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Issues in Vendor/Library Relations -- Repairing Fountain Pens: The Apprenticeship of a Bookseller

Bob Nardini
Coutts Information Services, bnardini@couttsinfo.com

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Column Editor’s Note: In my last column I wrote that among the most fulfilling parts of a library vendor’s job are friendships struck up with customers. Equal to those would be the friendships struck up with colleagues. For some twenty memorable years I had the pleasure of working with Helmut Schwarzer, whose career of nearly 50 years in the book business began in Germany in the mid-1950s before taking him to Paris, London, New York, Oregon, back to Germany, then to New Jersey, and finally to New Hampshire, where Helmut now enjoys retirement, and where he can be contacted at <schwarzer@tds.net>. The name of just a few of the companies for whom he worked are themselves a small catalog of book trade history: Presses Universitaires de France, Foyle’s, Adler’s Foreign Books, Abel, Blackwells, Yankee. In this interview, Helmut recalls his very earliest years in the business. — BN

BN: Why did you get into the book business?

HS: Well, in the sixth year (out of nine) of my secondary (grammar school) education, my grades in math and Latin deteriorated to a degree that I didn’t pass and had to repeat the year. Even at that, prospects for completing the remaining three years towards achieving the baccalaureate qualifying you to enter university didn’t look too good. I hated some of my teachers, and they hated me. As a consequence of the war, the teaching faculty had few members of a younger generation. They were all in their fifties and early sixties, e.g. born between 1890 and 1900 and, thus, formed during and by the Wilhelminian era. They were rigid, authoritarian, almost fossilized, and at times even ignorant. When we read a story by George Sand in French class, I remember enlightening the prof that Sand was a woman, not a man. And the teaching of history in all those years never strayed into the 20th century! One or two teachers were choleric or had a sadistic streak — for instance, pulling you up from your seat by your shoulders. Luckily, in my last year a newly-arrived youngish teacher of German was assigned to our class. He was hip avant la lettre and really fostered and nurtured my love for literature.

And it so happened that an apprentice position became available at the local bookstore, in Gladbeck, which was a small industrial, coal-mining town, about 70,000 population, not far from Essen. So I decided to quit school and enter the book trade. Which in Germany means three years worth of apprenticeship. You do everything, particularly in a small town like the one I grew up in — we even had a modest mail order business for customers who lived in the same town, but who were too busy or too lazy to pick up at the store. Every evening I used to drag the packages in the little carts that I pulled by hand to the post office, which was maybe a fourth of a mile away.

BN: When was that?

HS: That was in ’55. The apprenticeship lasted from ’55 to ’58.

My boss, Rudolf Neubert, came out of the famous Leipzig bookselling tradition, which was world-renowned. And even though his shop was insignificant in terms of location and prestige I couldn’t have hoped for a better grounding.

Along with the hands-on training in the store I attended classes once a week to be instructed in the rudiments of bookkeeping, inventory control, commercial math, and such. This was together with apprentices from other types of retail outlets. During my last year it became a full day’s course each week, out of town, and totally geared towards bookseller apprentices. Here we learned about the history and development of the first book fairs (first Frankfurt c1480, then shifting to Leipzig in the 17th cent.), the great publishing houses of the past, some still with us today (ex: Walter de Gruyter, founded in 1749!) and bookselling with its evolving trading practices.

BN: How many would have been apprenticing at the same time you were?

HS: I was the only one; there were only two bookstores in town and neither one was large enough to take on more than one at a time.

BN: It was a formalized apprenticeship?

HS: Very much so, yes. The boss’s responsibility was to acquaint you with all aspects of the trade, both the history, the current goings-on and the commercial side of things. One of the first tasks I learned was to maintain subscriptions and standing orders, which of course was all, you know, ledger cards, logging the issues, monitoring the supply, and claiming with publishers. So, that was pretty rigorous, and methodical.

BN: What was your typical day in that bookshop?

HS: The hours were regimented, obviously. You started at eight-thirty or nine, and you’d better be on time. The day was over at six, I believe, or six-thirty, with an hour for lunch. Overtime, unpaid of course, was demanded whenever the boss thought it appropriate, whether it was for annual inventory, or for special occasions, like the pre-Christmas Books of the Year presentations, held in the town’s tiniest café. Our bookstore was in charge of making the arrangements, delivering the books to the café where Frau Jacobi, our local literary czarina held forth and discussed, re- or de-commended new titles. She was a professor at the Girls’ High School in town (there were no co-ed institutions in those days). A formidable figure in her early sixties; blunt, outspoken, opinionated, and funny in her assessments, she took no prisoners. And if literary demi-gods, such as Hesse or Mann needed to be knocked off their pedestal, at least temporarily, she went and did it. A kind of Julia Child for books. Enormous fun and one of my fondest memories.

