

The demon hunters of Ringwil

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THE DEMON HUNTERS OF RINGWIL

The "witch trial" which was held in Zurich at the beginning of the year was one of the most original affairs of the past decade. A defrocked priest, his female companion and four of his disciples were charged with beating a seventeen-year old girl to death in an effort to free her from the devil.

The case histories which led to this gruesome crime have been reported by Walter M. Diggelmann in a very readable book called "Hexenprozesse" and published by Benteli Press, Berne. The story is a rather rare illustration of the extremes to which purely psychical religion can lead. It has two main actors: Joseph Stocker, the priest who dreamt of converting the world and Magdalena Stocker, the wilting maid called by God to a great mission.

Joseph Stocker had an immensely devout mother. She attended mass three times a week and worked in the fields away from her companions, immersed alone in silent prayer. Her spiritual ambitions for her son were great and she used to thrash him unsparingly whenever he failed to be immaculate. Not unsurprisingly, Joseph Stocker remained a weak and anxious child, and expressed the wish to become a priest at a very early age. At fifteen he entered a monastery, where he prepared for the Gymnasium under private tuition. At seventeen, he attended the Gymnasium of Bruchsal and rapidly became one of the best pupils in his form, passing his Abitur without any difficulty. During his last year, he fell in love with one of the girls of the school. He confessed this to his father-confessor, who told him to love only the Virgin Mary. From then on, Joseph Stocker directed his flame towards the Holy Virgin and became her fervent adorer.

He went through his two-year noviciate at the monastery of Untermerzbach, following which he studied in Salzburg and Rome and was ordained priest at the age of 27. He then taught ancient languages and religion at the convent of Hersberg on the Lake of

Constance, imposing a particularly strict regime on his students. He became vice-director of the seminary of Salzburg. Having openly criticized the German occupier and hinted that Hitler was an incarnation of the devil, he was watched, and finally imprisoned by the Gestapo. Released, he was transferred to Germany, where he was given work in a parish. He eventually resumed his teaching at the convent of Hersberg. This never satisfied him entirely because his great yearning was to convert people to his belief, a task which could best be achieved in the personal contact encountered in the cure of the souls.

Magdalena Kohler also came from a devout peasant family. Her father was highly religious, but tyrannical and bad tempered. Her brother studied theology and was killed in the war; a sister sacrificed her life to the poor at the age of eighteen, dying of consumption within six months of beginning her ministry. Magdalena had a burning desire to follow the same path and was about to enter a convent of Benedictines when her mother became seriously ill. She returned home to take care of her. But when the mother died her last wish was that Magdalena should take care of the household.

Thus her religious aspirations were thwarted. For almost twenty years she stayed at home to keep the house for her catankerous father. She enjoyed none of the pleasures of life and avoided masculine company. At thirty-six, she felt badly that God was calling her on a great spiritual mission and that it was time for her to leave home and go out into the open world.

It was at that time that she met Father Stocker in an inter-church gathering. They were strongly drawn to each other: the priest with a burning desire to convert the world and the frustrated maid aspiring to a great spiritual mission were two people ideally suited to understand one another.

Her first step towards the outside world was to go on a pilgrimage to

Rome with her bicycle. There, she managed to reach towards the Pope and be photographed in his presence. She went on a second pilgrimage with her bicycle, this time to Fatima. On that occasion, she received through divine inspiration the message that she must go to the Holy Land with Father Stocker. She told him this. He had some misgivings at first but soon agreed to participate in the great work of redemption she had in mind.

For a year, Magdalena Kohler prepared for her great journey, learning English and Arabic. She bought a Volkswagen in spite of the recriminations of her astounded father. He was sufficiently Catholic to be impressed by his daughter's messianic venture and eventually let her have her way.

Magdalena Kohler and Father Stocker left for Israel on their Volkswagen. At one point in the journey, Magdalena had terrifying doubts on the value of her enterprise. She overcame them and never let her companion become aware of them.

