

■ BRIEF AUS WASHINGTON D.C.

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500.000 Dollar hat der amerikanische Verlag Random House 1996 für die Rechte an Viktor Klemperers Tagebüchern gezahlt, eine Summe, die noch nie zuvor für die Übersetzung eines Buches geboten worden war. Ende 1998 erschien der erste Band von »I will Bear Witness« auf dem Markt, der Klemperers Einträge von 1933 bis 1941 enthält. Seit kurzem ist auch der zweite Band mit den Notizen bis 1945 auf englisch erhältlich.

Im Juni dieses Jahres veranstaltete das Deutsche Historische Institut Washington D.C. aus Anlaß des Erscheinens der englischen Ausgabe von Victor Klemperers Tagebüchern einen Workshop. Brewster Chamberlin, Associate Director der International Programs Division im United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington D.C. und langjähriger Leiter des Museumsarchivs, stellte eine erste Bestandsaufnahme der amerikanischen Rezeption vor, die sich bislang weniger in rein akademischen Publikationen, als vielmehr weitgehend in Veröffentlichungen in der Tages- und Wochenpresse niedergeschlagen hat. Zeitungen und Zeitschriften wie *The New York Times*, *The New York Review of Books*, *The Nation*, *The Boston Globe*, *The New Republic* und andere stellen freilich die einflußreichsten Organe einer intellektuellen Öffentlichkeit dar, in welcher die Grenzen von akademischer und publizistischer Debatte fließend ineinander übergehen.

Es erscheint uns sehr lohnend, Brewster Chamberlins Ausführungen hier abzu-
drucken. Die amerikanischen Debatten über den Nationalsozialismus und den Holocaust haben in den letzten Jahren wichtige Initialzündungen für die Auseinandersetzung in Deutschland gegeben. Angesichts der breiten, aber sehr einhelligen Rezeption der Klemperer-Tagebücher hierzulande möchten wir – angefangen mit den USA – Reaktionen aus anderen Ländern vorstellen, die dem deutschen Blick anderes entgegensetzen. Damit die internationale Rezeption über den deutschen Sprachraum hinaus verfolgt werden kann, veröffentlichen wir Brewster Chamberlins wie auch die folgenden Beiträge in der englischen Originalfassung.

(Die Redaktion)

BREWSTER CHAMBERLIN

The American Reception of the Klemperer Diaries

Diaries which are too accurate are the end of freedom. Thus we should keep them only intermittently, so that the »empty« intervals become the fullest entries.

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--Elias Canetti [1964]
Nachträge aus Hampstead

A few words in the nature of a preface would be of some benefit. I have not read each and every piece published in the United States about the diaries. No doubt some day soon a book of essays on the reception of the diaries in America will be published and we will have a more definitive picture than we do at the moment. Here I will attempt a general, brief overview based on a selection of reviews in newspapers and longer considerations from journals and magazines with intellectual pretensions.

The first remark should be to note the fact that this massive compilation of diary entries, over 1000 pages in two volumes about a subject on which hundreds of books are in print in English, was reviewed so extensively in the mass media. This phenomenon is part of a curious mass syndrome of interest in the fate of the European Jews, a syndrome, which includes the incredible success of the US Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, which just welcomed its 14 millionth visitor. It is also in part a result of an intense publicity campaign by Random House over a period of two years. This is not surprising given the fact that the American publisher paid the until then unheard of price of a half million dollars for the English language rights to the diaries. More pertinent, however, is the human propensity for identification with what one reads. One commits an act of recognition in reading Klemperer's pages. It is old wisdom that it is far easier to identify with this old man and his wife in extraordinary circumstances, than it is to associate one's inner self with an academic treatise or a table of statistics. It also should be noted that it is far too early to make definitive statements about the reception of the diaries in this country, but one can offer a provisional evaluation and some tentative conclusions. This can best be done in the short time we have by scrolling down a list of subjects.

