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Hans Keilson – Immer wieder ein neues Leben. Biographie. [Hans Keilson: A new life each time. Biography], by Jos Versteegen, 2024, S. Fischer Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 736 pp., €39.99, €34.00 (German Edition), ISBN 9789046831014

The biography

A Dutch biography of the Jewish-German-Dutch psychoanalyst and literary writer Hans Keilson (1909–2011) has recently been written by Jos Versteegen. A German translation will be published shortly. Keilson is of iconic importance for post-war Dutch and German psychoanalysis. This is underpinned by his literary oeuvre in the German language consisting of a series of three novels (*Life Goes On*, *A Comedy in Moll* and *The Death of the Adversary*). It also includes several collections of poetry and essays.

The well-written biography is captivating because Hans Keilson was a man of many talents, whose colourful life has been marked by the dramatic European history of the first half of the twentieth century. He was able to sublimate in his work the destructiveness of which he was one of the countless victims. Yet he himself was deeply wounded, and this wound did not heal in his "new lives".

Keilson grew up in a liberal middle-class Jewish family in a small town in the heart of former East Prussia. After the takeover of power by the Nazis, he barely managed to get his first novel published by S. Fischer in 1933. Then, a few years later he had to abandon his medical studies. As a qualified physical education teacher, he subsequently devoted himself to coaching Jewish children in Berlin. Following the introduction of the Nuremberg Race Laws, he fled to the Netherlands in 1936.

In 1939 he persuaded his parents to leave Germany to join him. Both parents were "abtransportiert" in 1943 and subsequently murdered in Auschwitz-Birkenau. Keilson himself survived the war by hiding. Although the existence of the gas chambers was known in the Netherlands by 1944, many remained hopeful that their loved ones would return. The biography aptly describes the dismay in 1945 when it became clear that this would not be the case.

Keilson remained in the Netherlands after the war. He qualified as a medical doctor, specializing as a psychiatrist and then as a psychoanalyst. As a (child and adolescent) psychiatrist, he was attached to the Jewish guardianship institution Le-Ezrad Ha-Jeled and was involved in many difficult and complex child custody cases of Jewish orphans.

The literary representation of grief

After the war, Keilson lives in "Trauer", in the sense of unending, intense grief. In his major novel, translated into English as *The Death of the Adversary*, he depicts how the murdered victims should not be killed again. The deportees have to remain "alive" in our collective memory, so that they shape it, set it in motion, transform themselves in it and continue to trouble us forever. He consistently juxtaposes this with hate, the fascination with hate and the triumph of hate in "the adversary" as well as in himself. In 1962 the American weekly *Time* included the novel in its top 10 books. The commentary noted its uncanny insight into the persecutor and the persecuted as well as the phenomenon of hatred.

An extreme psychosocial dissociation results from the conflict between his loyalty as an assimilated Jew to his German sociocultural background and the growing hatred he had been experiencing there. This is aptly illustrated by the true story of a secret meeting in the occupied Hague with a former German student friend who had converted to National Socialism. Both were under the illusion of normality, but each knew it was not so from the other. The social and cultural environment, the friend he lost to the enemy, the deception and loss of identity involved, would go on haunting Keilson for the rest of his life.

The inability to express the unimaginable in language is also a recurring theme in his work. Movingly, Keilson describes his encounter with 12-year-old "Esra" shortly after his return from Bergen-Belsen. The boy stands before him with his head bowed, and both can only be silent. Keilson saw the children who had lost everything. He heard them crying in their beds at night, crying without restraint. No one had to be ashamed, each child knew why another was crying, and the adults in the orphanage were part of it.

One can only get an approximate picture of the reality in which the children survived the camps by observing their behaviour: the way they gorged themselves on food, the way they crawled under their beds, the way they interacted with each other, the camp jargon they spoke with each other. In essence, however, their reality remains unimaginable, and all share in this psychic disaster. At that time there was, as yet, no (psychoanalytic) theoretical frame available for the long-lasting effects of traumatization in the camps, and it was difficult for the victims to get public recognition.

