich zunichte zu machen” and to strengthen his “Widerstandskraft”, his power of resistance and mental sanity. After months of replaying the old matches, he starts to create new ones, but runs into the seemingly insoluble paradox of having to play against himself.

The solution entails a complete splitting of his consciousness. He is compelled to pursue this absurd strategy for months in order not to fall into a state of pure insanity. But the need to play this way, “um nicht erdrückt zu werden von dem grauenhaften Nichts um mich”, eventually leads to a form of manic excitement, a “Schachfieber oder Schachvergiftung” that is the source of his complete mental and physical breakdown.

Bartok’s struggle against the “Druck des Nichts”, “gegen das Würgen des Nichts”, which is ultimately the cause of his mental breakdown, illuminates the inhumane torture tactics of the Gestapo. Zweig himself would become a victim of this struggle to resist the “Druck des Nichts.” In his Abschiedsbriefe he writes:
"Ich grüße alle meine Freunde. Mögen sie die Morgenröte noch sehen nach der langen Nacht! Ich, allzu Ungeduldiger, gehe ihnen voraus."

Stefan Zweig  Petropolis, 22. Febr. 1942

Calendar of Events

**May 2023**
Sat. May 20  Wandern at the Willows, 11:00am

**June 2023**
Sun. June 4  Gentle Yoga, 11:00am
Sun. June 4  Annual Meeting and Elections of the Board of Directors, 3:00pm
Sat. June 10  Buchclub: *Tauben im Gras* by Wolfgang Koeppen, 1:30pm
Sat. June 10  Summit for Teachers of German, 2:00pm
Thu. June 15  GHI Fellows Brown Bag Lunch, 12:00pm
Sat. June 17  Wandern at the Willows, 11:00am
Sat. June 17  Women’s Group Meeting, 11:00am