



German History in Documents and Images

Volume 5. Wilhelmine Germany and the First World War, 1890-1918
Ludwig Thoma, *Der erste August* [*The First of August*] (1915)

In this play, Ludwig Thoma (1867-1921) recreates the world of a small Bavarian village and its experience of the mobilization for war. Far away from the centers of political and economic power, the concern of the villagers contrasts with the enthusiasm of many in the cities.

Cast:

Gschwendtner, farmer
Gschwendtnerin, his wife
Hans, their son
Loni, female farm worker
Martin, farm worker
Seppl, young male servant
Mayor
A boy
The old weaver
Farm boys, reservists, etc.

Tidy living room in the old Bavarian style in a farmer's house. The devotional corner is on the right. A heavy, rectangular table also stands in this corner. There are built-in benches on one side of the wall. The back wall has two low windows; the right wall has one. Geraniums and images of saints are hanging in the windows. A certificate commemorating the farmer's military service and a diploma from the agricultural association are hanging on the wall. There is one door on the right which goes to the cellar. The door on the left goes to the bedroom.

[. . .]

From a distance, one hears a cry of joy, then another. All listen attentively, and Gschwendtner turns his head toward the window at this moment.

Gschwendtner
Hey! What kind of party is that in the middle of the harvest?

Martin
Well, tomorrow is Sunday . . .

Gschwendtner
But it's in bad taste; there'll be time enough for yelling your lungs out when the harvest has been brought in. Yeah, yeah, well, as I said, you can ask Schmid Lenz, Martin, if he could help out

with the harvest . . . and [to Hans] the two of us will look at the white horse and see if it is still injured. Seppel . . . we two need to discuss something.

A shrill cry of joy resounds nearby. Everyone looks toward the window.

Gschwendtnerin
I wonder what's going on out there?

Gschwendtner
A stampede. One would think it was the fair.

Gschwendtnerin [scared]
I don't know . . . [She turns her head quickly toward the window.] There's someone standing out there. [She gets halfway up from the chair.]

Gschwendtner
Heh, what's the matter? [There is a loud knock at the window.] Really now! [He stands up and opens the window and the mayor appears.]

Mayor
Gschwendtner, is Hans home?

Hans
[Lively and soldierly, with a strong voice]
Here! [He squeezes himself out of the bench.]

Mayor
I have a telegram for you. You must depart tonight.

Everyone has stood up and gone to the table. Hans goes quickly to the window. The mayor hands him a slip of paper.

Gschwendtnerin [shocked]
Jesus!

Mayor [serious]
Yes, folks! It's war! The mobilization has been ordered. [To Hans.] You are going to have to go to the station today. [Hans has read the slip of paper and lets out a shrill, "Yahoo!"]

Gschwendtnerin
Bua! Bua! How are you able to scream yahoo?

Hans
Surely I won't cry! Now we're off. [To the mayor.] I'll be ready soon, Mayor. [He turns to the left to go.]

Gschwendtnerin [grabs his hand]
You aren't going to just get up and run away?

Hans [well-meaning]
I need to get everything ready, Mama. After that I will come and say goodbye. [Exit stage left.]

The town bell is now ringing as loud as it can, and sounds quite solemn.

Mayor

Yes, folks, who would have thought? Now it has truly come this far! We often talked about it and no one really believed it!

Gschwendtner

And in the middle of the harvest!

Martin

Just like 1870. And once again the French – like always, the French.

Mayor

And Russians and Serbs and French and the devil knows who else . . .

Gschwendtner

[Bursting out in anger]

What did we do to them? What do we want from them? Weren't we just simply hard-working – day in and day out? We were quite happy with our work and didn't want anything else but our work. And then some idiot comes and tears down the fence, saying: get out of the way, I want your stuff.

Mayor

Everything is going to be all right!

Gschwendtner

Everything is going to be all right – yes – and they're not going to get it out of our hands before the last one dies . . . by God.

