
Kameradsomething?

The young Weldon Kees and the Nazi professor

James Reidel

When I came to Nebraska, I had to recognize a “Gentleman’s Agreement” about Germany and its alleged transgressions. [. . .] Once, the editor of the student newspaper, the *Daily Nebraskan*, who was a Jew, attacked me, labelling me as a “Nazi propagandist” in this publication.

Friedrich Schönemann¹

Several years ago, a professor of philosophy at Metropolitan Community College in Nebraska, Dr. Frank Edler, informed me that in 1936, the poet Weldon Kees saw two letters published in the *Daily Nebraskan*, the University of Nebraska’s newspaper. He was quite taken by this discovery, since there was no mention of these letters or their significance in my biography of Weldon Kees, *Vanished Act* (2003). Naturally, I felt chastened by this sin of omission. Dr. Edler, however, intended to fill the void if and when he found a publisher—as I vaguely recall.

His paper, at some point, would deal with Kees’s opposition to a visiting German professor from the University of Berlin, Dr. Friedrich Schönemann (1886–1956). Dr. Edler wanted to know if Kees spoke German. He referred to a passage in *Vanished Act* in which I mentioned that the young Kees had read Alfred Döblin’s *Berlin Alexanderplatz*. Since it was the English translation by Eugene Jolas, I couldn’t say yes or no, indeed, little more than what a Magic 8 Ball might say. And here I felt behind one.²

Naturally, graciously, I provided Dr. Edler with what assistance I could. But not enough to get a courtesy copy of his published article—or a link. He must have forgotten me in his enthusiasm, his planting his flag on what was a tempest in a teacup, really. So, recalling his ancient query in a recent interview that dealt with Kees in Lincoln in 1936 and when he worked on the Nebraska state guide for the Federal Writers Project, I decided to at last flesh out my own “void.”

It didn’t help that I had forgotten Dr. Edler’s name and academic affiliation.³ I had even forgotten the German professor’s name. But I did find that the *Daily Nebraskan* was now available through the *Nebraska Newspapers* site.⁴

With a better set of keywords, I found Kees's 1936 letters. But, more importantly, I found the context. Then, using the same keywords, I found Dr. Edler's article in an obscure, archived newsletter—one of those PDF-only kind—the *AFCON Sentinel*, AFCON standing for the Academic Freedom Coalition of Nebraska.⁵

While the Edler piece is rather specific given his immediate interest in Dr. Schönemann, I could see that this Keesian imbroglio, which took place ninety years ago and lasted for a week in September 1936, might fit in a do-over of *Vanished Act*—at the risk of getting long-winded, wordy, and pedantic in my contribution as follows.

That said, Kees in 1936 was youthful, serious, full of himself, and not as self-aware or careful as he was in his mature prose. His sardonic–satirical talent seems miscast in this “Spartacus” moment, but then Kees was more comfortable cultivating the individual Kees rather than the communal one.

Lastly, Kees was not infringing on academic freedom. He was stating his outrage, the irony that his university had given a loyal German and Nazi a platform at Nebraska. But such an outrage was in keeping in the United States, which to him was already a totalitarian state. To paraphrase Umberto Eco's “Ur-Fascism,” *one has only to look at its syllabus.*

Dr. Friedrich Schönemann was an *Amerikanist*, a specialist in American culture and literature who was the only German on the faculty of Harvard from 1913 and throughout the duration of World War I. His devolution in the 1930s into an outspoken apologist for the Hitler regime is, as they say, a story in itself and often repeated in other German academics. Nevertheless, Schönemann continued to maintain his American contacts. He was charming, gregarious, and spoke excellent English. For this reason, he invited to teach and lecture at the University of Nebraska in 1936 during the fall quarter.

In the September 21 issue of the *Daily Nebraskan*, a front-page interview appeared that quoted Dr. Schönemann about the new camaraderie among German professors and university students. To him it was a new phenomenon—and certainly a requisite for those German academics who retained their positions after Hitler became chancellor in 1933 due, in part, to German students who were the vanguard of the Nazi movement on German campuses. They were the radicals who could make life miserable for a professor unwilling to march in lockstep. Undoubtedly, Schönemann understood that his survival necessitated joining the Nazi party.