First, one of the most controversial of them: Klemperer's anti-Zionism. With a few exceptions, reviews in the newspapers stayed away from this topic. Perhaps because the reviewers were shocked at Klemperer's clear hostility to the notion of displacing Arabs in favor of Jewish settlers in Palestine; his comparison of the Zionist goal of returning Jews to the land and the National Socialist »Blut und Boden« (»blood and soil«) ideology. Indeed, his direct comparison of Zionism with Nazism

seems to have unsettled most reviewers, none of whom except Omer Bartov analyze the matter in any depth.¹

Second, the writing of the diary as an act of heroic resistance, as a protest against the Nazis, and degeneration of the German language. In this latter sense the diary is seen as an attempt to save the language of Goethe and Heine, the language of the spirit of the Enlightenment, from the barbarians of the blood. »Der Geist entscheidet, nicht das Blut.« One reviewer, Verlyn Klinkenborg, went so far as to describe Klemperer as »the most extraordinary German witness of Nazism that has yet come to light.«² She grounded this statement on the diarist's fundamental faith in the reason of the Enlightenment as a highly moral quality of mind and a European cultural tradition of great value, that very reason so viciously attacked by the Nazis and their cultural supporters.

Although well aware of the possibility he could be killed for keeping the diary, he notes: »I shall go on writing. That is my heroism. I shall bear witness, precise witness.« But it was not only his heroism, but also that of his wife and the two or three friends who helped him by hiding the diary pages and whom he endangered by naming them in it. With very few exceptions, writing the diary has been accepted as an act of extraordinary courage. The exceptions add that it was also an act of incredible egotism and self-centered indifference to the fate of those closest to him.

What could be viewed as unsparing honesty in revealing his own weaknesses and shortcomings, the revelation of the dark side of his personality was not remarked upon at all, with two important exceptions, namely Walter Laqueur³ and Istvan Deak.⁴ Laqueur, it is true, is also speaking of Klemperer's lengthy memoir of the period 1881–1918, *Curriculum Vitae*⁵, but he notes that the diaries also show the man in all his complexity, a point also made by Bartov in an attempt to strike a balanced appreciation of the man and his work. Deak's is the most negative voice surveyed for this presentation. He sharply criticizes Klemperer's »brutal honesty,« which he identifies as callous indifference to the fate of those who most helped him and Eva to survive. The very fact that he names them in the diaries made them as vulnerable to the slings and arrows of the Gestapo as he was should the pages be discovered. Klemperer himself was not unaware of the problem and in 1945 he mulled over this aspect of his work when he thought about publishing the diary.

A third topic universally commented upon is the unusual situation in which Klemperer found himself as a Jew with an Iron Cross from his World War One service, a convert to Protestantism, and married to a gentile. The latter is what saved him until February 1945 when the *deus ex machina* took over that responsibility. By this I mean that survival was mainly a matter of happenstance, of sheer luck, an issue noted by only one of the 20 or so reviews read for this article.⁶ It has become a commonly accepted trope these days that heroism or cowardice had little or nothing to do with most Jews' survival – luck played the largest determining role.

1 Omer Bartov, »The Last German«, in: *The New Republic* (December 28, 1998).

2 Verlyn Klinkenborg, »The Noble Idea of Rationalism in Nazi Dresden«, in: *The New York Times* (November 29, 1998).

3 Walter Laqueur, »Three Witnesses: The Legacy of Viktor Klemperer, Willy Cohn, and Richard Koch«, in: *The Journal of Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, 10/3 (Winter 1996).

4 Istvan Deak, »Cold Brave Heart«, in: *The New Republic* (April 17 & 24, 2000).

5 Victor Klemperer, *Curriculum Vitae: Erinnerungen 1881-1918*, Berlin 1996.

6 Robert Taylor, in: *The Boston Globe* (April 9, 2000).

What many find difficult to comprehend is Klemperer's rock bottom conviction that he was a German cultural nationalist first and foremost, what Peter Gay has called his »maddening patriotism.«⁷ For most of his life he did not consider himself a Jew. As he notes on several occasions in the diaries, the nazis made him a Jew. In his autobiography he wrote: »[We] Germans were better than the others, freer in thought, purer in feeling, more peaceful and just in action. We Germans were truly the chosen people.«⁸ This conviction made it difficult for Klemperer to immediately comprehend his own position in the Nazi state. Why did he wish to curtail the immigration of the Ostjuden into Germany? Because, as Laqueur points out in his essay, apart from a few intellectuals »they did not even want to be German.« They should have gone to Palestine where they could be as Jewish as they wished. Consequently, what a shock for him to be progressively forced to realize between 1933 and 1940 that he himself was made less and less a German and increasingly isolated as a Jew. The effect of this trauma as it is reflected in the diaries has not been thoroughly analyzed as yet in America. Laqueur goes into this problem in some detail, but his is less an analysis than a descriptive commentary. Gordon Craig, in his lengthy New York Review of Books article on the first volume of the American edition, gives an analysis of Klemperer's situation and discusses the centrality of the »Jewish question« to National Socialism and Klemperer's attitudes and opinions on the subject.⁹ Klemperer's belief that he was more a German than a Jew is, of course, intimately connected with his anti-Zionist stance. His diary entries show that his hatred of Zionism almost equalled his hatred of Nazism. Only under the extreme pressures of the war did he partially change when he noted that » ... if I have to be a nationalist I might as well be a Jewish nationalist.« But he never changed his mind about Zionism. And this, too, deserves more attention than it has received in America thus far. Bartov, in his consideration of the first volume, writes most cogently about Klemperer's position as a »true German« and a Jew in the Third Reich with the complimentary opposite view that the Nazis were the »un-Germans,« a complex tissue of emotions and thinking obsessively mentioned by Klemperer throughout the diaries. Bartov also shows the connection between Klemperer's almost blind cultural nationalism and his visceral hatred of Zionism.

