

The Reformation of Wolfshausen

Teil Vierzig,

The Temptation of Vater Karl, 1524

Although Julia Ausländer had a greater tolerance for atheism and a stronger taste for profanity than most of the farm wives around Wolfshausen, she made a point of attending Vater Karl's weekly sermons in the town square. She liked the old priest to begin with and enjoyed the satire that lay beneath some of his sermons. More importantly, there was no better opportunity to gather intelligence on developing conspiracies to which she was not a party.

Wherever simple people gather for devotion, those looking at their own feet will be participants in the current collusion. Those looking at their neighbors are the alert intended victims. Except when the plot served an ecclesiastical cabal, in which case the orientations reverse.

Julia liked to stand in the corner of the square, to Vater Karl's right, which was the perfect vantage from which to note her compatriot's eyes, applaud the priest, and see Jeremiah lead his fraternal boar and adopted mother down to the gathering. Julia found great entertainment in Jeremiah and the pig. She was safely alive to their thievishness.

On this Sunday, a cold wind blew across the valley. Julia backed up beside the alehouse for shelter. From there she could still hear the sermon and still assess the various suspicions and intentions among her neighbors even if she could no longer see the priest or the path to Gretchen's cottage.

From her shelter, Julia could hear Vater Karl start to preach, beginning with his regular exhortation and the standard disclosure. He began his sermon and the wind blowing across the valley was no match for his voice.

“The bible is filled with characters familiar to us. In its holy pages we find Egyptian Jews, Persian bureaucrats and Palestinian lions we remember from our childhoods and understand better than our own families. So well-known to us are the people who occupy holy scripture that we can be forgiven if we forget how many are strangers to each other.

“King David’s great grandmother was a foreigner raised to a strange religion. The good Samaritan was a stranger and, to the man he comforted, an apostate. The Magi who came to worship Jesus were oriental. Even the angels of heaven, when they visit their chosen people, come among them as aliens as they did to Abraham and to Jacob.

“Foreigners are who we are sent to give us favor and who we are sent to do favors for. To we who hear the word of God, all its people are our neighbors, and to all of us who live day-to-day in Wolfshausen, all of our neighbors are foreign. It is their presence among the strange, foreign, perplexing, exotic, wrong-headed, heretical and barbarian that allows us all to recognize ourselves in all the saints of scripture.

“We, my neighbors and friends, come into the Holy Mother Church to find Jesus but also home, but the Christian’s home remains far away as long as he lives in this world or this town. Home is farther than Rome.

The Christian is called to show kindness to sinners and strangers and those with foreign customs or who worship false religions because our Lord instructed us to do unto others as we would have done to ourselves.

“Perhaps you will not admit that you are quaint, exotic or foreign. But look to the man, woman and child beside you and tell me, does he or she not have French eyes and a Muslim expression?”

An odd thing occurred to Julia as she stared at the crowd of her own neighbors. There was something wrong with them this Sunday. As Vater Karl’s sermon continued, all the eyes her town could bring to suspecting a neighbor seemed fixed at the same point, somewhere to the priest’s left. Either the whole town and its backcountry, excepting herself, was involved in a common ecclesiastic scheme against one of their members; or they were all in thrall to the secular fear of a single, unique conspirator.

Such consensus was simply not in her hometown’s character. Perhaps in Marburg, or another big city, the rich and poor could agree on science, or the church and

castle could come to some political arrangement. But in a small, egalitarian farming village like her own, controversies as to the current season or the nobility of your average goat broke out at the first speculation. The prospect of agreement among her neighbors, friends and persecutors made her sensitive to the cold wind the alehouse still sheltered her from.

“Remember, my friends. When a stranger appears among us we have the commandment to love him as our neighbor. If his beliefs are strange or his worship unconventional, are we not citizens of the cross, sacrificed to foreign empires and saved by a nomad? Let us be as kind and understanding as Jesus asks us to be, at least until the Archbishop’s knights get here to restore order.”

Julia started forward, at the very least to learn which of her neighbors was such a fearsome lay predator or such tempting devotional prey. Although only a few steps from exposure to the town square, she halted before she gained the corner. She had noticed something else. The crowd was enormous. It seemed as though, for the first time in her recall, all the town’s tradesmen had sobered up in time for the service. Nearly every farmer or farm hand had made the cold trip into town. Had the whole town known something that she hadn’t?

That mystery of this conspiracy worried her. She had left her sons and her husband at home and could not see them now. But their absence and the invisibility of the dangerous or endangered individual made her wonder if one hadn’t somehow gotten past her and into the web of a universal conspiracy.

That thought made Julia furious and, warmed by her anger, she strode out and into the congregation. She followed the eyes of the village to their focus and her jaw set with an audible pop when she realized the new most important man in town to be the giant scamp who had trespassed her haystack, drowned the field rat that rightly belonged to her family and frightened her speechless in front of Frau Braun.

“This will not do,” Julia swore. Whatever his purpose, Julia’s was to protect her family and their standing.

“Old friends and young ones,” the priest continued, “my new friend hulking there to my left has given me permission to tell you that he is both Czech and evangelical. But also that he will be here but a short time. Treat him as you would have had the Romans treat Jesus by which I mean, resist the temptation to murder him. Besides, we have only so many trees in our forest on which to martyr him.”

More than two years ago, Frau Braun had started her gang of wives to defend the church and persecute poor Gretchen. Julia saw a new wisdom in that now. If the stranger's presence now filled her neighbors with fear, she would call upon their fervor.

Vater Karl concluded "May God bless and keep you, make his face shine upon you and be gracious unto you. The Lord lift you up with favor and give you peace. Come on everyone to the alehouse, the cider is warm. But hurry! Ludwig here drinks like an elephant, through his nose."