# Publishing in the Thirties: The Paul Zsolnay Verlag

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Asking how many people today live off the word 'poet' is like seeking infinity ... You could begin with literary chairs and seminars and go on through the whole university industry, with all the functionaries, janitors and others supported by the system. Or you could begin with publishers and all the many employees of a publishing house, with printing works, paper mills and machine factories, with the railways, the postal service, the tax authority, newspapers …; all these thousands of people make their living, a good one, a bad one, full-time or part-time, from the existence of poets, even though no one knows what a poet is ...

Despite the self-irony inherent in the text – the quote is taken from Robert Musil's feuilleton "Eine Kulturfrage," which appeared in 1931 – it nevertheless outlines the wide range of field for a literary scholarship which does not merely restrict itself to the "reine Dichtung," to the literary product itself. If one attempts to render Musil's amusing observations in a more scientific language, then a definition provided by Herbert Göpfert would seem to do the trick. Göpfert writes that it is clear that the conditions and processes of publication with all their technical, economic, social, legal, political and organizational – i.e. historical – determinants help to condition not merely the reception but also the very production of literature.'[11]

Recent scholarship dealing with the history of Austrian literature in the inter-war years with special consideration being given to the specific development in Austria has, in part, already proved the thesis that the reception and production of literature are widely determined by non-literary factors.

Using one Austrian publishing house as an example, I would like to show how such a history can contribute to our understanding of German literature in the 1930s. The book and publishing trades are, as banal as it may sound, prerequisites to the entire process of literary communication. The trades are also closely tied to business life in general and thus subject to economic parameters. As far as the period in question is concerned, it would almost be an understatement to say that the "historical determinants" were largely a result of the political system in Nazi Germany after 1933.

The Paul Zsolnay Verlag was founded in 1923 and published its first work – Franz Werfel's *Verdi. Roman der Oper* – in the spring of the following year. It was to become the biggest, financially most successful and most prestigious (three Nobel Literature Prize recipients!) publisher of *belles lettres* in Austria. And the acceptance of the Paul Zsolnay Verlag especially in Germany was a feat no other Austrian company before or after it achieved. Zsolnay became the heir of the Kurt Wolff Verlag in Germany, which like its competitors long laboured with the uncontrolled inflation. He took over a number of established and popular writers including Franz Werfel, Heinrich Mann, Max Brod and

[1] Herbert G. Göpfert, „Verlagsbuchhandel," *Reallexikon der deutschen Literatur* (Berlin 1979), Vol. 4, p. 651.

Carl Sternheim. Coming from a wealthy family, the young publisher Paul von Zsolnay, who was a successful flower grower by profession, did not have to worry too much about the financial viability of his fledgling operations. He was born in Budapest in 1895 and was a Slovakian national, a detail not worth mentioning if it were not for the fact that it saved his life in March 1938 while his colleagues were being tracked down and sent to concentration camps. As far as the authors were concerned, Paul Zsolnay was able reliably to offer them royalties in the (stable) currency of their choice which no German publisher at the time could afford.

With the family wealth behind him he could risk flops and publish hitherto unknown authors out of the goodness of his heart. A survey of Zsolnay's programme during the first ten years of production shows a penchant for European and international literature without entirely neglecting young Austrian writing.
The early financial and literary success of the Paul Zsolnay Verlag was based on three prominent writers: Heinrich Mann and Franz Werfel – both of whom signed lucrative general contracts with the young publisher – and John Galsworthy of whose works the Verlag printed no fewer than 1.4 million copies in German before 1938. By comparison, Zsolnay printed almost 660,000 copies of Werfel's works and 250,000 of Heinrich Mann's oeuvre. The emphasis among the literature in translation was on English, American, French and Russian. Not until 1934 did Zsolnay begin to publish Scandinavian literature systematically. This "Ausländerei" began to upset German booksellers who were leary of so much foreign literature. Paul Zsolnay was not opposed to contemporary Austrian literature; he had simply not established his company with the intent of creating a base for Austrian writers per se or to serve as the long-awaited Austrian publishing house which would, after the decade-long export of literary manuscripts and import of the finished product, repatriate Austrian literature. Indeed, the scope was primarily European. When literary production and reception began to be dictated by the Nazi authorities in Germany so too did the Zsolnay programme take on a German nationalist flavour. The issue of an "Austrian publishing house" is neither chauvinistic nor provincial nor an attempt artificially to justify the existence of an Austrian literature. It raises a fundamental question in literary history, namely that of the existence or non-existence of a national cultural identity. For as long as Austria and Germany got along with one another the question was insignificant. Whether the country had its own more or less autonomous and commercially viable publishing trade was not a matter of life and death, not a question of survival in the spiritual sense, at least as long as Germany took no action which was essentially directed against the very existence of Austria.