A fourth point is the general reaction to certain aspects of his life as »bizarre,« »kafkaesque,« and »absurdist deformations«, as if the critics had never before thought about these things. Thus, they express astonishment at the fact that Jews were not allowed to use the telephone, to own pets, to sit on certain benches in the parks, to own motor vehicles, go to the cinema, to buy flowers, smoke tobacco, own typewriters or furs, subscribe to newspapers or be on the streets at certain times. The difference between the reactions of the general reviewers and the academics must be mentioned here, because the latter are less apt to express shock or surprise at these »deformations« since they were already aware of them.

Many reviewers also found the way in which Klemperer avoided the last transports to the East to be astonishing. The mass chaos resulting from the fire-bombing of Dresden on February 13, 1945, allowed him and his wife to walk away from the city after she removed the yellow star from his coat. The astonishment is under-

7 Peter Gay, »Inside the Third Reich«, in: The New York Times (November 22, 1998).

8 Victor Klemperer, *Curriculum Vitae*, Bd. I, S. 315.

9 Gordon Craig, The New York Review of Books (December 3, 1998).

standable because the circumstances appear today as having been invented by a particularly imaginative novelist such as Kurt Vonnegut.

Fifth point: With one exception, none of the critics in my survey questioned the matter of what »being an obsessive diarist from the age of 17« means or tells us about Klemperer's character. If nothing else, this obsession separates him from most other human beings. What does this mean? Only Laqueur briefly mulls this over when he notes that, whether this trait was an addiction (like drug or alcohol addictions) or a rare form of »vanitas vanitatum« or a sense of duty and responsibility, we must be grateful he persevered. One might say that he kept the diary under life-threatening circumstances because he could do nothing else to affirm the value of his life as an individual, and as a form of protest. But the universal praise for the enterprise is combined with some incomprehension at the obsessiveness of keeping the diary, which could have resulted in death if the Gestapo or some other police agency discovered it. However, there has been very little attempt to analyze or evaluate what this mental-emotional condition might mean in relation to the contents of the diaries themselves. Another related interesting question is: how many Germans did the Gestapo execute for keeping diaries? This is not to belittle the dangers attendant upon writing and keeping what would have been viewed as an act of »Widerstand« by the authorities, but the answer (»probably not very many if any at all«) does put the matter in a retrospective context.

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Sixth point: I found only one throwaway reference to the fact that gentile-Jew marriages were considered by Nazi ideology as *Rassenschande* which was to be severely punished, but exactly such marriages saved Jewish lives. The irony here is rather sharp and one would have thought it worth commenting on. After all, where NS ideological strictures forbade sexual relations between »Aryans« and Jews, the 1935 Nuremberg racial laws allowed already existing intermarriages to stand, a form of »legalized *Rassenschande*,« although pressure was exerted to obtain divorces.¹⁰

Seventh point: the role of Klemperer's wife, Eva. Many reviewers mention in some fashion the self-sacrificing quality of her part in the relationship. They also note that she was the one who carried out their public life when he could not because of his state of shocked lethargy at having to wear the yellow star (standing in lines for rationed items, etc.). It was she who carried his pages to the countryside for safe-keeping, a task that could have cost her life had she been discovered. Max Frankel comments on the lack of a rounded portrait of this woman who also suffered from migraines and other ailments and who gave up so much to serve the needs of her husband's life.¹¹ Robert Taylor in the *Boston Globe* complains that »Victor undoubtedly paid too little attention to Eva in the diaries,« but follows this with the comment that »the couple's return home together is one of the most touching scenes in modern German literature.« Contrarily, Istvan Deak points out that Eva appears on almost every page of the diaries and is thus a constant, if occasionally negative, presence. And Gordon Craig notes how close the couple remained and how Klemperer did what he could to make her life easier after 1933, even at the cost of almost bankrupting them, until the Nazi regime forced them into the *Judenhaus*.