The interview must have annoyed or even amused him. After all, didn't reaction prove that superiority of the German *Volk*—and the published version? The student reporter had either or both misheard and misspelled the most

important term that the professor had likely slowly and carefully pronounced. (Then, to compound things, his name being rendered as *Shoenemann!*)

The most important change that the Nazi regime has wrought in German schools has been to make professor and student ‘kameradschaftlich’. [. . .] In plain English, German professors and students have developed a new understanding of each other, and friendly personal relationships are rising in German classrooms under Mr. Hitler’s reign.⁶

Unnoticed and uncorrected was the all-important word that should have been *kameradschaftlich*, that is, to be *comradely*, *companionable*, and the like. Unfortunately for Kees, he repeated the mistake—and repeated it over and over again for what he thought was a masterful rhetorical effect.

Kees should have known better. His grandfather spoke German and Kees heard plenty of German growing up. But World War I and the anti-German hysteria made speaking German a loyalty test after the United States went to war in 1917, when Kees was three years old. So, he grew up without knowing any German or having an ear for it.

The offending word stubbornly remained *kameradschaftlich*.

The following letters were written in late September 1936, a year after Kees had graduated from the University of Nebraska. He had, in the spring, returned to Lincoln from Los Angeles, having failed to find work in the motion picture industry. Nevertheless, he still enjoyed seeing his stories being published and the manuscript of his novel *Slow Parade* getting some serious attention from publishers in New York City. Money and the self-respect that came with it were short. The ongoing Great Depression forced him to seek work through the Federal Writers’ Project, a New Deal program for writers. For Kees, this meant gathering and editing content intended for the Nebraska state guide.

During the mid-1930s, Kees identified as a “Communist” and was active in the Nebraska Farmers-Labor Party, a left-leaning liberal movement that had aligned itself with the Democratic Party. Such an affiliation also meant being an antifascist and Dr. Schönemann’s presence on the Lincoln campus was considered divisive and controversial in Kees’s milieu. But the German professor also had a great deal of support from university faculty, including the formidable Louise Pound (whom H. L. Mencken said, Mencken, “put the study of American English on its legs”).

Kees published his first letter the next day, on September 22, and soon found himself at odds with another student, Boyd Innes, of Atwood, Kansas.

They Call It ‘Kameradschaftlich.’

TO THE EDITOR:

According to a story featured on yesterday's front page of your paper. Dr. Friedrich Schoenemann, visiting professor from fascist Germany, opines that "the most important change that the Nazi regime has wrought in German schools has been to make professor and student 'kameradschaftlich'." This is an interesting idea from Herr Schoenemann; but there have been some, at least, who have felt that the expulsion of hundreds upon hundreds of professors, liberals, Jews, democrats, men such as Einstein, to mention the best known is perhaps slightly more "important."

Of course it is pleasant that student and professor can be kameradschaftlich. They can be kameradschaftlich while great numbers suffer untold tortures in concentration camps, while the Jewish people are beaten and oppressed, while civil liberties have been completely put down. After all these things are of little importance, evidently, to Herr Schoenemann. As he has said, student and professor are kameradschaftlich, and who would complain about that?

Think of how pleasant it must be! The student comes into his professor's office, shouts out a "Heil Hitler!", hears a "Heil Hitler!" from his kamerad (professor), and then they are free to embrace each other, if they wish, in a true Rhein-Goebbels fascist endorsed fashion. They can sit down and talk about how their beloved leader has saved Germany from that horrid bolshevism; they can watch from their windows the sadistic brown shirts returning from a pogrom; they can slap each other on the back, forsaking academic dignity for the moment, and discuss the aesthetic value of beating labor organizers over the kidneys with rubber truncheons. Of an evening, professors and students may journey together in true kameradschaftlich fashion to indulge in a blood purge or a book burning. What fun they must have! American students must envy their kameradschaftlich. For at the book burning, kamerads together, they are able to toss on the blazing fire the works of Heine, Thomas Mann, Gorki, Dos Passos, Tolstoi, Wassermann, and Dreiser, while fascist bigwigs smile approvingly. On their way home, professor and student may arm in arm indulge in some good fascist Jew baiting, chauvinism, hatred of the Soviet Union, and a little old fashioned war hysteria. It's all in good fun, very pleasant in deed. They are kameradschaftlich.

