No Life Without You

Refugee Love Letters from the 1930s

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Seven: Of Books and Arts (2): Thomas Mann

Among the books that Vera's parents brought with them to England when they fled Germany in 1934 were leather-bound editions of Goethe, Schiller, Heine, and Shakespeare, the latter in English, and the multi-volume Meyer's Konversations Lexikon, *replete with beautifully colored chromolithographs, that had been a must-have among educated German families. These were the cultural baggage of many other educated German-Jewish escapees. It speaks to the values of these refugees that such artifacts were prized when so much else had to be abandoned.*

Over a decade younger than Mope, Vera grew up during the Weimar Republic, and was captivated by its literary and artistic freedom. In cultural terms, despite the hyperinflation, the literary and artistic flowering of the 1920s was an exciting time for an alert teenager, certainly more so than Mope's experience had been, who had gotten to that age toward the start of the war years. Beyond school, at home Vera's mother introduced her to writers in English and French whose works she expected her daughter to read and comprehend in their original languages. Reading such authors as Franz Kafka, Hermann Hesse, André Maurois, George Bernard Shaw, and Joseph Conrad, Vera absorbed much of the liberal spirit that these writers imparted.

An important manifestation of Vera's early discernment of the dangers of Nazism may be gauged from her personal reading choices. Before 1933, many Weimar-era writers and intellectuals took advantage of the relative freedom of the press to fill their pages with admonitory signals decrying the advance of totalitarianism across Europe. Soviet Bolshevism and Italian fascism were just two prime examples of an accelerating trend toward state-sponsored tyranny that these writers sought to keep at bay. In particular, Vera was enamored of the works of Thomas Mann, having read as a schoolgirl his early blockbuster novel, Buddenbrooks, *and immersing herself during her senior year at the Victoriaschule in the complexities of Der Zauberberg* (The Magic Mountain). *He was unquestionably her favorite author.*

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When Mann penned his prophetic novella, Mario und der Zauberer (Mario and the Magician)*, he was inspired by personal observation, during an annual family vacation to Forte dei Marmi on the Tyrrhenian coast of Italy in the mid to late 1920s, of the sinister changes wrought by Mussolini's fascism. It was published in 1929, the same year that Mann was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. In* Mario and the Magician*, without so much as a reference to the dictator himself, Mann delineates an Italy that has fallen under the corrupting spell that had been cast by Benito Mussolini and his militant band of flag-waving nationalists. The loosely disguised allegory at the heart of the novella presents a picture of a country that has been infected by the poison of fascism, and, although the immediate setting is in Torre di Venere (a fictive replication of Forte dei Marmi), readers quickly recognized that Mann had in mind the threat to Germany posed by Hitler no less than the state of affairs in Italy, where Mussolini had come to power in 1922. It is an extraordinary indictment of authoritarian rule and exposure of the effects of repression on individual and societal freedom.*

At the time, it was known that Thomas Mann, by then at the height of his fame, was not averse to—even encouraged–personal correspondence from his readers. Vera was deeply affected by Mario and the Magician*, at once recognizing the political topicality of Mann's latest fiction, but left wondering whether the novella was truly based on his own personal experience. If that was so, she felt, the message of the book would prove to be all the more disquieting. When she wrote to Mann in the spring of 1930 toward the end of her freshman year in medical school, she had little expectation that he would respond. In writing to such a venerated figure, she drafted her letter several times and carefully honed it before she mailed it. That Mann took it as far more than just a half-baked adulatory note from an infatuated devotee seeking his autograph is evident from his reply, dated Munich, 29 June 1930:*

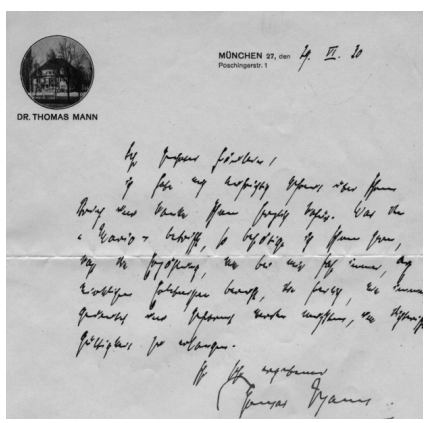

Fig. 33 Letter of Thomas Mann to VH, Munich, 29 June 1930.

Dear Miss Hirsch,

Your letter has given me real pleasure, and I thank you most warmly for it. As to the "Mario", I gladly confirm that the story–as nearly always with me–is based on real personal experiences ["*Erlebenissen*"], which of course as always only require to be formulated newly–thoughtfully—in one's mind in order to achieve poetical validity.

Yours Very Devotedly,

Thomas Mann

In his posthumously published correspondence, Mann goes into far more detail explaining the motivation for Mario and the Magician (*"I should prefer to see its significance in the realm of ethics rather than politics"*), *yet there is little doubt that many of his contemporary readers shared with Vera a tacit understanding that the pertinence of the novella was in its implicit exposure and criticism of the threat to personal liberties posed by dictatorial regimes.*

Three years later, Mann's own acute sensitivity to the risks attached to fascism, which he had so consistently opposed, led to his self-protective exile from Germany within days of Hitler's coming to power. Writing from the safety of Switzerland in May 1933, he was to share with Albert Einstein his grave fear that out of this "terrible fall into hatred, vengeance, lust for killing, and petit bourgeois mean spiritedness… I shall never believe that any good can come… for either Germany or the world."

The ascent of Hitler as Chancellor immediately muzzled any expression of dissent against the brutal dictatorship that he imposed. The era of free thinking and plurality of political views was over.

Fig. 34 Nazi burning of "un-German" books, Berlin, 10 May 1933 (U.S. Holocaust Museum at https://www.ushmm.org/lcmedia/photo/lc/image/31/31077.jpg).

On 10 May 1933, after barely three months in power, the Nazis ordered the public burning across Germany of books by such dissident or radical writers and thinkers as Ernest Hemingway, Sigmund Freud, H.G. Wells, and Franz Werfel. On the capital's main thoroughfare, the Unter den Linden, books by Jewish and other writers deemed "un-German" were set ablaze in sight of the previously liberal University of Berlin. For Vera, the knowledge of Thomas Mann's precipitous flight from Germany in early 1933 was to have some influence upon her own decision making as she grappled with what she herself would do with her own young life and promising career under the threat of the ascendant Nazi regime.