The fact that authors such as Franz Grillparzer, Marie von Ebner-Eschenbach, Peter Rosegger, Arthur Schnitzler, Robert Musil and so on published their works in German houses was periodically bemoaned but not viewed as a threat. It was only when Hitler came to power in 1933 that people came to realize Austria's almost exclusive cultural dependence on Germany. 1933 marked the true beginning of a process of cultural annexation from within and without. Be that as it may, the Paul Zsolnay Verlag

production programme took on an Austrian flavour of a completely different kind as a result of the Nazi-dictated market parameters after 1933. Production, distribution, sale, and reception of literature were now to become dependent on extra-literary factors.
The key event of the year 1933 for the further development of Austrian literature or literary life in Austria in the 1930s was without doubt the 11th International P.E.N. Club congress in Ragusa, Yugoslavia at the end of May 1933. Because so much has been written in the past decade about the conference from an Austrian standpoint, I shall restrict myself here to the repercussions on the Paul Zsolnay Verlag and its literary programme. The conflict and later split within the Vienna P.E.N. Club arose from the heated debate over the position to be taken by the official Austrian delegation vis-à-vis the question of persecution of writers in Germany. The spectacular book burnings had taken place in a number of German cities only two weeks prior to the Ragusa congress. It was decided, by no means unanimously, that the official Austrian representatives, the president Felix Salten and the founder Grete von Urbanitzky, would not participate in any such debate against Germany or the "Nazified" German group of the P.E.N. Club. With minor exceptions the protagonists were all authors of the Paul Zsolnay Verlag. Indeed, Paul Zsolnay himself and his literary director Felix Costa were influential members and benefactors of the Vienna club.
The split in the aftermath of the Ragusa meeting, during which the Austrian delegation abided by its resolution to maintain "strict neutrality" (Salten) and, if at all, to stick to "internal criticism," was more or less an anti-climax to the Vienna prelude. It was the Nazi party member and Zsolnay author Friedrich Schreyvogl who had brought the message of an impending exodus of the "nationalist" members. A hitherto unknown and unpublished "Protokoll über die vor dem Kongress im Haus von Felix Salten abgehaltene Sitzung" of the club on 21 May 1933 supports the thesis that the later exodus of Catholic-nationalist writers from the Vienna club was pre-programmed. The minutes bear signatures of the founder Grete von Urbanitzky and the "dissident" Hugo Sonnenschein-Sonka, both Zsolnay authors from opposite ends of the political and ideological spectrum. Because the text sheds new light on the turmoil within the club and hints at the material motives influencing the stand in Ragusa, I would like to quote briefly from it here. The P.E.N. Club president Felix Salten, who was to be poorly rewarded for abstaining from criticism of the Nazi German actions against his writing colleague argued, for example, in the following manner:

No government in Germany can be allowed to accuse us having fought against Germany in the battle ... An Austrian protest could only be directed against the German P.E.N. Club in Berlin, but we ought not to use the Congress to protest against Germany itself ... It is better to remain silent than to show disapproval. If we protest, we shall provoke an international squabble. Enough nations will oppose Germany. It is for us to remain neutral and silent.[22]

[2] *Nachlaß* Grete von Urbanitzky (Geneva). Since these documents were first consulted, the literary papers of Grete von Urbanitzky have be transferred to the Wiener Stadt- und Landesbibliothek.