BN: So you must have been what, between sixteen and eighteen years old?

HS: Yes, that’s right.

BN: Did you know at that point that you would make a career as a bookseller?

HS: Yes, I was soon resigned to the fact that this was going to be it. Being surrounded by books, soon learning to appreciate their physical qualities, reading about the seasonal lists every year, then seeing the reps giving their spiel, getting in a request at a collegial discount (40-50% at most though, no freebies ever). The reps overall were really quite impressive: superbly knowledgeable, well-read, suave, worldly. Scholars manqué some, others truly colorful characters. Often like a walking calling card for the kind of publisher they represented. For instance, the rep for the famous Brockhaus Encyclopedia publisher not only drove the top of the line Mercedes, but traveled with a valet who carried his admittedly heavier-than-usual bags. Sadly, as I learned many years later, at least two of my favorite reps died rather prematurely of alcoholism.

Don’t know what drove them to it, but I don’t think it was literature.

BN: So buying books for the shop was one of your duties. What other duties did you have?

HS: Well, for the first two years I was only allowed to kibitz. Then the boss let me turn a hand at children’s books and paperbacks, then on to publishers that were less tricky or risky to over- or under-order. You see, unlike over here, returns were not the order of the day; in fact it was not done. It smacked of a lack of expertise, not knowing what you were doing. Exceptionally, when for instance the rep encouraged you to gamble on a book, you sought return permission during his next seasonal call, while ensuring you added the value of your return to the new order.

The bookstore wouldn’t have been sustainable with selling books alone in this blue collar town. Thus we had a full range of stationery, school supplies, popular magazines, even...
The bookstore was regarded or assumed as

One aspect of customer service I found hard
difficult to deal with. The town’s notables: the lawyer,
the bank director, the prominent business
owner, anyone who was a Herr Doktor (not
limited to the medical profession), were shown
an excessive amount of deference by the store
owner, bordering on servility. He would, and
we were instructed to do the same, bow and
open the door for them, whenever they were
ready to leave. Same procedure, should we
spot them outside, ready to enter.

BN: It sounds very unlike today’s retail,
which is so dependent on the display of books,
on reviews, and publicity.

HS: Indeed. No shelves or sections were
labeled in any way, and finger-pointing would
have been considered extremely rude.

BN: People couldn’t browse, then?

HS: Browsing was limited due to the narrow
shape of the store. A couple display tables
with the current season’s attention getters, but
most books were on shelves that went perhaps
10-12 feet high, and we didn’t encourage them
to get on the ladders.

The boss was a heavy smoker, which
wasn’t unusual in those days. His choice was
a non-filter brand by the name of Red Hand,
compared in strength to Gauloises. Became
quite popular with young intellectuals later
on. He died a few years after I left, and no
doubt due to his overindulgence. I can see his
nicotine-stained fingers to this day.

BN: The shop was smoke-filled?

HS: No, he rarely smoked in the shop itself,
except when he sat down with publisher reps.
But he did when dealing with his administrative
work in the back office.

BN: What were some of the books that you
remember from those years, the ones that did
the best in your town?

HS: The biggest splash was made in 1955
by Thomas Mann’s swan song, a picaresque
novel, The Confessions of Felix Krull, Con-
fidence Man. A tour de force, all the more
astonishing, as he picked up, seamlessly, from
the first eighty pages or so he had written over
forty years earlier. Plus the frolic and
the erotic encounters were quite unlike the rest of
his oeuvre. Some readers, and critics, thought
it was quite improper for an eighty-year-old.
Didn’t harm sales at all.

Then there was Thornton Wilder.
Much in demand for his classic The Bridge of San
Luis Rey — but also with his famous play,
Our Town, which was translated into German
as Our Little Town. And surprising it was that
this should mean so much to us. The flavor
and setting are unlike anything in Germany:
the kind of people, the folkloric aspects, the
temperament, the way of life in a little New
England town. But perhaps we thought of it
as being a unique definition of America, or
Middle America, or people were

And yet, Wilder was probably the most
important European American writers. He was fluent
in French, he was a James Joyce scholar, he
was friendly with Gertrude Stein, in Paris —
although Stein, of course, was an American. He
spoke passable German — I’ve read some
of his letters to his German publisher. The
letters were written in English, but were<br>