Gschwendtnerin

Well Mayor, come in!

Mayor

I can't, farmer woman. You hear what's going on in the town and I must bring a couple more messages.

Gschwendtnerin

Oh my! What is going to become of us?

Mayor

Two of mine have to go – on the Lenz farm three even.

Gschwendtner

And in the middle of the harvest!

Mayor

Yeah, there aren't going to be enough people. We will long remember these days . . . but now it's time to go. Good-bye, folks. *[Leaves the window.]*

Gschwendtner

Good-bye, Mayor!

During the last scene, Seppl and Loni exited stage right through the doors. The bells have stopped ringing.

Martin

I'm going to go see what's going on. Eventually, I'll go say good-bye to Hans. [*Exits stage right.*]

It is getting darker. Gschwendtnerin sits down on a chair and brings her apron up to her eyes again and again. She is crying quietly and steadily, not hysterically. Gschwendtner has gone to the window and is looking outside. In the distance, Gschwendtner hears one or two "Yahoos." He turns around and looks at his wife.

Gschwendtner [*well-meaning*]

Come on mother, you don't have to cry!

Gschwendtnerin

Here I brought up a child, caring and worrying until the kid grew up and now he has to go!

Gschwendtner

He'll return.

Gschwendtnerin

People must not know how it is for a mother to bring up a child; otherwise they wouldn't fight any wars.

Gschwendtner [*sighing*]

Yes, yes! . . .

Gschwendtnerin

The joy you have when finally they're over the worst part, when all of a sudden they can stand and they can walk . . . and then they're grown up and you think you've done your duty but you still worry quietly with every cough . . . and now he's off to be done in . . .

Gschwendtner

It's happening to the others, just like to us, look . . .

Gschwendtnerin

Yes . . . but a mother doesn't think about the others . . .

Gschwendtner

Of course not . . .

He turns from the window, takes a candleholder from the console, puts it on the table and lights the candle. Then he takes a chair and sits down next to his wife. Both have just turned to the audience.

Gschwendtner [*well-meaning*]

Come on, wife, it'll turn out alright . . .

He takes her hand; she removes the apron from her eyes.

Gschwendtnerin

[*more to herself than to anyone else*]

We've had all these plans for him – how he'd help out on the farm for a couple more years and then marry the right girl . . .

Gschwendtner
[Also contemplative]
Yes . . . yes . . .

Gschwendtnerin
And we two would have retired and had our peace and quiet . . .

Gschwendtner
And we would have known that everything is in the right hands . . . [Sighs, then livelier once again.] Hans became a real farmer. He made me completely happy, that boy. How he sat on that horse for the first time, how he went out with the hay wagon. Martin says to me, farmer, one day he'll be – –

Gschwendtnerin
[Joining in enthusiastically]
And how he knew every horse in town by name and recognized whose it was from afar, so that I often said, well, boy, how can you remember all that in your head, and he laughed and said, Ma, I can just do it!

Gschwendtner
You have to have something like that inside of you; you can't just learn something like that.

Gschwendtnerin
He was smiling over his whole face and he said: I can just do it, Ma!

Gschwendtner
And he was such a happy worker, and he learned every chore correctly and fast – and he was good at it. You don't find 'em like that very often.

Gschwendtnerin
And a good soul and a good boy . . .

Gschwendtner
[Touching her hand]
You brought something special into the world with him, Ma. He sure has given us real pleasure . . .

Gschwendtnerin
Yeah, and now he's going to be done in and we don't know what for . . .

Gschwendtner
[Takes her hand gently]
You shouldn't say that, Ma!

Gschwendtnerin
But it's true. What do we have to do with the whole thing? People like us only want peace and quiet to be able to do their work.

Gschwendtner
[*Quiet and without pathos*]
But the others just don't want to leave us alone!

Gschwendtnerin
What do they know about us?