Whether Salten and the others who sided with him by remaining "neutral" really expected to be spared from the repressive measures against "Jewish" and/or other "undesirable" writers in Germany is difficult to say. At any rate, their "brotherly love" was to remain unrequited. Following Salten's credo "silence is golden," the spokesman for the nationalist authors placed his cards on the table: 'If the Austrian delegation were to turn against Germany, all nationalist and Catholic writers would immediately resign from the Club.' Understandably, several of the members attending the meeting in Salten's home protested against what they saw as a veiled threat in Schreyvogl's words: 'The Vienna P.E.N. Club cannot be dictated to by any group ... Schreyvogl has spoken only for a small number of people who happen to have communicated with him. The Vienna P.E.N. Club draws its membership from all political parties – isn't Sonka, for example, a Communist?!' So much for the members of the policy-making meeting prior to the Ragusa conference. The exit of Catholic and nationalist-leaning P.E.N. members did not take place on one single day as Schreyvogl had predicted, but the split was a "fait accompli." Incidentally, the publisher Paul Zsolnay and his director Felix Costa also decided it was advantageous to leave the club. The importance from an historical perspective lay not only in the split in the Vienna club itself or down the middle of the Paul Zsolnay Verlag, but also in the consequential division of Austrian writers into two camps, those who would profit from and those who would suffer from the Nazi policy on literature. Seen from a wider perspective, the decision to remain in the club or to leave it was open to an eminently political interpretation. The events in Austria provided Nazi authorities who were at no time particularly familiar with the literary scene in Austria with an initial opportunity to distinguish the desirable from the undesirable.

The measures introduced in Nazi Germany from 1933 onwards with the aim of "Gleichschaltung" of all fields of cultural, social and political life, the book burnings, and the unofficial "black lists" of proscribed authors and books forced numerous Austrian publishers to revise their literary programmes. For someone as politically abstinent as Paul Zsolnay, pragmatism seemed the best path to follow. Following several financially disastrous years, Zsolnay was now confronted with a politicized publishing trade. Whereas the law of supply and demand had hitherto ruled the book trade, the free market forces were now out of commission. Whereas hitherto various literary currents vied with one another for readers, "undesirable" literature was to be eliminated through an administrative procedure and the invisible censor of literary book production in Austria sat in Germany.

To appreciate the extent of the remote control of production in Austria it is important to recall various statistics showing that something like 90% of Austrian authors published their works in German publishing houses and that the Paul Zsolnay Verlag, for instance, sold three quarters of its production in Germany. The ban of an individual work or several books meant a financial loss for the publisher in the short and long term, but for the author affected the immediate loss of the market for two thirds and more of his book sales. Economic dependence on the German book market was thus extremely great both for the publisher and for the now undesired author.

Even Paul Zsolnay's declared political disinterest did not impress the Nazis in the least. For them he was a liberal Jewish publisher, and it was questionable that as such he should be permitted to publish and sell "German" literature at all. Zsolnay was forced to make the best of a bad job and try to restrict damage to his company and his authors to a minimum. It is definitely to his credit that he made every possible effort under the circumstances to soften the blow for the many authors whose works had, in whole or in part, been banned from the German market. Zsolnay, like his friend Franz Werfel, was convinced that once the dust had settled the situation would return to normal. Some authors voluntarily withdrew and turned to emigrant publishers in Holland, aware that there was then no return. Other authors, although black-listed in Germany, continued to be published, and it was here that Paul Zsolnay took advantage of a firm he had established in Switzerland in the autumn of 1929 under completely different circumstances and for an entirely different reason. "Paul Zsolnays Bibliothek zeitgenössischer Werke" was established first in Bern and was then moved to Zürich. It was the Vienna publisher's answer to a new trend on the German book market. In an effort to reach wider sections of the reading public and to open up a new market, a number of German publishers began to follow the lead taken by Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks* and introduce so-called "Volksausgaben," special cheap editions of popular contemporary works at a price more or less dictated by the big department stores in Germany. RM 2.85 was the magic new price. But the *Bibliothek,* originally intended to further popularize successful Zsolnay publications such as the works of H. G. Wells, Franz Werfel, or John Galsworthy, offered Zsolnay a solution to the problem of what to do with authors who could no longer be sold in Germany. Even if the printings in what after 1933 was falsely regarded as a "ghetto publishing house" were limited to between 3,000 and 5,000 copies, it meant at least some financial support for otherwise homeless writers.