The couple visited and stayed in a number of convents in Egypt. Father Stocker acted as father-confessor and Magdalena Kohler as spiritual guide *de passage* to the nuns in the convents. In Jerusalem, they met Sister Stella, a nun who received messages directly from Christ and who had acquired a considerable fame in this way. Sister Stella had received a message telling her that she should join Father Stocker and Fraulein Kohler. The three were called by God to form a "holy family" and create a "holy foundation".

Magdalena Kohler found in the nun's divinations a providential confirmation to what she believed she was called for and an answer to her prayers. The three left for Europe with an undaunted faith in their mission. Sister Stella was firmly called back by the mother superior of the convent in which she had spent the past twenty years, but she answered that the will of Christ stood before all human command.

By divine inspiration, Sister Stella had learnt that they were to create a "holy foundation" in Germany. The three drove in accordance towards Singen, where Magdalena Kohler's father lived, and they settled down in his house. It needed all the stubbornness and religious determination of Magdalena Kohler to placate him.

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She was the real leader of the "holy family", even though everything was decided according to the messages Sister Stella was receiving from Christ. By some kind of subtle empathy, the desires which Christ formed supernaturally in Sister Stella's consciousness were wonderfully suited to Magdalena Kohler's purposes.

The "holy foundation" met with great opposition from the established church from the outset. Father Stocker was admonished and told to reintegrate the regular life of the Church, failing which he would be excommunicated. Fraulein Kohler came to the rescue of his shaking will by telling him that it was the will of God that he should consecrate his life to the "holy foundation" and that he should therefore not fear excommunication, or the judgement of humans. Excommunication arrived in due course and Father Stocker ceased wearing the cassock of his order.

Sister Stella received a message from Christ whereby the "holy foundation" was to possess a luxurious Mercedes car. With the financial help of the small circle of faithful that Fraulein Kohler had already managed to gather, the holy family bought itself a Mercedes 300 with which they went on pilgrimage to Fatima in regal fashion. In obedience to another message from the Saviour, the "holy foundation" acquired the title of "International Familial Community for the Advancement of Peace" and was registered as such at the town hall. The Saviour yet dictated that the centre of the Community was to be enlarged. Money was raised for this purpose among citizens of good standing who were actually interested in the "holy family's" endeavours.

But they claimed their money back very soon when they lost faith in the Community and its proponents. One

reason for this sudden change of attitude being a suspicious bulge in Fraulein Kohler's abdomen, a circumstance which she explained away as a hereditary ailment but which they clearly saw as pregnancy. It was proved at the hearing that she and Father Stocker had had intimate relations at that time, but she swore before God that she had done so without once having felt any kind of pleasure and erotic feelings.

The "holy family" fell into financial difficulties. They were brought before the courts for fraud by some former members of the Community. The father of Bernadette Hasler, the murdered girl, was himself jailed for nine months. Following his release, Father Stocker and Fraulein Kohler attempted to bring an action against the people who had brought them into legal difficulties. They wrote and published a harsh attack on the Church and other parties involved in the dealings, following which they were summoned and charged with libel.

Sister Stella had been carried away from the Community by a relative who put her back in a convent. Father Stocker had tried in vain to get her out. The "holy family" was now no more but a "holy couple" holding together a minute but unbelievably faithful community. In spite of the harsh times they were going through, the handful of stray Catholics in search of truth and salvation attracted to the "holy family" remained firm. They were submitted to a rigorous religious discipline and Father Stocker conducted infernal group-confessions. Salvation could only be acquired at the cost of complete abandonment to the "holy foundation." Fraulein Kohler forced one adept to get engaged, another one to stop having conjugal relations with his wife, yet another to have no more children. The parents of Bernadette Hasler had to pay their salvation by sufferings which cumulated in the death of their daughter. They were allowed to see her only once or twice a year, and near the end of her tragic life, the "holy family" claimed her as their own and asked the parents to dispossess her. The Community counted a relatively rich man, He contributed to the acquisition of a large chalet at Ringwil, which became the new seat of the "holy family" and the place where Bernadette Hasler met her death.

