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Bob Nardini

Coutts Information Services, bnardini@couttsinfo.com

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

Column Editor: **Bob Nardini** (Group Director, Client Integration and Head Bibliographer, Coutts Information Services)
<bnardini@couttsinfo.com>

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 names 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 sideburns. 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?*

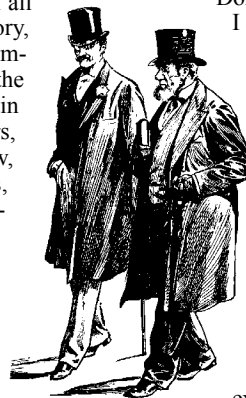
HS: Yes, I was soon resigned to the fact that this was going to be it. Being surrounded by books, soon learning to appreciate their physical qualities, reading about the seasonal lists every year, then seeing the reps giving their spiel, getting in a request at a collegial discount (40-50% at most though, 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

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steel nibs for old-fashioned penholders. Toilet paper, too. A solid selection of fountain pens was carried; they were popular gifts for children who delivered good grades. We repaired them as well, and I learned that, too. We even had a small lending library in one corner of the store, stocked with romance novels and pulp fiction.

In the wintertime, it fell to me to go down to a cavernous basement an hour before store opening and start stoking a rather huge stove with anthracite, also known as hard coal. It was the only heat source; the building had no central heating.

But serving, and learning to serve, customers clearly became the core duty. You see, rather few walk-in customers came with firm requests. You had to hand-sell all the time. The bookstore was regarded or assumed as knowing all about books, and they wanted to be advised, be it about the appropriate gift for a friend or relative or some exciting reading matter for themselves. So you started probing in a general way the interests and habits of the prospective recipients, what reads they'd enjoyed in the past and so on. If you did well, you made a sale after ten or twenty minutes; if not, the client walked out undecided, perhaps muttering "maybe I'll buy some flowers instead" (in which case if the boss happened to notice it, he'd be questioning you about your lack of success).

One aspect of customer service I found hard 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**, comparable 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, Confidence 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, and, therefore, people were very intrigued and charmed by it, I guess.

And yet, **Wilder** was probably the most European of 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 sprinkled with German, not just a word here or there, but true German colloquialisms. I guess that was one of the reasons why I liked him, because he was so European. It didn't require any great leap of comprehension or adjustment. I wrote a paper on him in bookseller school.

BN: *How popular were American books generally?*

HS: Oh, enormously so. Considering that only ten years after war's end when Germany was a wasteland, publishers' lists were teeming with translations, dominated by American, English, and French authors, naturally. Let one publisher stand for many: **Rowohlt**, for instance, a kind of **Knopf/Random House/Farrar Straus** rolled into one, and also Germany's first publisher of mass market paperbacks. By the mid to late 50s he had done most of **Hemingway**, **Henry Miller** (even the naughty ones), **Thomas Wolfe**, **Camus**, **Sartre**, **de Beauvoir**, some **Faulkner**, **Thurber**, **Nelson Algren**, **Paul Bowles**, **Greene**, **Cheever's Wapshot Chronicle**, **Durrell's Alexandria Quartet**, **Nabokov's Lolita** and **Pnin**.

BN: *And German authors?*

HS: Well, it's odd. 1945 had been declared, or labeled, The Zero Hour of German literature. And there was **Adorno's** much (mis-) quoted dictum that after **Auschwitz** the writing of poetry was no longer possible. The great num-

ber of writers who had been driven into, and published in, exile were curiously, and shamefully for many years, absent from publishers' catalogs — with few exceptions like **Mann**, **Hesse**, **Brecht**. The names and works I became familiar with were a) through avid reading of literary histories, mostly written by former fellow travelers of the Reich and not yet replaced; and b) via the new seasonal publishing output. As we know now, very few of the authors who stayed in Germany and continued to publish after 1945, had kept their noses clean and their hearts pure during the Nazi regime, although most of them insisted to the contrary. Some claimed the term *Inner Emigration* for themselves by writing for the desk drawer or trying to trick the censors with seemingly apolitical novels in historical settings (not much emerged from those drawers in the postwar years, by the way). Here's a sprinkling of names that had currency in my apprentice years and sold well (*Wikipedia* will yield info on most of them): **Stefan Andres**, **Hans Carossa**, **Luise Rinser**, **Ina Seidel**, **Reinhold Schneider**, **W. Bergergruen**, **Ernst Wiechert**, **Manfred Hausmann**, **Eugen Roth**. A younger generation of writers cast their war, prison, and immediate postwar experiences into literary form, but with limited success. The reading public wanted uplift, solace, or humor.

One of many differences between then and today's publishing is that there were no self-help manuals, no feel-good books, or even genre novels. No books about health, God, or any proselytizing literature. For spiritual nourishment one read novelists. We did sell Bibles and missals, of course, and school catechisms among all the other schoolbooks.

BN: *You were three years at that store, did you say?*

HS: Yes, apprenticeship from April '55 to March '58, then a six-week consolidating course at the **Cologne Bookseller School** which ended with my graduation in June of '58. I should add, without false modesty, that I graduated with top honors — which earned me a week's junket to Paris, touring publishers and booksellers there and starting my love for this city, to which I have returned many times since. After that I stayed on with my first boss for another six months as was the custom, before I started on my journeyman years.

And, don't you know, something I forgot to say earlier: I almost didn't make it into bookselling because I'm recalling as we speak that there was one other option. They were accepting trainees at city hall for municipal civil servant positions, and I'm not proud to say that among some 60 applicants who took a day's worth of tests, I ended up among the last four. But they only had two openings, and I didn't make it. Thank God I didn't. I probably would have been stuck for the rest of my life in that little industrial Ruhr Valley coal-mining town of Gladbeck, Westphalia, and probably retired a couple of years earlier than I have, with better health insurance, granted, but spending my life, you know, pushing paper, sharpening pencils.

BN: *And repairing fountain pens?*

HS: Ha-ha, quite possibly, yes. 🐾