

Letter to Germany

by

Thomas Mann

I AM deeply grateful to you for your cordial birthday greetings as well as for the "Open Letter" to me, published by the German press and reprinted, in condensed form, in the American newspapers. This "Open Letter" expresses the wish, no, the compelling demand that I return to Germany to live there once more, to counsel, and to work. You are not alone in having sent out this call to me; the Russian controlled Berlin radio and the organ of the United Democratic Parties of Germany have made a similar appeal, as I have been informed, based on the exaggerated contention that I had "an historic mission to fulfill in Germany."

Now, of course it gives me joy that Germany wants me back again—not only my books, but myself as a person and a human being. And yet I feel somewhat disquieted, somewhat distressed by these appeals. There is something illogical about them, I might even say something unjust and ill-considered.

Can these last twelve years and their results be wiped off the slate and can one make believe they have never existed? It was hard enough, it was a deep shock, in 1933, to suffer the loss of my accustomed way of life, of house and home, of books, keepsakes and fortune, punctuated by contemptible disavowals and renunciations on the part of erstwhile friends and admirers at home. Never shall I forget the wrestling for words, the attempts to write, to answer, to explain myself, the "Letters into the Night," as René Schickele, one of the many departed friends, called these stifled monologues. It was hard enough to endure what followed—wandering from one country to another, worrying about passports, moving from hotel to hotel, while one's ears were ringing with the tales of horror and shame daily streaming from the lost, brutalized and estranged country. None of this did you have to bear and suffer, all those of you who swore allegiance to the "charismatic Fuehrer" (horrible, horrible, this intoxicated erudition!) and carried on "culture" under Goebbels.

At times I was roused to anger by the advantage you enjoyed, those of you who stayed on in Germany. I saw in them a denial of solidarity. If at that time the whole German intelligentsia, all those whose names were known in Germany and

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risen as one man against infamy and disgrace, if they had proclaimed a general strike, if they had left the country—that would have made a deep impression, at home and abroad, and much of what happened later could have been different. The individual, if by chance he was not a Jew, always found himself confronted by the question: “Why leave? All the others are stringing along. It can’t be so dangerous after all.”

I say: at times I was roused to anger. But I have never envied you who were over there, not even in your greatest days. I knew only too well that those great days were nothing but a bloody foam which would quickly dissolve.

Then slowly, very slowly, things became settled and ordered again. At first in France, later in Switzerland, I found once more the joys of domestic life; the consciousness of being uprooted gave way to a comparative calm, to a feeling of being settled and of belonging; I could pick up the threads of my long neglected work which had already seemed all but lost.

Then came the summons to the university in America, and all of a sudden, in this immense, free land, there was no longer any mention of “tact,” there was nothing but open, uninhibited, emphatic readiness to help, joyfully unreserved, under the motto: “Thank you, Mr. Hitler!” I have good reason to be grateful to this country and good reason to give it proof of my gratitude.

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Today I am an American citizen; and long before Germany’s dreadful defeat I had publicly and privately declared that I had no intention ever again to turn my back on America. My children have struck root in this country, I have two sons still serving in the United States Army, English-speaking grandchildren are growing up around me. I myself, too, am already anchored to this soil, bound by moral obligations here and there, to Washington, to the leading American universities which conferred honorary degrees upon me, and I am now attached to this magnificent shore whose breath is the future and whose climate is balm for the eve-

ning of my life. Here I have built my house. And here, in this house, thankful for each new, sunny day, for the world around me colorfully gleaming in the bright light, I would end my life's work—partaking of an atmosphere of power, reason, abundance and peace. To put it bluntly: I fail to see why I should not enjoy the blessings of my strange lot after having endured the full measure of its sorrows.

That all has turned out as it did is not due to my own will and actions. And how very much it is not due to me! It is due to the character and fate of the German people—a people, remarkable enough, tragically interesting enough to make one bear it and tolerate a great deal from it. But then one should also accept the consequences and not attempt to end it all with a trite “Come back, all is forgiven!”

Yes, I have become somewhat estranged from Germany through all these years. Germany, you will have to admit, is a disquieting country. I confess that I am afraid of the German wreckage—the human wreckage as well as the rubble of stone and iron. And I am afraid that it would always be difficult for one who watched the witches' Sabbath from without to communicate with all of you who participated in the mad whirl and who waited upon Sir Urian. How can I be insensible to the letters which come to me now from Germany, full of outpourings of long suppressed adherence and attachment! They are to me veritable adventures of the heart, they touch me profoundly. But my joy in these letters is somewhat impaired, not only by the thought that none of them would ever have been written had Hitler won, but also by a certain unawareness or callousness which sneaks from them, and even by the naïve assumption that interrupted friendships can be renewed immediately, as if these twelve years had not been at all. Sometimes it is books that come to me. Shall I confess that I did not care to see them and soon put them away? It may be superstition, but in my eyes, books that could be printed at all in Germany from 1933 to 1945 are less than worthless and had better not be touched. There is a smell of blood and shame about them; they should all be ground into pulp.

It was not allowed, it was impossible, to pursue “culture” in Germany, while all around one happened the things of which we know. It meant the extenuation of depravity, the adornment of crime. Among the torments we suffered was the spectacle of German art and German thought constantly lending themselves as shield and spearhead to the absolutely monstrous and

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horrible.

A conductor who, by Hitler's orders, played Beethoven in Zurich, Paris or Budapest made himself guilty of an obscene lie—under the pretext of being a musician and playing music and nothing more. But above all, this music itself was a lie also at home. How could Beethoven's "Fidelio" *not* be forbidden in the Germany of the twelve years? "Fidelio," this festival opera made for the day of Germany's self-liberation! It was a scandal that it was not forbidden and that excellent performances of it were given, that singers could be found to sing it, musicians to play it, a public to listen to it. What dullness, what callousness was needed to listen to "Fidelio" in Himmler's Germany without covering one's face with both hands and rushing out of the theatre!

Yes, many a letter now comes to me from the estranged, uncanny homeland, transmitted through American sergeants and lieutenants—not only from men of consequence, but also from young and simple people. Recently I received as a sort of trophy, from an American, an old copy of a German periodical: "Volk im Werden" ("People in the Making") March, 1937, Hanseatic Publishing Company, edited by a high ranking Nazi professor and *doctor honoris causa*. His name was not exactly Krieg (war), but Kriek, spelled with a "ck." It made distressing reading. I said to myself that it would not be easy to live among people who had been fed these drugs for twelve years. I said to myself that I would undoubtedly have many good and true friends over there, old and young; but also many lurking enemies—beaten enemies, to be sure, but those are the worst, the most poisonous. . . .

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