Keilson's relevance to psychoanalysis

Keilson's relevance for psychoanalysis lies in his German-language PhD thesis *Sequential Traumatisation of Children* (*Sequentielle Traumatisierung bei Kindern*), written under the supervision of the Jewish professor of child psychiatry and Holocaust survivor David de Levita, for which Keilson was awarded a doctorate in 1979 at the University of Amsterdam. The thesis consists of interviews with several hundred Jewish war orphans and 40 case descriptions in detail. The highly relevant questions are: What was the condition of these children when they returned from the camps or from hiding? How were they cared for by the Dutch and the hard-hit Jewish community in the Netherlands? How did their lives continue?

Keilson introduces the concept of "sequential traumatization", by which he makes it clear that psychological traumatization takes place in a sequence of situations. First there is threat, then exclusion and persecution and finally, after the war, there is the third phase of care and eventually the provision of new perspectives. In his thesis the importance of the third phase could be statistically demonstrated. This also includes the social recognition of suffering and injustice. The thesis gives insight that the third phase can, however, also be highly traumatic. This point of view was rather new at the time and became of great importance to theorizing on mass traumatization.

Keilson is of particular importance for German psychoanalysis. This began in April 1980 in Bamberg during the conference of the German-speaking psychoanalytic societies, to which the Dutch Society of Psychoanalysis also belonged at that time. In the decades after the war, the collective memory of Western Germany was marked by denial or disavowal: "We didn't know." It was only after the change of generations in the period 1967–1980 that the discourse gradually shifted towards the perpetrator–victim polarity. Keilson's presentation of his doctoral thesis on the Jewish war orphans was a breakthrough. A middle-aged German colleague tearfully shared how, in his youth, the smoke rising from the chimneys behind his village (probably a so-called national-socialistic "euthanasia programme") was a normal part of life that was never talked about after the war.

In clinical seminars, Keilson does not shy away from confrontation with younger German colleagues. He points out that the traumatic experience of violence and helplessness had to be lived through directly in the transference. The latter view is reflected in the work of Dutch Jewish psychoanalysts who survived the war in the camps, such as Eddy de Wind and Jacques and Louis Tas. Certainly for the younger generation of German psychoanalysts, it was of course no small matter that they were thus thrust into the role of Nazi hangmen.

In the decades since Bamberg, Hans Keilson has gained considerable influence in Germany. He received many high German public and literary awards and, on the recommendation of German colleagues, was awarded the IPA's prestigious Hayman Prize in 1999.

At the same time in the Netherlands, Keilson was fading into the background. This had to do with a different culture of remembrance. The Shoah came to the Netherlands from the other side of the border. But there was also considerable collaboration and a prevailing passivity. However, over the years a collective recognition of shared guilt has grown. Unprocessed guilt easily leads to accusations and several forms of disavowal. It is a recognition that subsequently is transferred into a different mental compartment. This can encourage trivialization, which has also led to vehement conflicts within the Dutch Psychoanalytical Society at the turn of the century.

In 2010, the novels were again praised in an article in the *New York Times* by Francine Prose, who wrote a biography of Anne Frank. This brought Hans Keilson great literary fame and in the last stages of his long life, he was at the centre of public interest in the Netherlands.

The balance between fact and reflection in biography

Originally the biographer Versteegen is a poet and rightly so devotes a great deal of attention to Keilson's poetry. Versteegen translated these poems into fine Dutch, retaining the rhythm, rhyme and form of the sonnet. Occasionally this is at the expense of poetological aspects: the self-reflective nature of poetry in which mental, sensual images (idiographic visual pictograms) are linked to linguistic processes. This could be seen as a more psychoanalytic perspective in the reading of poetry. This is relevant, since Keilson's literary work is eminently a call for reflection. Even in his love poems, he does not shy away from the question of what this love actually "is".

In his biography, Versteegen seeks the actual reality of Keilson's life, so a wealth of facts is well documented. He also mentions many anecdotes to paint a picture of Keilson's personality. Versteegen focuses on Keilson's capability to go on living in sequential phases of life, also with different traumatic aspects. Hence the subtitle of the biography, which refers to the title of his first novel, and indirectly to a passage in Thomas Mann's novella *Tonio Kröger*, " life dares to go on living without shaming itself … "

But what else does the biography offer the psychoanalyst? To what extent do the facts allow us to reflect on the creative process that takes place between writer and

reader? Keilson himself has repeatedly drawn attention to the relationship between literature and psychoanalysis because both involve the articulation of feelings. He also compares the literary approach to hermeneutic reading to the interchange between defence and what has been repressed. This means that the reader forms hypotheses about what he has read and tests these hypotheses by re-reading. A psychoanalyst, like quite a few literary scholars, will have an eye for what the text denotes as well as what it overlooks.

