Book Review: Death of the Adversary, by Hans Keilson

Hans Keilson, now over a hundred years old and still alive in Holland, near Amsterdam, is so little known that he Wikepedia entry tells us almost nothing about him, except that he is Jewish, and of Dutch/German descent. After a favorable review of his work in the *New York Times Book Review*, I picked up the paperback *Death of the Adversary*, originally published in 1959. It is a haunting 208 page paperback.

We know, whether young or old, that Hitler came, Europe was eaten alive by war, and millions of Jews (and others) died in concentration camps or by execution squads in Eastern Europe. It is all so long ago now that we think of it as happening at one blow. One day the Jews in Germany were fully integrated into German society, held key posts in business and cultural institutions, and then, a day or so later, they were gone.

But of course that is not what happened. Keilson's narrator is a young man - very young when he begins his notes. He is European in a way few Americans can understand (but perhaps this book will help them, for it is written "from inside the mind" of a young German). The narrator's own Jewishness is never once mentioned, though before we are too many pages into the book we assume it. His nationality is not clear - quite possibly the narrator of this novel was meant to be Dutch, perhaps German. Even Hitler's name is never used - only a single letter - "b".

In the beginning of this novel the young man has heard about "b", understands he has an intense following, grasps that he is an enemy. He has occasion once to hear his voice as he sits outside a hall where "b" is speaking. And once "b", now risen to political power, drives in his car through the town, the streets crowded with the residents, eager to see him. And the narrator sees him, wonders at how such an ordinary looking man can hold such power

There is a surreal feeling to the novel. The politics of "b" are never discussed. The issue of Jews is never discussed. Yet by not doing so, by approaching things from his own angle, as the young man watching, we see what it was like to find the walls closing in. Of course it was never possible for the Jews to simply leave Germany. And why should they? They were fully integrated. The thought of the impending gas chambers was so unreal it didn't arise. One lived there. One spoke the language. One had a job. Had friends.

Only gradually this friendship or that ends badly. A colleague, meeting the young man in the street, asks what they are supposed to do, should they form cooperatives of some kind in order to have work? Legal or medical associations of their own, as they are gradually excluded from those they had been part of? After all, these are the practical daily questions of life. Those who would eventually be taken to the camps could still travel by train, walk the streets, stop in the cafes for coffee or to play cards. They were - such an illusion - still free.

And so we begin to understand - it my case for the first time - how the horror which fell on Europe did not fall like a stone from the sky, but came like a mist, so fine one did not need an umbrella. Toward the end of the book there is a deeply moving passage as he talks to his father, who is packing his rucksack. The father has it ready for the day when he and his wife will have to leave. The youth talks with his father about what to put in it - soap, aspirin, some cologne for his wife who has fainting spells and is revived by some dashed on her forehead. His father asks him not to mention the packing of the rucksack to his mother, as it will only worry her. His mother knows, of course, about the rucksack, and asks the son what the father is putting into it, to make sure there is some chilblain ointment as his circulation is not so good. The parents, each talking to the son, discuss what to put in this rucksack, neither parent willing to talk directly to the other for fear of worrying them.

The parents have packed a suitcase for him, not a rucksack, and it is sent on to a place where he will

meet friends. And he does leave, and join the underground, though this is not dealt with plainly or with drama. (In fact the author was active in the Dutch underground).

By the end of the book I realized how moved I was by watching this young boy, now a young man, experience the light mist which soon enough became a rain of blood. Sometimes a horror story becomes more powerful by avoiding all the obvious words. So with *The Death of the Adversary.*

David McReyonlds, 10/5/10