10 See Nathan Stoltzfus, *Resistance of the Heart. Intermarriage and the Rosenstrasse Protest in Nazi Germany*, New York (Norton) 1996, xxviii and 72-74.

11 The New York Times (April 2, 2000).

Point eight: Gordon Craig and Omer Bartov particularly draw our attention to the matter of using Klemperer as ammunition in the debate about the spurious Goldhagen thesis, which stipulates that something profoundly evil existed in the German spirit that made Germans killers of Jews (at least until the spring of 1945, whereafter the evil somehow dissipated into the thin air of occupied Germany). The diarist portrays the Germans as quite ordinary people, weak and strong, pathetic, often courageous, many if not most of them ordinary anti-Semites, not »eliminationist« anti-Semites, and he gives countless examples (duly noted by many of the reviewers, especially Peter Gay in his totally laudatory review) of small kindnesses shown to the Jews in Dresden by ordinary Germans. The conclusion to be drawn here is apparently that if it happened there with ordinary people, it could happen anywhere, and is thus not a phenomenon unique to Germans in Germany.

Bartov presents a more balanced view of the diaries in this regard, noting that many reviewers have misrepresented Klemperer by emphasizing the examples of the »good Germans,« when in fact what Klemperer clearly shows is a progressive retreat by his friends and colleagues into an increasingly distant indifference to his and Eva's fate. While most Germans were not »eliminationist« anti-Semites, with few exceptions they did not really care what happened to their Jewish neighbors. This point was ignored or missed by most of the reviewers under consideration here, with the notable exception of Bartov. (It was also pointed out that the diaries show ordinary Germans suffering from severe terror under the nazis, a phenomenon which is also seen as refuting Goldhagen, although the logic here seems particularly weak.)

Point nine: With the exception of the novelist Silvia Tennenbaum¹², none of those surveyed speaks of the style of the entries and how, if at all, that style develops or changes over the years. This would seem to be especially important when considering a writer, a philologist, and an academic specializing in European literature (with an emphasis on 18th century French writers, though he could not speak French!). The reason for this lack of attention to the question is probably the fact that the reviewers are discussing an English language translation (which is universally praised when mentioned at all). The »lit-crit« – so to speak – will no doubt come as American academics study the German editions, and indeed this may already have begun in the relevant small circulation professional journals.

Point ten: German ignorance of the »final solution.« This discussion has been going on since the summer of 1945 and shows no signs of disappearing. The diaries are taken to refute the claims that few knew, or could have known, about the implementation of the »final solution«, and is thus welcomed by those reviewers who mention the matter. It is seen as a corrective to the claim of ignorance that most scholars cannot credit. How could the Germans, or most of them, not have known what was going on? If Klemperer in his increasing isolation knew so much about the death mills, how could those with access to a wider set of information sources not know? Few reputable scholars would go as far as one reviewer, who flatly stated that »everyone knew the mass murder was taking place.«¹³ Yet Klemperer himself notes (Januray 30, 1943): »The worst measures are concealed from the Aryans. Even people who are close to the Jews are not aware of the petty bullying or the brutal murders.«

12 The Nation (November 16, 1998).

13 Arthur Salm, San Diego Union-Tribune (April 2, 2000).

Point eleven: Klemperer's relationship to Communism and Nazism. This is a controversial topic and it is therefore surprising how little attention it has received. Robert Taylor in the *Boston Globe* briefly notes the startling fact of Klemperer joining the Communist Party upon his return to Dresden in the summer of 1945 and his subsequent participation in a political demonstration. Since Klemperer is unclear as to his own motivations one can only speculate about the matter. The identification of Communism as the exact opposite of Fascism is a political and philosophical platform that has been written about since the Italian Fascists took power in 1922. The notion of Communism as the leader of the anti-Fascist resistance has continued to hold the minds and imaginations of many intellectuals. Whether or not these notions are objectively true, they do help to explain why many such as Klemperer remained in the Soviet Zone and joined the party. It is also the case that Klemperer earlier thought that not much separated the Nazis from the Communists. Some have pointed out the »strange« fact that, after describing Communism and National Socialism as »both are materialistic and lead to slavery,« he became a CP member, but there is little attempt to explain the matter. In the end, he returned to his original opinion and in subsequent postwar diaries railed against the SED and the Soviet Union (as Deak points out in his essay).