At the University of Nebraska, where thought is squelched on occasion, and where such liberals as Stuart Chase and Norman Thomas are viewed as "dangerous" and denied a fair hearing, room is easily made for a minister of Nazi propaganda who whitewashes the cruelty, ignorance, and terrorism of the whole Hitler regime. We seem to be able to find room for fascists here. Furthermore, such action is accepted by professors and students without

question, or at least, without protest. When such a condition exists, it might be said that an American form of fascism is not far off.

WELDON KEES, '35.⁷

The next day, a journalism major and former high school quarterback, Boyd Innes (Class of '38), responded to Kees on September 24. Innes, older than Kees and a married man, put on a display of his vocabulary. But while he tried to correct Kees's German, he only got a little closer to the correct and elusive word—nor did he notice that the student newspaper was really at fault.

Innes surely was a reader of the *American Mercury* given his tongue-in-cheek style and likely touched a raw nerve. It surely reinforced in Kees that Menckenists and their Menckenisms were indicative of a refusal to think.

Mr. Kees Called It “Kameradsdraftlich.”

To the editor:

Mr. Weldon Kees found it his patriotic duty to inform the citizens of Nebraska about a flagitious situation. According to Mr. Kees, an otherwise conservative administration has allowed “a minister of nazi propaganda” to enter the walls of N.U. This heinous propagandist is none other than Dr. Friedrich Schoenemann, who has been engaging in pernicious activities behind a propaedeutical mask.

The fact that Mr. Kees' letter was merely a rechauffe of an old Arthur Brisbane editorial isn't important.⁸ Also, the fact that his vigorous powerful style was somewhat enfeebled by his constant repetition of the German word “kameradschaftlich,” which he misspelled “kameradsdraftlich,” isn't important. But the fact that Mr. Kees took advantage of an interview, which was evidently sought by the Daily Nebraskan, to belittle an innocent professor and an equally guiltless administration is important. It isn't entirely unreasonable to believe that Mr. Kees took his hairy-chested attitude in order to get a little personal publicity. If he did, and it is barely possible, it is lamentable. The little duck that squawks about the way his mother swims usually attracts attention.

One of the amazing things about Mr. Kees' letter is its utter modesty. He employs one hand in uncovering international intrigues, while he uses the other to point out defects in administrative policy. It is strange that all this esoteric knowledge, which Mr. Kees undoubtedly possesses, has been concealed from other eyes. However, one must admit that the stand taken by Weldon Kees is an admirable one. The fearless exposure of conditions as they really are was truly remarkable.

Naturally he knew that Dr. Schoenemann would be helpless before an attack of that nature. Of course, there are libel laws, but who would take advantage of them in dealing with a youngster.

And as for the administration, he also knew that they would just ignore him as usual. But you will have to hand it to him, it was a masterful expose. So lookout you international conspirators. Weldon “Bloodhound” Kees is on your trail.

BOYD INNES.⁹

Kees, course, couldn’t let Innes go without a response in the September 25 issue. But, Kees, a natural satirist took offense—a lot of offense because he had been duped by the mystery word and his writing compared to warmed-up leftovers worthy of the leading editorialist of the conservative Hearst chain during the 1930s. But he also needed to save face.

“Mr. Innes Misses the Point.”

TO THE EDITOR:

In an issue two days back I wrote a letter pointing out that Dr. Friedrich Schoenemann, visiting professor from fascist Germany at the University of Nebraska, painted a pretty picture of the Hitler regime. My source was a feature story in the Daily Nebraskan—an interview with Herr Schoenemann—in which the professor stated “. . . the most important change that the nazi regime has wrought in German schools has been to make professor and student ‘kameradschaftlich.’” The point of my letter, which seems to have escaped at least one person, was that liberalism has been crushed in Germany, that it is possible for fascist propaganda to be disseminated in this university, and finally that these things indicate the growth of a fascist consciousness in this country. In my letter I attempted to point out some of the developments that have arisen since Hitler took power: book burnings, suppression of civil rights, nationalistic hysteria, destruction of culture, terrorism against the Jewish race, violence and sadism.