But not all Zsolnay authors felt they were being dealt with correctly. Heinrich Mann, whose correspondence with Zsolnay (and others) reveals a constant wrangling over money, was one example; Emil Ludwig, who had been brought from the Ernst Rowohlt Verlag was another. Both were early victims of Nazi literary persecution, both prominent in the first book burnings in May 1933. Since that time, it was utterly hopeless to place their works on the market, something which did not prevent the two writers from blaming the publisher. Whereas Emil Ludwig chose to air his displeasure in an interview with a Vienna paper, Heinrich Mann was less restrained in letters he wrote to his brother Thomas. He called Zsolnay a "cowardly traitor" and a "scoundrel." Understandably, there was little contact between Mann and Zsolnay after 1933. Indeed, among his papers in the Heinrich Mann Archives in East Berlin there are copies of only two Mann letters. Not until the Zsolnay Verlag sent him a statement of account did Mann break his silence to accuse his publisher of breach of contract. In a letter of 1 October 1934 from Amsterdam Mann described the statement as unacceptable and made a further charge: 'I refuse to

enumerate all your many sins of commission and omission in our contractual dealings ... This letter requires no answer, particularly since you have taken great pains to avoid any written correspondence with me since February 1933.' Mann's final letter to the Paul Zsolnay Verlag dates from April 1935. Again, Zsolnay has sent a statement of account, 'which does not concern me [Mann] in the slightest. You can keep your manipulations with book returns to yourselves ... There will be no further business dealings between us ... You will herewith "take cognizance" that I intend henceforth not to open, read or reply to any further communication from you.' Mann did not reconcile his differences with Zsolnay until 1947. But Mann was an exception among the many authors whose works could no longer be sold in Germany. Others showed more understanding for the predicament Zsolnay was in. Zsolnay did not then altogether cease to publish and sell the books of authors who because they were Jewish or liberal were in one way or another undesired in Germany. Franz Werfel's works, for instance, with the exception of the monumental novel *Die vierzig Tage des Musa Dagh,* were distributed in Germany until a sweeping confiscation by Leipzig police in April 1936. Zsolnay retained and published new works by Franz Werfel, Felix Salten, and Leo Perutz in his Vienna company. They were merely not exported to Germany. This practice became part of the contracts between author and publisher in order to rule out later disagreement. The relevant passage reads as follows:

Concerning the sale in Germany of the work in question author and publisher are in accord that such sale will in all probability meet with difficulties immediately upon publication or soon after, and that there is even the likelihood that sale will prove impossible. Publisher and author have therefore agreed that it shall be for the publisher to decide whether an attempt should be made to put the book or the German market or not.

The contract in question with Leo Perutz *(Der schwedische Reiter)* is dated 3 July 1936. Like the attempts to publish his authors in the Swiss firm, this again was another form of coexistence with the closed German market despite the prohibitive financial risk involved. The extent to which the above-mentioned assessment of the situation on the German market was correct evident from a letter which Zsolnay's attorney Paul Neumann wrote to the former author Robert Neumann in March 1937:

> I hardly need tell you that the problems with authors of non-Aryan extraction writing in German are now almost insuperable. We have an example in Perutz' splendidly written novel 'The Swedish Cavalryman,' which despite the most intensive publicity has barely found a market. Had the same novel been published in 1929, I estimate that 10,000 copies would have been sold in no time at all.

Whereas earlier first printings of Perutz's works were around 8,000 copies, under the present circumstances the figure had dropped to 2,000.