Gschwendtner [*grimly*]
Nothing or too little. Otherwise they wouldn't be starting it up with us. [*Once again kindly.*] Now, Ma, we know very well why our boy has to go. [*Gets up.*] Everything's at stake here.

Gschwendtnerin [*sighing*]
How did that come up?

Gschwendtner
We can't think about that. But this we know, that we are not bad folks whose life you can just take or give. And we won't give up our ground, which was worked by our forefathers and by us as well. We won't let them desecrate the ground where our fathers and our mothers are buried and where we are going to be buried, too . . . honorably and in peace . . . [*He gets angry.*] Lord God, one didn't ever think that bad hands would reach for that which is most important to us. And only out of ill will, because we are too unimportant, too insignificant to them . . . [*Screams.*] Do you think I will watch and stay behind the oven? Do you think I'm too old, that I wouldn't also like to take a gun? . . .

During the last few words Hans has entered from left in his blue uniform; the cap has been put on slightly tilted; in his right hand he is carrying a small suitcase.

Hans [*lively*]
Well, Papa, are you going to report for active duty with me?

Gschwendtner
[*Half laughing, half quite agitated*]
I wouldn't like anything more.

Gschwendtnerin
And our things'll spoil in the meantime.

Gschwendtner
[*Once again quiet and serious*]
You know well that one does what's right . . . [*He walks over to Hans, who is putting down his suitcase and taking off his hat. He takes his hand and shakes it heartily.*] Did we ever think that we would have to say good-bye like this?

Hans
Well, this is how it goes, Father . . .

Gschwendtner
And . . . and because you are leaving I can tell you this already – that you have been a real good soul and I want to say thank you for helping out like that . . . now, during vacation . . .

Hans

[Fighting back his own tears]

Well . . . well, it really is my turn to say thank you and . . . and . . . I . . . ask you, Father and Mother, . . . to forgive me . . . that I . . . sometimes disappointed you . . . and . . .

Gschwendtnerin

[Crying into her apron]

My boy!

Gschwendtner

[Wipes the back of his hand over his eyes and is fighting to control his emotions.]

Come on mother. We can't make it so hard for him to go . . . *[To Hans, who is looking at the ground, and who is rubbing his forehead with his hand.]* You are going to do your duty out there, Hans, and . . . and well, we just have to hope that we see each other again in good health . . .

Hans

[Lively once again]

Nothing is going to happen, Father! . . .

Gschwendtnerin

And not that you think that you have to be first everywhere.

Hans

[Smiles good-naturedly]

Now . . . now . . . Mother!

Gschwendtnerin

Yes . . . you, it's true. You think that you can do everything by yourself and you're so sure of yourself that you always have to be in the front.

Gschwendtner

He's certainly not going to be the last one all of a sudden. *[He goes to the wall cupboard.]*

Gschwendtnerin

Don't you talk him into it! That's just like you . . . *[To Hans]* And what's going to happen if . . . if . . . *[She pulls her apron up to her eyes and cries.]*

Hans

[Moves closer to her. Takes her hand so that the apron falls down.]

Oh, Ma, Please! You don't need to cry so!

Gschwendtnerin

Yes . . . you! *[Somewhat livelier.]* And you should have let me help you pack . . . Are you sure you didn't forget everything again?

Hans

I have everything, and not all that much fits into that backpack anyway.

Gschwendtnerin

But you have to have warm socks and a knit-jacket because soon the nights are going to be cold.

Hans

I have everything that I need, Ma, and you can send me everything else . . .

Gschwendtner

And make sure you wear a woolen scarf . . . And some smoked ham – you should really take some along.

Hans

It's O.K., Ma . . .

Gschwendtner

[Has walked up to them and places a leather moneybag into Hans's hand.]

Here's some money for you Hans; you're going to need some.