And now one Boyd Innes seeks to make a personal issue out of a discussion of fascist trends by calling me a lot of names. I submit that this is no way to discuss any issue, if that was actually what Mr. Innes was attempting to do. Calling me a “bloodhound” may be good stuff for remarks in the back of high school annuals, but it doesn’t mitigate the fact that Mr. Innes was unable to disprove any of the points I made. Shedding tears for “an innocent professor . . . helpless before an attack of that nature” hardly takes into consideration that these columns are open to Herr Schoenemann to make any sort of a reply that he wishes, even as they are to Mr. Innes and myself. Pointing out my ignorance in misspelling a German word neglects mention of the fact that I copied the word as spelled from a quotation by Herr Schoenemann in the Daily Nebraskan, which I assumed to be correct. Comparing my point of view with that of Arthur Brisbane is so patently absurd that I hesitate to point out to Mr. Innes, who must be very naive

indeed, that Brisbane is employed by and writes for William Randolph Hearst, whose connections with Hitler are well known to prominent educators and progressives everywhere. Inferring that my letter was prompted by a desire for personal publicity scarcely needs reply: I could in turn accuse him of the same.

I am not concerned with gutter tactics, and if Mr. Innes wishes to keep a discussion of the rise of fascism above a purely personal level, I shall be more than glad to meet him more than half way. My letter was concerned with Herr Schoenemann and his case purely as an example; I have no interest in considering him as an individual phenomenon, and if Mr. Innes will re-read my letter he will see that I am concerned only with him as one who accepts a regime which has been condemned by decent people everywhere.

If Mr. Innes resents my statements in regard to fascism, as his vague and confused letter implies, I can only assume that he regards the menace of fascism as of little consequence. Men such as John Dewey, America's most important living philosopher; Charles A. Beard, the eminent historian; Robert Morss Lovett, one of America's foremost literary critics, are deeply concerned over the possibility of fascism in America and take an active part in the struggle against it. Are they perhaps "blood hounds," "youngsters," "little ducks," alarmists "uncovering international intrigue"?

Perhaps Mr. Innes will supply us with this information.

WELDON KEES.¹⁰

Having triggered Kees once, Innes was given space to do so again. But here Kees had drawn out Innes's real sympathies characteristic of the German-American Bund and such Germanophiles as Charles Lindbergh, Joseph P. Kennedy, the Prince of Wales, the Cliveden Set, and so on.

Mr. Innes Replies.

To the editor:

One observes that Mr. Kees in his second letter to the press has ceased his painful satire. He informs us that his altruistic motive in trying to put Dr. Schoenemann in an unpleasant questionable position was the preservation of democracy. He said in his letter that fascism had given earnest concern to such men as John Dewey, America's most important living philosopher; Charles A. Beard, the eminent historian; Weldon Kees, Nebraska '35; Robert Morss Lovett, one of America's foremost literary critics. Mr. Kees suggests that I might perhaps supply him with answers to his standard questions concerning the deplorable conditions, which, he assures us, exists in Germany.

Mr. Kees wishes to maintain the discussion upon a broad impersonal level. But meanwhile he unassumingly claims for

himself support of “decent people everywhere.” If I oppose him, I am risking my decency, it appears. However, it was not my intention to defend fascism. I was merely answering a grossly unfair attack by Mr. Kees. I agree that certain aspects of the nazi regime are indefensible. But along with these there are accomplishments that are commendable. Mr. Kees took all the worst features of a country that was in a state of revolution and presented them as a true picture of present-day Germany. His first letter was so hopelessly bigoted, dogmatic, and prejudiced that anyone out of his intellectual diapers would have resented it. He condemned the nazi party for what he himself was practicing; namely, in tolerance, fanatical adherence to narrow partisanship, and glaring misrepresentation.

The sources Mr. Kees depend upon in making up his “decent” mind are unknown to me. However, he admitted that the Daily Nebraskan, where he copied the interesting version of German spelling, was one of his authoritative sources. It is probable that his other sources of information concerning Germany are just as susceptible to conscious and unconscious corruption. Therefore it can be reasonably assumed that he has never read a Hitler speech in its original form nor in its entirety. Then Mr. Kees, who has been alarmed about fascism taking this country, may be comforted to learn that Hitler in a recent speech to the German public said: “National socialism is not a commodity for export.” Even if it were for export, it might be difficult to import to this country.

I wish to apologize to Mr. Kees for identifying him with Arthur Brisbane. I became rather confused by the similarly omniscient manner of exposition; and at one time Mr. Brisbane, too, wrote derogatory editorials about nazi Germany. That was before Hitler contracted for \$100,000 worth of American news to be supplied by International News Service. Not only “prominent educators and progressives everywhere” know that Hearst owns this news agency; it is even known by the canaille. Tho I am in an apologetic mood, I do not wish to apologize for “gutter tactics,” as Mr. Kees so graphically called them, in replying to his slanderous letter. Because it is truly an unconventional plumber who dresses up in his Sunday serge to work on a sewer.