The children of the members of the Community were kept in charge by the "holy family" and Fraulein Kohler's sister. They lived in the same house and were kept busy with the household and the kitchen-garden. Bernadette Hasler and her sister had lived there for over six years. Bernadette, a lively, seventeen-year old girl, was beginning to show signs of independence and did not perform the housework as well as she used to. She appeared to be visibly interested in men and had expressed disrespect for the "holy foundation". Fraulein Kohler forced

her to admit in a diary that she had frequent encounters with the devil. On the day of her first communion, Bernadette had seen Satan kneel down besides her in a bristling black fur-coat. She had dreamt many times of marrying him, of having another ten supplementary men and a child from each of them; these children should intermingle and produce a new sex. Worst of all, Bernadette had monstrosly admitted to playing with Satan's male organs in front of the Virgin Mary!

This for Fraulein Kohler was ample proof that Bernadette was possessed by the devil and ought to be chastised. The Community examined her late one evening. She showed no signs of relenting and even went so far as to accuse Fraulein Kohler of having perverse sensual habits.

This was too much. She was sent to her room by her judges. They came, the four most faithful male members of the Community, and told her to kneel on all fours on her bed. They started whacking her on the behind, on her legs and her hands. After a first series of blows they halted and told her to disavow the things she had said earlier in the evening. She obstinately refused and the beating continued. Fraulein Kohler came in to join the sport, flailing away with a plastic pipe and urging to hit hard in the name of Jesus and Mary. Bernadette received the blows in listless and stunned silence. Two walking-sticks were broken and Satan had not yet been beaten away. Her bowels loosened and a bad smell pervaded the room. She was told by her torturers "to eat it", whereupon she vomited. She was carried to the bathroom, undressed and washed. She was then ordered to clean her clothes in the stream outside and dragged in the cold night. She took two cups of coffee and went to bed. The next morning she was found dead by Father Stocker. The autopsy revealed that the fat which the blows had massively destroyed had penetrated the circulatory system and provoked a lung embolus. Many traces of older blows were also found on Bernadette's body.

The Community called for her parents and held an urgent council. Fraulein Kohler asked the father to take this death on his own shoulders as an educational accident and to take the dead child back home. After protesting, he accepted and actually went to admit his guilt to the police. But twenty-four hours later, his wife broke down and insisted on telling the whole truth.

Both Father Stocker and Fraulein Kohler said before the courts that they felt innocent before God and that Satan just had to be expelled from Bernadette's vicious soul. Only God's mysterious design could account for her death. The four men also accused said that they were acting entirely under the "holy mother's" directives and would have stopped beating their victim had she given the signal. One of them

insisted that he had told Satan to "give in" at each of the blows he had administered. He had acted entirely in God's name.

Contrarily to what the reader might think, the story of "Hexenprozess" has not yet been entirely given away. The psychological explanations which give sense to these irrational doings are a vital part of the book, which I leave out. How was it that Sister Stella could profit from Christ's enlightened help in the smallest decisions of daily life, such as deciding which tooth-paste to buy? How could a woman who had consciously tried to be a saint all her life kill an innocent girl with the conviction of having acted righteously? Thanks to Freud, biographies and life histories can today be constructed in a beautifully logical and clinical way. Egos and superegos, oedipus complexes and libidos constitute their brick and mortar.