The forced disappearance of a number of authors from Zsolnay's programme had been a passive reaction to the politicized literary market. But the publisher was also compelled to seek support in National-Socialist circles to maintain its acceptance on the all-important German market. Because of his close association with the P.E.N. Club Zsolnay at first turned to two writers. One was Grete von Urbanitzky, one of his own authors and the lady at the centre of the controversy within the Vienna club. She had left Austria for Berlin from where she led a campaign of denunciation against her colleagues in the Zsolnay Verlag and other P.E.N. dissidents. Zsolnay's second "attorney" for interventions with Nazi authorities was the German P.E.N. delegate in Ragusa, Hanns Martin Elster who was a pronounced National-Socialist. They were to counter the propaganda campaign against the Paul Zsolnay Verlag in Germany and recruit new and "reliable" authors for the house in Vienna, who, if at all, Zsolnay accepted for artistic reasons only. Later, the Austrian author Erwin Rainalter who had also gone to Berlin to work among other things as a correspondent for the *Völkischer Beobachter* was active in maintaining the acceptance of the Zsolnay Verlag.
Zsolnay's second option after 1933, apart from throwing in the towel, was to open his publishing house systematically to Nazi writers in Austria. This process of "nazification" began in late 1933/early 1934. All of a sudden, a group of authors decided to leave the highly unsuspicious L. Staackmann Verlag in Leipzig. But the most visible outward sign of this development was the unofficial appointment of a contact man, a confidant of the illegal Nazi organization in Austria. His name was Hermann R. Leber, and it was his task to provide a link with Nazi authorities in Germany and with the German Embassy in Vienna. The latter was the actual "headquarters" for the quiet process of cultural annexation with Germany. Leber was to recruit "nationalist" authors, the majority of whom were so mediocre, as Josef Weinheber put it, that they would have otherwise stood no chance of being accepted. Gone now were writers such as Heinrich Mann, Max Brod, and Emil Ludwig, only to be replaced by over a dozen new writers whose only real claim to fame or recognition was that they were members of the illegal Austrian Nazi party.

In a later account of the events up to the mid-1930s written in 1941, one of Zsolnay's authors, a key functionary in the Nazi cultural organization in Austria, Albert von Jantsch-Streerbach summarized as follows: 'As early as 1934 Mr Paul von Zsolnay reached agreement with the Reich Ministry of Propaganda that he would delete Jewish authors from his list and henceforth publish only the works of Aryan writers.' Although this statement is not correct as it stands, the "Aryan" authors – and Jantsch-Streerbach was one of them – did come to dominate the Zsolnay Verlag. As of 1935, the company had taken on sixteen new "nationalist" authors. When the time came for writers to mix facts with fiction in order to embellish their curricula for membership in the *Reichs-schrifttumskammer* or the NSDAP the "nationalization" of the Zsolnay Verlag – described in June 1935 as 'at the time the only large-scale cultural organization in Austria truly to have been brought into line with National Socialist policy [gleichgeschaltet]' – came to have many fathers. One of the species was the very popular Zsolnay author Egmont

Colerus, who described his rôle as a service to the Nazi movement before 1938. In a lengthy confession of May 1938 entitled *Mein Lebensweg als Deutscher* Colerus wrote that he had `then established relations between the party agents designated to me [viz. Erwin Rainalter, Hermann Leber, Franz Spunda and Otto Emmerich Groh] and the publishing house of Zsolnay. The intention was to destroy international influence in the publishing trade to whatever extent possible and to secure the services of a large publishing house for Austrian National Socialist writers.' No matter to whom credit should be given, the transformation within the Zsolnay Verlag provides a prime example of the way literary and cultural life was being "Nazified" from within. The new reader and recruiting man, Hermann R. Leber, did not represent the company in an official capacity, but instead pulled the strings from the privacy of his own home. Taking control of the Zsolnay Verlag had top priority within the Nazi party itself in Austria. Their leaders had 'quite clearly given the order that nationalist writers in Austria, who had no access to a large publishing house, should take control of the firm of Zsolnay with its substantial means of publicity and distribution.' This was even more plausible in view of the fact that, according to the same source, Paul Zsolnay 'in spring 1934 approached nationalist Austrian writers, offering to place his publishing house at their disposal.' Although the publisher Zsolnay and his literary director Felix Costa were not willing to sign an just any German writer cherished in Nazi circles in order to improve their acceptance in Germany, there is no evidence to support the thesis that Zsolnay as a "Jewish" publisher being viciously attacked from all sides was not fully aware of what he was doing. But this seemed to be the price he was willing to pay. A brief glance at the roster of Zsolnay authors in the 1930s shows the extent of the change. Scarcely any of the newcomers were not already or soon to become members of the illegal Nazi party in Austria. Even the main book illustrator and graphic artist Rudolf Geyer had been a member of the S.A. and NSDAP since early 1934. At the same time, the situation in the country's largest literary publishing company is paradigmatic for the exchange or exclusion of literatures which had begun in 1933. To give a further example, roughly 30% of the contributors to the now legendary *Bekenntnisbuch österreichischer Dichter,* which came out just after the annexation of Austria and which is widely regarded as an indication of support for Hitler and the Nazi movement had been Zsolnay authors prior to 1938. The figure rose to 35% after 1938. An analysis of the list of members of the "legal" Austrian branch of the *Reichsschrifttumskammer,* the *Bund der deutschen Schriftsteller Österreichs,* would be likely to produce similar results.