Hans

[Laughs good-heartedly, and puts the moneybag into his pocket]

Something one always likes to have . . . Thanks. *[In the distance, from the direction of the town street, one hears the sound of an accordion and the song: "The French have to retreat. The French have to see that we Germans are winners." Hans stands up straight.]* But I have to get going now.

Gschwendtnerin

Come on, don't hurry like that!

Hans

I have to catch the last train . . . you see.

Gschwendtner

We can't keep him back, Ma!

Gschwendtnerin

[Wipes her hand once again across her eyes, sighs.]

If it has to be . . . *[Quietly, almost embarrassed]* . . . "Well, bend over a little, boy" . . .

Hans bends his head down and his mother makes the sign of the cross on his forehead, his lips, and his breast with the words: "In the name of God the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost . . . Amen!" Hans takes her hands and both stare at the ground. Then she lets go of Hans's hand and Gschwendtner shakes it firmly.

Gschwendtner

Good luck to you – in everything . . .

The sound of the accordion can be heard, as well as the voice of the boys closer on the street. They are singing: . . . "The birds in the woods, they sing so wonder – wonderful . . . We will see each other . . . back home again!"

Hans

[To his father]

Good-bye again . . . *[He straightens up and takes his suitcase.]* You'll have to see now for yourself, Father, what's wrong with the white horse – you should bandage him tonight . . .

Gschwendtner
I'll look after it . . .
[There are loud voices at the window.]

A young man
[Looks in and calls out]
What's up, Hans? Aren't you coming along to the station?

Hans *[lively]*
Of course, I'm all ready!

A couple of farmers and a number of older and younger women are coming from the right; among them is the old weaver, bent over. She is about seventy years old. Gschwendtnerin walks over to them. Gschwendtner steps to the window. A couple of boys – some in civilian clothes, some in uniform – are standing in the window frame. Their hats are decorated with flowers.

Gschwendtner
[Loud and lively]
Now, boys, are you brave?

A Couple of Them
[Very loudly]
You better believe it. Brave and sharp!

A Couple of Others *[similarly]*
We'll kick their butts so hard their boots'll fly off . . .

One Sings
"And three radishes, three turnips
And three Bavarian Boys.
They were all so tough
That the Devil couldn't eat them!"
[He lets out a shrill "Yahoo!" and all join in.]

Gschwendtner
Now that's good! Now the fun and joy has the right purpose. And make sure you come home safe and sound!

Many of Them
Thank you! We won't get lost!

One
We have to come back. They don't have any big, Bavarian radishes over there!
[All laugh heartily]

Another One
Certainly, we'll be coming home! We'll put some Russians in front of the carriage!

A Different One
And Frenchmen!

Some of Them

That'll get us home!

A Young Man
Hans, hurry up!

Hans
I'm ready! [*He walks, standing straight, to the doors, turns around one last time and calls out.*]
Good-bye, Mother. Adieu, Father! [*And then he is off.*]

A Boy
[*Imitates the whistle of a locomotive and calls out to them like a conductor.*]
All aboard! All aboard the fast train to Paris! [*All laugh*]

Another One
Let's go!

A Third [*commanding*]
Battalion! Forward, march . . . [*The accordion begins playing the melody: "Ich hatt' einen Kameraden [I had a Comrade]" . . . There are some screams of "Yahoo" and "Yippee," etc. . . . Then the boys start marching off.*]

Gschwendtner
[*Runs to the window and calls out*]
And make sure you write a lot . . . how you're doing and things . . .

The boys march out, singing: "Ich hatt' einen Kameraden" . . . The sound of their singing trails off quickly into the distance . . .

Gschwendtnerin [*sighing*]
Now he is gone . . .

The Old Weaver
So many boys! So many fresh, young boys!

Curtain falls

Source: Ludwig Thoma, *Der erste August; Christnacht 1914. Zwei Einakter* [*The First of August; Christmas Night 1914. Two One-Act Plays*]. Albert Langen: Munich, 1915, pp. 24-43.