

THE GERMAN SOCIETY OF
PENNSYLVANIA
Friday Film Fest Series



Schachnovelle

Directed by Philipp Stölzl

May 19, 2023

● 6:30 PM ●

Film, Food & Discussion

The German Society of Pennsylvania
611 Spring Garden St.
Philadelphia, PA 19123

Support provided in part by the
Philadelphia Cultural Fund.



Schachnovelle (2021)

Director: Philipp Stölzl

Screenplay: Eldar Grigorian

Philipp Stölzl

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 Moehlmann



Stefan Zweig (1881 – 1942)



Stefan Zweig, who was born in 1881 in Vienna, Austria to Jewish parents and died by suicide in 1942 in Petropolis, Brazil. Zweig received a doctorate from the University of Vienna in 1904 and settled in Salzburg in 1913 after extensive travels throughout Europe. In 1934, he emigrated to England and then in 1940 to Brazil after a short stay in New York. Feeling increasingly depressed and disillusioned about the war and “*die Zukunft der Menschheit*”, he and his second wife Lotte committed suicide by a barbiturate overdose.

Stefan Zweig, who was born in 1881 in Vienna, Austria to Jewish parents and died by suicide in 1942 in Petropolis, Brazil. Zweig received a doctorate from the University of Vienna in 1904 and settled in Salzburg in 1913 after extensive travels throughout Europe. In 1934, he emigrated to England and then in 1940 to Brazil after a short stay in New York. Feeling increasingly depressed and disillusioned about the war and “*die Zukunft der Menschheit*”, he and his second wife Lotte committed suicide by a barbiturate overdose.

Zweig's famous works include essays about Balzac, Dickens, and Dostoyevsky (*Drei Meister*, 1920), studies about Hölderlin, von

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 Novelendichtung “*Unterhaltungen deutscher Ausgewanderten*”, he stresses “*den Wert des Neuen, Ungewöhnlichen, Interessanten, weil es ohne Zusammenhang Verwunderung erregt und unsere Einbildungskraft einen Augenblick in Bewegung setzt, unser Gemüt nur leicht berührt und unseren Verstand völlig in Ruhe lässt.*”

Zweig fulfills Goethe's classical *Novellentheorie* 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, maulfauler 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, verlieren Sie und sind nach neun bis zehn Zügen erledigt. Es ist beinahe dieselbe Konstellation, wie sie Aljechin gegen Bogoljubow 1922 im Pistyner Großturnier initiiert hat."



The expert advice given to McConnor 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 McConnor 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 *"fiebrige 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 Begebenheit"* 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 *Abschiedsbrief* 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