Not surprisingly, the transformation of the Paul Zsolnay Verlag over the years did not escape public notice and was viewed with deep suspicion by the liberal Vienna press, by Nazi circles in Germany and Vienna, and by the Jewish and liberal authors in Austria. As an example, I should like to quote a couple of brief entries in the unpublished diaries of Leo Perutz. Because of their private nature, they provide overwhelming evidence in support of often self-serving claims made by nationalist authors. On 8 March 1935, Perutz noted: 'Had a row with Zsolnay over Scheibelreiter and his Nazi views ... Dr Neumann

(from Zsolnay) treated me to a long justification of their Nazi policy, and I sent him packing.'

Police and government records first uncovered and evaluated by Klaus Amann show the extent to which politics and literature were closely intertwined in the 1930s. They demonstrate how the transformation process in the Zsolnay Verlag became tied up in domestic politics and involved the government all the way up to the Chancellor himself.

It all began in April 1935 when the state police in Vienna (Generaldirektion für die öffentliche Sicherheit) received an anonymous letter full of information and allegations about the clandestine activities of the nationalist authors and their cronies. The well-informed source also charged that the Paul Zsolnay Verlag had become or was now a `concealed National Socialist cultural organization.' Police at various levels began to investigate. The police department in Vienna, generally blind in one eye when it came to matters concerning illegal National Socialist activities found nothing to support the claims. The state police, on the other hand, were able to substantiate them. The investigation proved to be a particular embarrassment for the Chancellor Kurt von Schuschnigg who was a good friend of both Paul Zsolnay and Franz Werfel. Schuschnigg demanded that his officials get to the bottom of the matter, rejecting reports by the Vienna police as "useless." Paul Zsolnay, who was subsequently questioned by police, pointed out, and rightly so, that he was not in a (financial) position to continue to publish the works of authors banned from the German market and that not one of his books paid homage to National Socialism or was directed against Austria. And that was where the affair ended.

Viewed in perspective, the case of the Paul Zsolnay Verlag shows at what early stage the process of cultural penetration by the Nazis set in and to what extent the internal cultural annexation was a virtual *fait accompli* long before 1938 and to what degree this gradual process was legalized by the so-called July Agreement of 1936.

In conclusion, one can say that a number of external factors or historical determinants force us today to re-assess what is widely considered to be *the* Austrian literature representative of the inter-war years. One can also conclude that the biggest publishing house in the country not only failed to resist the exchange of literatures beginning in the early 1930s, but also promoted such a development. The external factors influencing both the production and reception of German and – in light of its specific parameters – Austrian literature were many and varied. All of them – essentially non-literary – were responsible for abolishing the free market system. They included import quotas imposed by the Germans an Austrian publishers, book bans, a clearing system which made it almost impossible to make regular payments to authors or obtain the release of frozen assets in Germany, the policy compelling Austrian publishers to have printing done in Germany to the detriment of local printers, the system of book dumping ordered by Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels in 1935, which put Austrian publishers at a disadvantage, and finally the sporadic unofficial boycotts of Austrian publishing houses in various parts of Germany.

The history of the Paul Zsolnay Verlag in the 1930s, of which only a few highlights have been presented here, is a stunning example of how the political annexation of 1938 had been preceded by the Anschluss of the publishing trade. Whether the path taken by Paul Zsolnay and others was dictated by economic reasoning or opportunism is open to debate. Contemporary reports speak of the swastika flag flying on the publishing house headquarters as early as 12 March 1938. The gesture appears have been purely symbolical ...

Publishing in the Thirties in Vienna: The Paul Zsolnay Verlag. In: *Austria in the Thirties: Culture and Politics.* Edited by Kenneth Segar and John Warren. Riverside, California: Ariadne Press 1991, S. 204–218.