
*Life Goes On*, the literary debut of Hans Keilson first published in German when the author was in his early twenties, is an illuminating fictional autobiographical account of Keilson. The novel splatters a murky scene of political upheaval of the period right before the ascent of Hitler in the political arena of Europe and of the economically ruined Germany between the world wars. The tale ricochets around the hardships of the Jewish store owner Herr Seldersen – an almost bankrupt textile merchant and decorated World War I veteran – along with his wife and son, Albrecht. Herr Seldersen’s character is roughly modelled on Keilson’s father and Albrecht on the author himself.

Hans Alex Keilson was born on 12 December 1909, in Bad Freienwalde, a spa town near the Polish border. He trained as a doctor in Berlin, but because of Nazi racial laws which prohibited the Jews from practising medicine, he had to take to teaching swimming and gymnastics at Jewish private schools. *Life Goes On* was banned by the Nazis in 1934. Kielson’s editor, Samuel Fisher advised him to leave Germany to avoid any further difficulties. Two years later Keilson emigrated to the Netherlands with his future wife, Gertrud Manz, a graphologist who could also anticipate the imminent danger in the form of Hitler. Keilson brought his parents to the Netherlands in 1938, but failed to convince his father, who ‘received the Iron Cross in recognition, but he never wore it’ (77), to spend life in hiding as he was doing. His parents were sent to Auschwitz where they died. In the Netherlands he established a pediatric practice but, out of caution, stayed in a separate accommodation from Manz, though on the same street. When their daughter was born in 1941, she said that the father was a German soldier to avoid any dangerous repercussions. Later on, he specialised as a psychiatrist and a psychoanalyst. He produced a pioneering work, ‘Sequential Traumatization in Children,’ as a psychotherapist dealing with the treatment of trauma in Jewish children after the World War Two. Keilson would spend rest of his life in the Netherlands.

When *Life Goes On* was rereleased in Germany in 1984, Keilson summed-up the novel’s historical and autobiographical features for an afterword. He notes the book is

> the story of myself and my parents in the small-town capital of the district of Mark Brandenburg, and later in Berlin – the story of an independent small businessman and his economic downfall, set in the political, social, and economic upheaval of the years after the First World War, the period of the Weimar Republic, the hyper-inflation, and the rise of National Socialism. (261)

*Life Goes On* illustrates the distress of failing economy of the period of the Great Depression. The turmoil is portrayed through a broke Seldersen and his hard up customers. From the opening pages, with Herr Seldersen sitting, without having much to do, in his shop reading the whole newspaper three times in a single day, the Zeitgeist is registered. Albrecht observes:

> That winter was the first one when all the poverty and misery was out in the open. Unemployment was rampant, sometimes affecting both father and son in the same family, and people came by and told stories, complained about all sorts of things, and were all so discouraged. There were no signs of new hope anywhere. (13-14)
The pervasive joblessness has taken its toll on Seldersen’s customers. He gives credit to his customers, but very few of them pay back the debt. He strives hard to save his dying business, but ends in a failure. The stage is set for the sixteen-year-old Albrecht Seldersen to combat an unending series of troubles. He is an above average but unfocussed student who loves to read, and enjoys roaming with his best friend, Fritz, through their town and its surrounding countryside. Perhaps, this was his escape from realising his father’s worsening situation.

Albrecht goes to a medical school in Berlin to continue his studies and begins to play violin in a band to pay for his own expenses and then to support his parents. Berlin was at that time going through a pronounced social turmoil with violent protests and tumultuous politics. Albrecht notes:

"It was as if everyone had gone crazy … they were standing on the corners, howling and screaming, and every time a police car drove by, with teams of policemen on the running boards, clinging like burrs to the car – holding on with one arm, ready to jump down at once when the order came – the screams only got louder, echoing from one side of the street to the other." (162)

It is in Berlin that he attains political consciousness, though in the novel he abstains from making explicit comments on politics of the time and he gives evasive hints on such matters. The end of the novel originally had a communist inclination, and was rewritten on the advice of the editor.

