

## KNITTELFELD Town Without a History

On an early summer evening in 1985, in the Kom Tavern in Knittelfeld, the brothers Hugo and Herbert Pritz are playing cards with Armin Haas. Haas is a soldier at Zeitweg Military Airport. Haas refuses to pay his betting debt and leaves. Outside, Hugo Pritz stops the soldier and starts to beat him. Herbert kills the soldier with a stone.

The brothers want to get rid of the body. People arrive and the brothers hide behind a billboard. They peer out from behind it, are spotted and arrested.

Armin Haas wanted to spend 20 days celebrating his (upcoming) 20<sup>th</sup> birthday. He was stationed with the medical corps at the military airport. The murdered soldier's parents, both farmers, abstain from seeing their son one last time.

Hugo Pritz is sentenced to 25 years. In prison, he becomes addicted.

Subsequent "drug-related crimes" extend his total jail time. In 1989 he gets HIV and dies 1993 from a heroin overdose.

His brother Herbert Pritz got a life sentence. Today he assembles crane parts in the machine shop at Stein Penitentiary.

Just west of Knittelfeld lies the village Puch. In the spring of 1990, Thomas Antonell is at the Pritz's home, visiting his friend Dieter. Dieter Pritz is a brother of the convicts Hugo and Herbert. The two fire a revolver out the window, aiming at stones in a field.

The pupil Susanne Debot rides her bicycle past the Pritz's house, heading for the riding stable. A bullet hits her in the head.

Susanne Debot dies under her bicycle outside the Pritz's house. Two days later, the incident is re-enacted. 800 demonstrators gather outside the Pritz's house to demand the expatriation of the family. They are made fun of by the rest of the county.

During the trial, the public learns that Markus Pritz, another of Dieter's brothers, was sentenced to 5 years for bank robbery in 1982. A German weekly illustrated (then) assigns a Viennese journalist to do a picture spread. The family of the murdered child refuses to provide photographs of the girl. This prevents publication (of the report).

For a year, Dieter Pritz shares a cell with up to ten other convicts. In 1991, he requests solitary confinement. Magda Pritz has the ground-floor windows of her house walled up – to avoid further disaster.

In 1977, the Pritz family moves to a village outside Knittelfeld. That year, Upper Styria (Austria) is also hit by the worldwide crisis in the metal industry. Despite the crisis, Wilhelm Pritz finds work. As a short-term measure against debt, jobs are to be cut. The workers announce strikes.

As a long-term crisis measure, politicians attempt to launch an Austrian automobile industry. Engineers design the "Austroporsche". One of the assembly plants is to be built near Knittelfeld. The "Austroporsche" is never built.

In 1977, racing driver Niki Lauda becomes 2<sup>nd</sup>-time world champion. At the Austrian Grand Prix, however – only a few kilometers from Knittelfeld – Niki Lauda disappoints 100,000 spectators by finishing only third.

On 7 October 1977, Wilhelm Pritz and his wife Magda, are seated at the kitchen table with two of their sons: Herbert, 17, an apprentice machine fitter, and Thomas, 23, a federal police officer in Leoben.

As the four finish lunch, Wilhelm complains of pains in his chest, then stops breathing. While an ambulance is called, Herbert performs mouth-to-mouth resuscitation – but cannot revive his father.

12 years after the father's death, rumor has it that he did not die a natural death, but was poisoned by his wife Magda. The supposed evidence: the circumstance that Magda's next common-law husband dies – also of heart failure. Magda Pritz has him buried (in the family plot) next to her first husband.

The rumors finally end when the Pritz family have the two bodies exhumed and examined. Few neighbors are satisfied that the events are coincidences. Magda Pritz is still pestered (when she shops or takes walks). She considers emigrating (to Canada or Australia).

Hanna Pritz, one of Magda's daughters, becomes mother for the second time. Together with her common-law husband Horst Heim and their sons Martin and Franz, 3 and 6 years old, she moves into a quiet flat (in an old building) in the center of Knittelfeld. In February 1990, she and her companion fight and separate. Horst Heim moves out.

One month later, in a newly opened supermarket, Horst Heim quarrels with his former neighbor Stephan Lechner. Stephan claims Hanna Pritz is having a relationship with her brother Karl. Horst counters that Stephan is having an affair with his mother Petra. (The two fight.) Horst Heim cuts his former neighbor in the neck with a broken (champagne) bottle. Supermarket employees and customers subdue Horst Heim. He claims self-defense and demands that everyone confirm this.

A military doctor happens by and helps the injured man. (Later that evening,) Stephan Lechner is operated on at the military air base hospital. Horst Heim is sentenced to 4 years. In 1992, Horst Heim and other prisoners strike for TV sets in their cells.

(Around 1990,) within a few years, (the face of) Knittelfeld changes radically. Shopping centers and large retail outlets spring up on the outskirts (of town). In 1989, an assembly plant for electric motors is erected.

During the construction, tools disappear from the building workers' hut. To investigate, the site manager's 15-year-old son Robert Obermaier spends the night at the construction site. In the early morning, he catches the youngest of the Pritz brothers, Peter. The two fight. Peter Pritz stabs the youngster with a



screwdriver. Two hours later, workers find Robert Obermaier. When the ambulance arrives, he dies of his injuries.

After consulting the police, the murdered youngster's family offers a reward for information leading to the murderer's capture. The investigation leads nowhere. Peter Pritz and his girlfriend show up at the funeral. 4 months later, (construction is completed.) The plant starts production.

At this time, Peter Pritz makes hints (in a barbershop) about the stolen tools. They are found buried in a vegetable garden. Peter Pritz is sentenced to 20 years.

His wife remarries in 1994 and has two children with her second husband, in addition to the two by Peter Pritz.

A year later, in 1991, Peter's sister Hanna is celebrating Christmas with her brother Karl and her two sons Martin and Franz. Martin starts to cry. Hanna and Karl try to calm it – in vain. After two hours, Karl gets brutal: takes the child out of the crib, slams him against furniture, throws him against the ceiling.

At 11 p.m., Hanna and Karl go to sleep. Later that night, Karl goes into the bathroom. He discovers the child's battered condition. He and his sister bundle the child in blankets and tie him onto a small hand-cart. They pull the cart to the outskirts of town and toss it off a bridge into the Mur River.

During the following days and weeks, Martin's disappearance goes unnoticed. On 26 January 1992, the disappearance is reported anonymously. The police find the hand-cart several days later. The autopsy reveals that the child died by drowning.

Hanna is sentenced to 9 years. In 1996, she marries a childhood friend, who visited her (several times) in prison. Karl gets life. He is a member of the religious group Fiat Lux. An elderly woman (from Düsseldorf, Germany), with whom Karl corresponds, encourages him to join in 1995. Karl Pritz refuses visits from relatives, particularly from his children.