

## Democracy in Danger?

Perils of democracy were the topic of a reading on Sunday afternoon. Program Director **Michael Lahr** had done intensive research for three months and presented current threats to democracy in a compact talk. **The first finding:** Polls show a dwindling acceptance of our form of government, explainable by Wilhelm Heitmeyer's thesis of the "unlocked decade" (entsichertes Jahrzehnt): Since 2000 worries about the future, political apathy and the tendency to use violence have increased. **The second finding:** Economy more and more controls political decisions and thus undermines the competence of democratic institutions. **The third finding:** The promotion of education and culture is dwindling. In our economy-driven way of life it supposedly is enough "to generate useful machines rather than complete citizens." Lahr urged that we need more teaching of values: Only culturally educated, politically critical and socially empathetic people have the competence and the courage, to recognize radicalism and to intervene against it. "We at Elysium see the chance to change the world to the better by means of art." This was the key-word for **Gregorij von Leitis:** He read 20 short text passages dealing with the topic "Defending Democracy" from the last 110 years, from Erich Mühsam (1904) to Lasantha Wickrematunge (2009). The latter was the editor-in-chief of an opposition newspaper in Sri Lanka who had already received several death threats. The journalist continued with his criticism and in doing so referred to Martin Niemoeller: A proof for the strength of critical thinking across the boundaries of time and culture.

"Our Daughters, the Nazis", a novel by **Hermynia zur Mühlen**, published in 1934, too, ends with a tragic death. When the Nazis abused the "old Huber" in the streets of the city, Claudia cannot hold back her anger: Although she is a member of the Nazi's girls association, she tears off the swastika-sign from her blouse and berates the offenders. The first-person narrator, Claudia's mother, ends: "In the evening they brought me my dead child." Although only a novel, the audience responded with utter silence. But there was also heartfelt laughter in the baroque music hall of the monastery. While in prison in 1940 Alfred Nathan alias Peter Pan wrote his poem of about the cleanup of the zoo. "When looking at the lion every child sees that his curly mane is Jewish." What is left in a purely Aryan zoological garden are: donkeys, longhorns, skunks, and the wolves at the door – a witty stroke of genius.

**Tucholsky and Polgar** were analyzing reasons why citizens would grow weary with democracy. Already in 1929 and 1919 they pointed at incompetent ministers, who later were paid absurdly high pensions. The afternoon ended on a political note: protest is important for any democracy, says a newspaper article from 1986; but equally important are small steps, as Robert Kennedy observed: "Each of us can do their part to bring about change."