BOYD INNES.¹¹

This is where it ended. There would be no *kameradsomething* between Kees and Innes, at least none documented. And Dr. Schönemann kept out of this painfully embarrassing dialogue about himself for the time being. Nevertheless, Kees vs. Innes must have confirmed what the professor already believed at Nebraska, that German university students were superior to their American

counterparts and that it might be an advantage should they face the Americans on the battlefield—the summer Olympics aside.

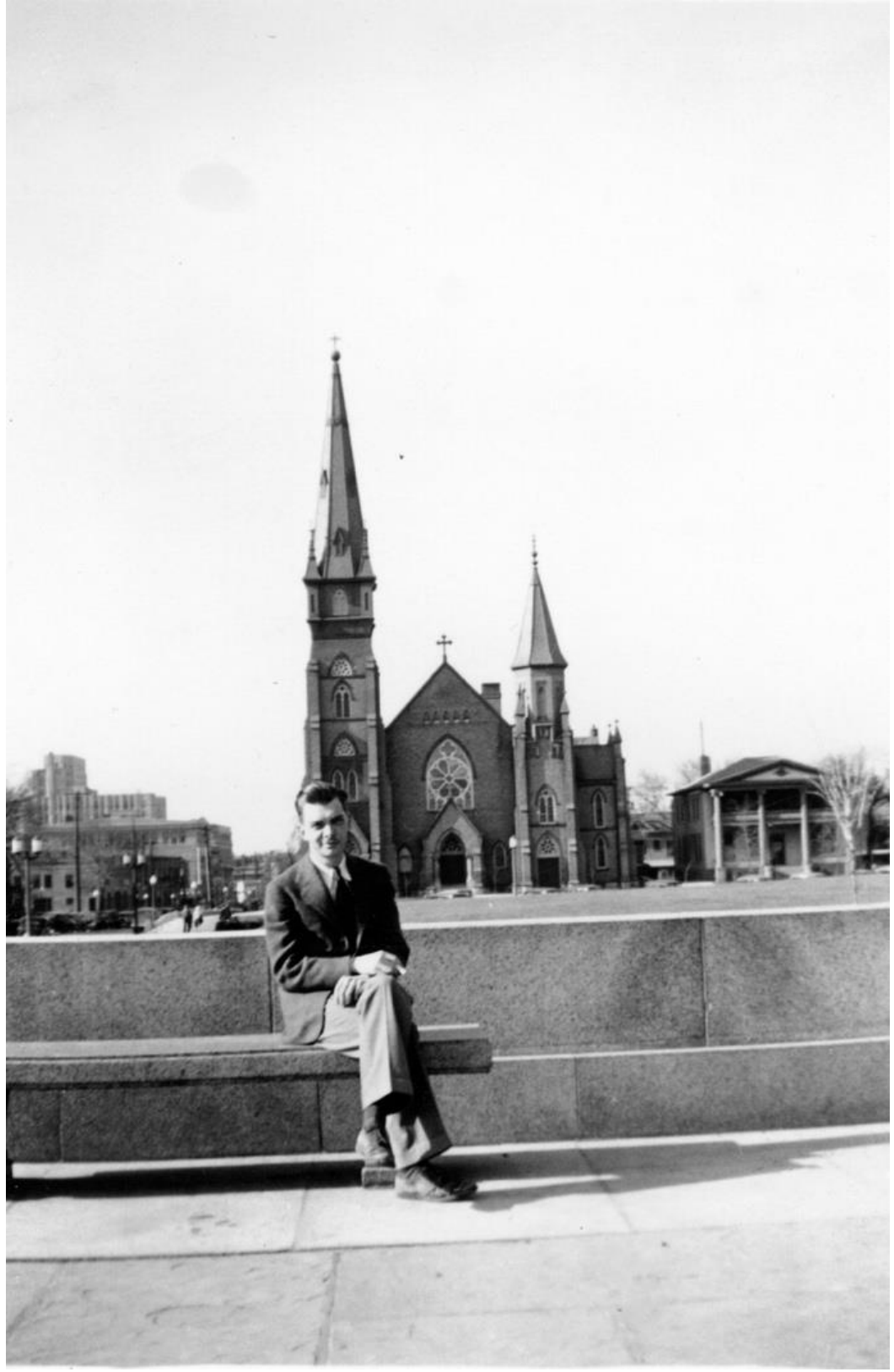
If there is something for us in the here and now, Kees and Innes foreshadow the debates and conflicts we still have over who is *fascist* and *antifascist*, who is a *Nazi* and how such a label is applied. But after 1936, Kees never raised his voice like this again, not without already having the last word, like he would in a poem. If he didn't read Ludwig Wittgenstein, Kees found out that "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent" quite on his own and in this brief incident in his life. He was surely "chastened" by what had devolved into a student debate that the student editors allowed to go on without running a correction.

