

# **The Tunnel over the Spree**

**From the Berlin literary life of the 1840s and 1850s**

**By Theodor Fontane**

**In Deutsche Rundschau, Heft 7**

**(German Review, Booklet 7)**

**April 1896**

## **The Tunnel, its members and its facilities**

The Tunnel, or with its more prosaic name the “Berliner Sonntagsverein” (Berlin Sunday Society), had been founded in 1827 by M.G. Saphir, who lived in Berlin at that time. In his eternal literary feuds, a personal bodyguard seemed urgently desirable, even necessary, which service, morally and almost physically, the Tunnel was to render him. At the same time, in his capacity as editor of the “Schnellpost” (Express Mail magazine), he was interested in a tribe of young, not famous employees who, because they were not famous, did not think about claims to a fee and were glad to see themselves feared under a feared flag. So it was only “future generations” that the Tunnel gathered every Sunday in a coffee shop permeated by tobacco smoke: students, educators, young merchants, who, assisted on the one hand by the royal court actor Lemm (a very excellent artist), and on the other by Louis Schneider, who had been beating the advertising drum from the beginning, were soon joined by actors, doctors and officers, young lieutenants, who at the time preferred to be dilettante poets, as well as musicians and painters now. By the time I joined, seventeen years after the founding of the Tunnel, the society had already changed its original character considerably, transforming itself from an association of poetic dilettantes into a real poetry society. Even now, despite this transformation, the “amateurs” still predominated, but they mostly belonged to that higher order, where playing with art either merges into real art or often serves it better through accommodating understanding than professional business does.

And so, around the year 1844 and for about fifteen years beyond, the Tunnel existed...

## **Hitzig, Baeyer, Kugler, etc.**

Franz Kugler's literary position in the Tunnel was, with all due respect, not outstanding, and a stiffness inherent in his whole being did not allow for a proper rapprochement even in personal intercourse with him. But all of this only applied to the entirely official or semi-official Kugler, in his family he was the loveliness itself and among my best hours spent in Berlin at that time were those in Kugler's house.

This house, which, if I am not mistaken, had belonged to the old Kammergerichtsrat (Chamber Court Counsellor) Hitzig, the friend of E.T.A. Hoffmann, was located at the south end of Friedrich Street, near Belle-Alliance Place and, small as it was, enclosed only three families. On the first floor lived two Misses Piaste, probably aunts from the old days, on the second floor General Baeyer, in the attic Franz Kugler, who in 1833 or 1834 had married the youngest daughter of Hitzig, a much courted and sung about beauty. More than one of Geibel's songs is addressed to her. Her beauty was matched by her kindness, and her kindness by her sense and taste, with which she knew how to transform spaces of extreme simplicity into something quite unique. Where the far projecting mansard windows already created small cozy corners, ivy-designed walls were erected, which, pushing at right angles into the middle of the room, divided the large room into three or four parts, which made an extremely cozy impression. While remaining in the context of the whole, one could always withdraw and whisper something in someone's ear. No one thought of social treason.

This is how it looked in the "Kugler's Salon", which I often have the opportunity to think back on when I am occasionally ridiculed because of my own more than simple living quarters. "What do you want?" I then asked. "You have to let me have this standard. You see, there was my fatherly friend Franz Kugler, who was a privy councilor and a great artist and possibly lived even more primitively than I do. And yet, I spent the most beautiful hours there, more beautiful than in many a castle. And now ever more so than in many a modern stucco hovel. Se leave me alone. It really depends on something else."

Yes, it depends on something else. What gives a house value is the life in it, the spirit that ennobles everything, makes it beautiful and transfigures it cheerfully. And this spirit was alive in the Kugler house. What is there that does not rise up before me, what abundance of faces! There was the old General Superintendent Ritschel, Protestant Bishop of Pomerania,

Privy Councilor von Quast the “Conservator”, Privy Councilor Hitzig (brother of Mrs. Kugler), Professor Strack the architect, Professor Drake, in addition young artists, poets and scholars: Storm, Otto Gildemeister, Jakob Burckhardt (Basel), Lucae, Roquette, Felix Dahn, Zöllner, William Lübke.

I will tell you about the evenings when Storm was a guest elsewhere; Lübke, then still quite young, appeared, introduced by Eggers and Zöllner, wearing paper father killers (high collars), which at that time were not yet elegantly factory-made, but were cut out of stiff paper individually. The unfortunate wearer suffered terribly, physically and morally, because not only the paper points stung him, but also the inferior supporting material had been recognized by the sharp eyes of the ladies. Once there was also a small party in Eichendorff’s honor, and Paul Heyse, then barely twenty-two, gave an impromptu toast in verse. He was so excited that I felt his trembling through the foot of the table between us. – That Eichendorff evening passed in the narrowest of circles. But even when there was a large company, the modest room had to suffice, for example when Kugler’s plays were presented on one or another birthday, or, on more formal festive occasions, Polterabend (party on the eve of a wedding) performances were staged. This was especially the case at Heyse’s wedding in the fall of 1874.

These were the parties, sometimes large, sometimes small, for which Clara’s salon provided the setting. But more beautiful than these parties were the hours that opened up nothing before one but an everyday life that was not an everyday life at all. From the then still little animated street hardly a sound penetrated up. A high umbrella lamp gave a subdued light, and around the table sat the ladies: Clara, the still beautiful mother, next to her the blossoming daughter (Heyse called her his “Borsdorf apple” – a famous variety of apple), and off to the side on a footstool, the house’s favorite, twelve-year-old Jeanette Baeyer (daughter of the General) with wise, big eyes and full black hair, the most delightful Backfisch (teenage girl) I ever saw, and fooled with Eggert, appearing once again in a new vest, Turkish pattern, who either because he was shivering, squatted on a wooden basket near the stove, or tumbled on the room’s carpet with a dexterity half reminiscent of a clown, and half of an acrobat. For he belonged to those who, graceful in their actions, could also dare the most daring. And then finally, when teatime arrived, Kugler himself appeared and sat down at the piano, above which hung a good copy of Murillo’s Saint Francis, and now at the call of colleagues, each of whom had his favourite piece,

the recitations changed rapidly, German and Danish, Venetian and Neapolitan songs sounded in colorful sequence through the rooms. Neither his playing nor his singing claimed to be something perfect; but it was precisely the informality that gave everything a special charm. He himself played to brush the file dust off his soul.

Once again, with gratitude and joy, I think back to those days that lasted into the summer of 1855. When I returned home four years later, after a long absence, the house had been deserted, Kugler was dead, and the beautiful Clara had moved to Munich, to the house of her son-in-law Heyse. There I saw her again, broken in happiness and in life. She survived those days only for a short while.

(Translated April 2022.)