(PMB)

COMMENT

TWO FOREIGNERS FOR ONE SOLDIER

At first sight, it might appear that Switzerland has her own Enoch Powell in the person of James Schwarzenbach, National Councillor for Zurich, whose name is associated with the "over-foreignization" initiative on which the Swiss will have to decide next year. There are a few differences however. For one, James Schwarzenbach is not an outsider to his party, the Zurich Democratic Party, and does not ride alone as does the M.P. for Wolverhampton. The ideas for which he stands find a more temperate backing among Swiss opinion than the premonitions of Mr. Powell among the working-classes of Great-Britain. But the problem of immigration is quantitatively far more serious in Switzerland than it is in Britain. Mr. Powell has been warning us that by the turn of the century 7% of Britain's population will be made up by immigrants, although this figure has been reduced to 4% by better authorities. He may be surprised to learn that 15.3% of Switzerland's population is foreign (admittedly not African or Asian) and that well over 20% of the work-force is imported.

The Schwarzenbach initiative aims at changing this picture. 10% is fixed as the maximum percentage of non-Swiss inhabitants in any canton, a special allowance of 20% being granted to cosmopolitan Geneva. This means a reduction of over 40% in the present foreign population and would have dramatic effects on the economy.

That is why the Federal Council has strongly urged a rejection of the

initiative. Not that it denies all good reasons for the apprehensions of Mr. Schwarzenbach. Only the adoption of his initiative would backfire on Swiss economy in a disastrous way and defeat its own object. Tens of factories would have to reduce their activity because of shortage of labour. There would be no one to supervise the production-line, no one to operate the machines, no one to fire the foundries and the guests at Hotel Dolder will be told to polish their shoes themselves.

Economic expansion and stability of prices are intimately related to the availability of cheap labour. A shortage in supply of labour in an economy where there is strong demand will inevitably lead to a rise in the cost of labour and hence of prices. Full employment in the absence of an ample outside supply of labour is a near impossibility since it will lead to serious bottlenecks, lack of flexibility and increase in labour costs. I have read somewhere that the most stable proportion of unemployment in Great Britain lies between 1% and 2%. Should the percentage be smaller, then the home pool of manpower dries up and industry gets into difficulties. Switzerland circumvents these economic realities by being in a commercial position to import massive numbers of foreign workers.

Since the beginning of the decade, the Government has sought to curb the influx of foreign workers by various decrees tending to fix a ceiling of the numbers which any firm was allowed to employ. These measures have invariably given rise to complaints among managers. Some said that this statutory shortage of labour was a handicap to their expansion schemes, many others protested against the injustice a common ceiling was bringing to industries more dependent on foreign man-power than others.

Expansion has depended on the importation of man-power and con-

versely, man-power has been imported as a consequence of this expansion. This is the economic background against which the Government's curbing measures have been applied. The effort has been rather like dabbling emollient on a purulent wound instead of injecting the patient with serum, with the result that there were 285,000 foreigners in Switzerland in 1950, 583,000 in 1960, 721,000 in 1964 and 930,000 today. Of the last figure, 280,000 only are residents. The rest are divided into seasonal workers, workers with a (renewable) 1 year-stay permit and borderers who go into Switzerland to work. The latter category are 63,000 in numbers.

Swiss economy has expanded so fast in recent years that it is not unfair to say that Switzerland is an "over-developed" country. A country that has so many factories that almost a quarter of its man-power has to be imported has really got an inflated economy. "Overdeveloped" but not "over-wealthy". There is still scope for Switzerland to get richer and she has yet some way to go to beat the U.S.A. But must this aspired prosperity be obtained at the cost of excessive industrialisation and forced importation of labour. Must the native population be swamped and the Swiss people disfigured? This is where the searching questions are to be asked. It is destructive to deprive industry of its indispensable foreign man-power, the wisest course being to steer it in a position where it will rely on it to a lesser extent. This means restructuring and replanning it. The Federal Council has recently declared that it will no longer be possible to artificially maintain a number of sectors whose production requires extensive man-power and who can survive only by hiring foreign workers continually. The time has come to concentrate on the sectors of industry requiring limited man-power, but the transformation must be accomplished gradually, if there is not

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