The publication of the diaries has also been welcomed because the entries reflect the quotidian terror inflicted by a society against its own citizens, a condition that most Americans have difficulties in understanding. This level of evidence also meshes well with the concern of many scholars for comprehending historical events from the bottom up, in the belief that only on the level of the citizen can one fully appreciate socio-political developments »wie sie eigentlich gewesen waren.« The Klemperer diaries provide a great mass of such evidence for daily life in the Third Reich, obviously from a specific perspective, but nonetheless full of a wide variety of data. The devil is in the details, and these he gives in generous portions. Does he give a comprehensive picture of the fate of the Jews in Germany? No, but he gives a very specific perspective on what it was like for one Jew in one set of circumstances. This one must remember when the impulse to generalize from his example arises.

Of all those covered in my survey, in America only Deak, Craig, Gay, Bartov, and Laqueur have thought and written at length about the diaries with trained critical minds. In general, there is a positive consensus about their value and importance. There is a consensus that they make a valuable, indeed a unique, contribution toward a comprehension of a society gone mad, that the accumulation of facts and events over the twelve year period offers a plenitude of possibilities for new insights into the evil that was the Third Reich. There is general agreement that until the publication of the diaries such a wealth of detail on how at least one Jew survived in the heartland of Nazism had not been available.

Three citations will suffice to give you the flavor of the rest. Sheila Tennenbaum, novelist, in *The Nation*: »...the great diarist brings you directly into the mind and the belly of his society.« Gordon Craig, in a brief review of the second English language volume: »There is nothing quite like [the diaries] in the historic literature on the Nazi period.«¹⁴ Richard Bernstein in *The New York Times*: »... the Klemperer diaries stand as an unparalleled and intimate record from the innards of the beast.«¹⁵ (The use of the stomach metaphor here is striking. At some point someone should investigate why writers use terms referring to the locus of the digestive process to indicate the center of something they find abhorrent or evil: »the belly of the beast.«

Perhaps because the digestive process produces excrement, which is a powerfully negative biological product in most civilized societies.)

It should also be noted that Peter Gay calls the diaries »a masterpiece« and writes that »they make Klemperer into one of the greatest diarists – perhaps the greatest – in the German language«, a judgement with which not everyone would agree. The one major dissenting voice I found to be that of Istvan Deak, whose honesty in print equals Klemperer's in the diaries. Deak writes: »Some critics believe that Victor Klemperer was a hero and a great man. I cannot share such a view. He was courageous, to be sure; but he was also cynical, and selfish, and an opportunist. What makes his diaries valuable is his faltering, neurotic, non-ideological voice.« His answer to the question »do the Klemperer diaries help us to pierce the incomprehensibility of this demonic turn of events?« is the simple statement, »not really.« Interestingly, I found only one other reviewer who asked the question »do the diaries tell us anything we don't already know about the Holocaust?«¹⁶ As if we ought to be able to find such things in this very personal diary.

The great bulk of the published American responses to the diaries to date have been written by book reviewers for newspapers and weekly magazines. Therefore, for a deeper and more informed critique, we will have to wait until the scholars have digested them and put their thoughts about them down on paper in public forums. It is to be hoped that American scholars will also be able to undertake a form of »Quellenkritik« which has not been possible thus far. Only Bartov's critique represents a sustained attempt to place the diaries in the context of today's concerns with the presence of the past (defined here as the Shoah) and the perceived difference in the historiographical viewpoints of the killed and the killers, the victims and the perpetrators. The real measure of the reception is yet to come: not only studies by scholars, but also how the diaries influence the writing about the history of the period and how they influence the novelists of the future who also write about that horrific time. In addition, the thinking about the phenomenon of these incredible and often exasperating diaries will have to come to terms with Bartov's statement about the relationship between Klemperer and today's Germany: »This is what Klemperer comes to tell Germany today: that the Jews were also Germans, perhaps the best Germans, maybe the last Germans, for they were the ones who were not Nazis.«

Washington, D.C., August 2000

14 Los Angeles Times (April 2, 2000).

15 The New York Times (March 22, 2000).

16 Milton Goldin, »Reading Writing«, in: PS. The Intelligent Guide to Jewish Affairs, No. 118 (February 3, 1999).