If Kees suffered any personal disappointment, he made up for it by devoting more of himself to writing, to his work on the state guide, and kept to his political activism less exposed. Whatever he felt certainly surfaced in his satire of Midwestern college life, *Fall Quarter*, in which he savaged the inferior faculty, students, and banal campus life of the University of Nebraska—as he saw it.

As for Innes, he kept writing letters but set aside his journalistic aspirations to work for Kraft Cheese and sell life insurance in Oakland, California, during the postwar years, just across the Bay from Kees in San Francisco.

Dr. Schönemann? He returned to Germany in 1937 and made various statements to the German press about his time at Nebraska as relations between the United States and Germany soured. He made special mention of being insulted by the student newspaper there, by a "Jude," who accused him of being a Nazi propagandist.

The "Jew" the professor meant was Weldon Kees.¹²



Weldon Kees on the grounds of the Nebraska State Capitol, Lincoln, 1936 (Norris Getty)

¹ “Dr. Schönemann über Lehrfreiheit an der Nebraska Universität [Dr. Schoenemann on Academic Freedom at the University of Nebraska],” *Tägliche Omaha Tribune*, 6 June 1938, 2.

² The Jolas translation has since been superseded by the estimable Michael Hoffman—who loved my Kees biography, incidentally, but consigned my translation of Thomas Bernhard’s poems as well as myself to the Tower of Babel as opposed to the ivory kind. I digress.

³ You will notice that I prefer to use the umlaut in my spelling of *Schönemann*. While he tolerated the substitute of *oe*, he never discarded the diacritical mark as, say, Arnold Schoenberg did.

⁴ <https://nebnewspapers.unl.edu/>.

⁵ Frank Edler, “A Nazi Professor in Nebraska, Part III, Conclusion,” *AFCON Sentinel*, March 2016, 9–12.

⁶ “Nazi Regime Initiates Friendship in Schools Prof. Shoenemann [sic] Says,” *Daily Nebraskan*, 22 September 1936, 1, 2.

⁷ Weldon Kees, “They Call It ‘Kameradschaftlich’,” *Daily Nebraskan*, 23 September 1936, 2.

⁸ Arthur Brisbane (1864–1936), a friend and business partner of William Randolph Hearst, provided editorials to the Hearst chain.

⁹ Boyd Innes, “Mr. Kees Called It ‘Kameradschaftlich,’” *Daily Nebraskan*, 23 September 1936, 2.

¹⁰ Weldon Kees, “Mr. Innes Misses the Point,” *Daily Nebraskan*, 25 September 1936, 2.

¹¹ Boyd Innes, “Mr. Innes Replies,” *Daily Nebraskan*, 27 September 1936, 2.

¹² **Postscript.** In 2020, a cache of Kees’s papers turned up in an Ohio antique’s barn for auction. In that lot, was a poem that Kees translated from the German, possibly a student exercise done in the 1930s. The poem is by Rudolf Voigt (1899–1956), a German American poet who taught at the University of Wisconsin in Milwaukee.

Night in July

A star falls, and the grass fades darkly into pearl,
Music comes softly into the rooms.
The garden is redolent as a new bouquet,
Like the slow smile of a beautiful girl.

A ray of light falls from an open door,
As the roofs, at nightfall, blend together.
Suddenly you have a sense of the splendor
Of angels singing, and you find your eyes
Are closed, you head turned downward.

Humility transforms your face,
And thoughts of other summers, other lands,
Sweep over you, remember a full moon
That set the woods aflame.

And are there those who live in such a place, blessed,
Free to live as men in legends,
Their beings sparkling in a new twilight,
In a field of all the stars?