Fritz, the handsome youngster who ‘could make anyone in the world laugh’ (43), also tries to evade his plight in a period when ‘there were bad days, as there always are, but now there were too many of them, coming too often; you had to wait too long for a single good day’ (42), but all of his schemes – leaving school in between to get a job, planning to move to America for better prospects – fail, as the company in which he works goes bankrupt and he does not get a work visa in America and has to come back to Germany. The pressure on Fritz mounts, as he does not get a job even in Germany, and ultimately he puts an end to his miseries by ending his life.

As the novel ends, despair is rife among people. The tone of the novel helps recreate the temper of Germany of that time. Keilson has an unassuming style which helps delineate complex human interactions. That rancid era is relived and revisited in the morbid ambience of the novel.

Keilson confesses that he is not a professional story-teller: ‘I’m not even a proper writer’. He creates a world and he draws his characters from his own life. The characters of Life Goes On are finely hewn, carefully balanced and appear real. They sound reasonably convincing. As a true representative of that time, the characters in the novel are confused and anxious. Keilson exposes confusion of his characters when Albrecht’s asks himself ‘Why in the world was he here? How had he ended up here, where he wasn’t happy, and where life was starting to unfold in a powerful but at the same time almost indecent way?’ (141).

The artistry of the novelist lies in juxtaposing contrasting characters together. They have been delineated with precision. Fritz, who ‘had the strength of a grown man and the restlessness of a boy; he wanted to take serious action for once and make something happen’ (61), is prompt in converting his decisions into actions. Contrary to him is Albrecht who describes himself as: ‘No bomb-throwing, that kind of big brave action is not for me, I leave..."
it to people who are stronger than I am’ (239). Fritz’s comment on Albrecht confirms Albrecht’s assertion: ‘You haven’t seen nearly as much as I have, my boy, you don’t have the courage, not even the courage for the truth’ (186). Between Herr Seldersen and Frau Seldersen, Frau Seldersen ‘remained the stronger and firmer of the two; heaven knew what secret soil she drew her strength from’ (229).

*Life Goes On* is a socio-historical novel. It takes us to a time which is very different from what we experience today. The novel echoes a time ‘when no one knows where we’re heading’ (6), a time when a ‘depressed, defeated mood held sway everywhere’ (84), a time when people were committing suicide ‘out of poverty, shame, God knows what’ (89), a time when ‘darkness hangs down from the branches like deep sadness’ (45). It outlines a period when ‘each turn of events pulled the others along with it, in a long chain of misfortune following one upon the other’ (104) and people were insecure about their future: as Herr Seldersen says, ‘Who knows what’ll happen between now and spring?’ (13). The novel takes us to a time when ‘there was a new wind blowing – you could tell from many little things’ (34). Herr Seldersen’s statement, ‘It’s a hell of time we’re living in’ (89) describes much about the milieu. The overarching presence of misery in the novel stages a low-spirited, gloomy and full of melancholy atmosphere.

At the age of 100, with his one copy of the first edition of *Life Goes On* in hand, Keilson told the *New York Times* that he would love to see his first novel reissued, and translated as well. He said, ‘Then you would have my whole biography’. After *Life Goes On* Keilson published only two more novels; he did not involve himself in much literary labour because, he asserted, ‘he’d lost his audience’. Though his third novel, *The Death of the Adversary*, sold well in America and was one of *Time*’s top 10 books of 1962 along with fiction by Faulkner, Roth, Nabokov, Borges and Katherine Anne Porter – Keilson had receded to literary oblivion until Ivo Jarosy decided to resurrect him by translating *The Death of the Adversary* in English. The literary translator Damion Searls chanced upon another of his novels, *Comedy in a Minor Key*, in the bargain bin of an Austrian bookstore and translated into English. The novelist Francine Prose, in the *New York Times Book Review*, declared both works masterpieces and their author a genius. She notes: ‘Rarely have such harrowing narratives been related with such wry, off-kilter humor, and in so quiet a whisper’. She goes on to suggest: ‘Read these books and join me in adding him to the list, which each of us must compose on our own, of the world’s very greatest writers.’

As Keilson said, ‘It’s not unusual for works of literature to be rediscovered decades after they were written. But the odd thing with my situation is that I am still alive while that’s happening.’

The novelist delivers the story with authenticity. The novel by all means secures a place in the must read list.

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