An example of such hermeneutic re-reading is a passage from an essay written by Hans Keilson in the late 1990s in which he looks back on his training analysis with Rik LeCoultre around 1955:

> My own training analyst Rik LeCoultre … was a student of Karl Landauer, who … later died in Bergen-Belsen. In my own analysis, only the art of survival played a role. (Keilson 2005, II, 425)

Between the two sentences quoted from above, first about LeCoultre, then about Landauer, and finally about "the art of survival", there is a deep chasm. A few sentences later, Keilson continues:

> While I was happily daydreaming on the divan about a literary work of the day, LeCoultre gave a brief, pointed interpretation that threw me back on myself and evoked a fierce, sad, angry affect. I reproached him that he once again had 'vermasselt' a beautiful literary theme. […]LeCoultre in a somewhat apologetic tone, said only: "Yes, that's how it is sometimes." (Keilson 2005, II, 425)

Keilson writes here in leaps and bounds, associatively, as in the free association of psychoanalysis. In addition to coherence, there is also disjointedness and emptiness. Some worlds are pushed away because they are unimaginable, too inhuman, too sad and too painful. What counts most of all is the text and less so the autobiographical factuality. We can only guess what went on in the consulting room. But an extremely painful subject seems to be touched upon when the name is mentioned of the Jewish psychoanalyst Landauer, who fled from Germany to the Netherlands. Keilson uses the Yiddish expression 'vermasselt' that is regularly used in Dutch and German language for something that is messed up, made inferior. Keilson accuses his analyst of having broken something. The analyst then apologizes. Guilt, accusation and apology appear in the analyst's office as a staging of the drama taking place at a deeper emotional level.

Gaps in the biography

In the aspects mentioned above, the biography is in line with the gaps in the Dutch memory culture. There are no references in the biography to several Dutch Jewish psychoanalysts who survived the Shoah and published afterwards about their experiences in the camps, or about their psychoanalytic treatments of Holocaust victims with "post-concentration camp syndrome". This expression was coined shortly after the war by the Jewish-Dutch psychoanalyst Jacques Tas. The writer of this review knew them all personally, and this omission leaves a sour feeling. Besides his promoter, the only Dutch-Jewish psychoanalyst the biography refers to is Herman Musaph, who intervened on Keilson's behalf in a painful conflict with Jewish war orphans. They accused Keilson of having no difficulty in openly identifying them in his descriptions. Keilson is certainly not uncontroversial in Dutch-Jewish circles.

The theme of "shame" as an inseparable part of "becoming a subject" (a being with a consciousness *of*) is another gap in the biography. This theme runs like a thread through Keilson's three books. In *Life Goes On*, the various forms of shame appear over 30 times, and it plays a role in all the narrative lines. It is interesting to note here that the Dutch-Jewish psychoanalyst

Louis Tas has described the sense of shame felt by the German Jews who sought refuge in the Netherlands before the war. The Dutch-Jewish psychoanalyst Eddy de Wind, who survived Auschwitz, points out in the 1980s how guilt and shame over "survival" also play a role in the relationship between those who return from the camps and those who survive the Shoah in hiding. This can lead to a silent agreement not to talk about it.

In many ways, the biography confronts the reader with shame. Dutch society's reception of Jews returning from the camps was deeply shameful, as was the openly virulent anti-Semitism in the first post-war decades. It is disturbing to read about the difficulties Keilson, as a German Jew, had in obtaining Dutch citizenship after the war. Equally disturbing is the description of the post-war "dehumanization" of German nationals living in the Netherlands, even if they had taken no part in the war at all or were deeply ashamed of what their country had done. This is a forgotten chapter in Dutch historiography.

While reading the biography, the reviewer himself was also confronted with many sides of shame. Not only because of dangerously growing anti-Semitism, but also by the face of ignorance, a tendency to trivialization and "denial", recognizing the destructive processes around us, turning a blind eye to these because they are too confrontational, and subsequently going on to live in the illusion of normality. In this sense, Hans Keilson's biography has a very contemporary relevance.

Reference

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