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The Cavalry Captain of Sword Street

n HERBERT KUHNER

It' s hard to describe Stephan since his appearance is always in flux. Not that his physiognomy or clothes undergo a drastic change, but his hair could provide a surprise when he opens the door to his apartment. He might greet you completely clean-shaven or with long hair and a full beard. And he's just as likely to have his hair in a pony tail.

Stephan has a marvelous and appropriate address, Schwertgasse 3 in the first district of Vienna. The house is baroque in that short narrow street of baroque houses that curves down to the gothic Church of Maria am Gestade.

When you enter No. 3, you pass under titans end putti, and once inside, you're greeted by a life-size statue of an ecstatic St. Florian. Then you climb four flights of stone stairs to the broad wooden double doorwith the old brass name plate of Rittmeister Fritz which translates as Cavalry Captain Fritz. That former tenant of days gone by could have last seen action in the Great War. And just as the address is appropriate, go is the name plate. Stephan Eibel is a man of action and handy with a sword of sorts, a verbal one. There are people who like Stephan, there are those who are mad about him, those who are mad at him and those who hate him. Stephan does not compromise. To be the butt of a polemic by Stephan means to be cut to the quick. Stephan knows how to write a sentence and he sparse no one who in his view deserves to be cut, even if cutting means to cut himself out end being cut more deeply than his adversary. Stephan is a foe or social injustice and those who perpetrate it at home and abroad. Call him Michael Kohlhaas or Don Quixote if you like. Or for that matter, call him Cavalry Captain Fritz! I don't think he believes that the world will be a better place after he leaves it, but he's trying his damnedest to improve it, and that's what counts.

Stephan became Austria's Public Enemy No. One in 1990 during the night and morning of the Opera Ball and Opera Ball Demo. That night the police went on the rampage knocking the heads of demonstrators, bystanders, plainclothesmen and political functionaries. Stephan represented the demonstrators on *Club 2,* a TV panal discussion program. But he was so incensed at what was going on that he kept his sword sheathed and started wielding a mace at the moderator and the pro-Opera-Ball faction. Since Stephan knocked heads, symbolically speaking, he overshadowed those doing the job with truncheons far as most of the press was concerned. Stephan became public enemy and scapegoat par excellence rolled up in on. overnight. What the hell, it's nice to have famous friends!

Stephan and I have had many long conversations in his spacious apartment with its sparse dilapidated and rickety furniture and mountains of papers, journals, books and whatnot on the floor. We Were like two mice in a maze and I doubted that either of us would find a way to get out. The difference between Stephan and me is that I Was forced to cut. If I had not picked up the sword, I would have been hewn to death. I had to parry in self-defense. I'm anything but a gratuitous cutter. But no matter how well you engage in polemics and no matter how concise and economical you are, the deeper you get into them, the more complex they become. Some will not be able to understand the comp1exities end others will not want to. If your adversaries are powerful and prestigious, even if they are sloppy and contradictory, they and not you will be considered credible. Id be lying if I said that that didn't worry me.

While writing this I am engaged in a dispute with an Austrian and American publisher after acting as an intermediary for a joint venture. Mr. In-between was defrauded and ejected by the Austrian, and the American, who had pulled the wool over my eyes, showed his true colors as a turncoat pal. The Austrian published a concatenation of fabrications and the American published a concatenation of contradictory fabrications. Birds of a feather were flocking together. The turncoat pal Was incensed at being caught fibbing by me and being shortchanged of his thirty pieces of silver by the other bird. But I was getting the brunt and things looked bleak.

The contradictory fibbers certainly had more going for them. and in many eyes. I was the liar. Stephan knew that that it occupied my thoughts, and when I broached the subject, he

looked at me intensely and said: “So What?!” And that’s the point I went to make. I try to take his advice and not let it worry me. It must feel good simply not to give a damn.

Herbert Kuhner: Herbert Kuhner ist 1935 in Wien geboren. 1939 mußte er mit seinen Eltern die “Ostmark” verlassen. Er wuchs in den Vereinigten Staaten auf, wo er sein Bachelor of Arts an der Columbia University bekam. 1963 kehrte er nach Österreich zurück und lebt seitdem in Wien als freier Schriftsteller und Übersetzer.

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