

13 An Unwritten Letter from Victor Klemperer to Hannah Arendt and Gershom Scholem

Dresden
8 February 1960

Dear Frau Arendt and Herr Scholem,¹

As we have never met, you will both, doubtless, find this confrontational – yet also confessional and conciliatory – letter rather startling, perhaps even bizarre. However, I am writing it now and raising these painful and personal issues, because I feel that the end of my long life is fast approaching (I am sure that this time my feeling is justified and not one of my habitual bouts of hypochondria).² With little now to lose, I believe that the time for ruthlessly honest existential stock-taking (hopefully not just on my side) has arrived. I have chosen to address you Frau Arendt and Herr Scholem, because each in your own way have most articulately and influentially formulated positions – and lived your lives – in ways diametrically opposed to mine (or, so at least, it seems on the surface.) Our differences on questions of identity, on issues of German and Jewish self-definition, liberalism, communism, nationalism, assimilation and Zionism appear to be fundamental. This letter will hopefully induce you to reconsider my points of view for, frankly, you have not at all presented the postures with which I am associated with the fairness I think they deserve. Your versions have currently won out and in the face of my isolation in the DDR have virtually discredited mine. So I want to at least try to explicitly face the differences. Perhaps, now that we have all mellowed somewhat, confrontation will lead to some mutual comprehension. I am as you see, much less than yourselves, still a child of the Enlightenment and believe in the persuasive power of reason and reasonableness. Would it be too much to hope that this hoped-for exchange will yield a

¹ This essay gives me free, imaginative rein to write about figures whose work I have addressed elsewhere in more constrained, academic fashion. See my *Scholem, Arendt, Klemperer: Intimate Chronicles in Turbulent Times* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001). Nevertheless, the quotes and sources used here are real as are the attitudes I have attributed to these respective figures.

² Victor Klemperer died in Dresden on February 11, 1960.

Note: I have borrowed this idea from the novel and playful volume of such “unwritten” letters throughout the years, edited by Michael Brenner, “*Wenn Du geschrieben hättest, Josephus....*”. *Ungeschriebene Briefe der jüdischen Geschichte* (München: C. H. Beck, 2005).

glimmer of recognition that, despite and underneath our differences, we may share some hidden, but rather revealing commonalities?

Even though we are not personally acquainted, I have gained access to your as yet unpublished diaries, Herr Scholem, and see that already in 1915 you knew of me because you had (not disapprovingly) read my essay on Arthur Schnitzler.³ As for you, Frau Arendt, you *should* have heard of me. Indeed, I would have thought, it was your *duty*. For while, over the years, I have come to respect your *Origins of Totalitarianism*, that book makes absolutely no mention of my philological notebook, *LTI (Lingua Tertii Imperii: Language of the Third Reich)*. Without appearing unduly immodest, mine really is *the* pioneering study of the debasement of language under Nazi dictatorship: a concern close to your heart. Familiarity with the field and a brief bibliographic search – my book appeared already in 1947 and yours in 1951 – would have rendered this discovery extremely simple. Many people have remarked that your *Origins* was very much a product of the Cold War. Could it be that your omission of *LTI* reflected that mentality, rendering anything that emerged out of East Germany as tainted?

Now that I have got this resentment off my chest, I want to focus on some points of agreement that may surprise you. You will understand that, as someone who after 1945, albeit rather hesitantly and perhaps even opportunistically, threw in his lot with Communism and became a loyal citizen of the DDR (partly too because I found West Germany's soft attitude to Nazis quite intolerable), it was only gradually that I could bring myself to admit, always and only in the privacy of my diaries, that your equation of the Soviet and Nazi regimes was not so far off the mark. You are never likely to see these intimate diary entries, although, who knows, perhaps, one day when the world has changed in unpredictable ways, they may indeed be published – but I have the feeling that you would approve of my secret and half-reluctant move towards your position.

To be sure, prior to 1945 I was not a Marxist and, indeed, never really became one – to this day I find its reductive approach to literature both distasteful and often incomprehensible. It may amuse you to learn that I had not even heard of Karl Marx when I matriculated at the end of the nineteenth century! Unlike you, Frau Arendt, I never married a Marxist. If I may say, the imprint of your husband,

3 Scholem notes in a diary entry for 25 July 1915 that he had read Klemperer's piece, "Arthur Schnitzler" which appeared originally in *Ost und West*, VI, Jg.1906. Scholem apparently read this essay as it was reproduced in *Jahrbuch für Jüdische Geschichte* 14, 1911, pp. 139–208. (The essay also was reprinted in *Bühne und Welt*, 13, no.9, February 1911, pp. 355–368.) See Gershom Scholem, *Tagebücher 1913–1917 I. Halbband 1913–1917*, eds. Karlfried Gründer and Friedrich Niewöhner with Herbert Kopp-Oberstebrink (Frankfurt am Main: Jüdischer Verlag, 1995), p.134. See too p.194.

Herr Heinrich Blücher, emerges quite clearly in your analysis of Imperialism in the *Origins*. I know too, Herr Scholem, that you have never been a Marxist but, unlike you, I was not able to sharpen my ideological teeth from an early age by debating the merits and deficiencies of Marxist dialectics and philosophy of history with a Communist brother,⁴ nor was my best friend of that persuasion. Idiosyncratic though his Marxism may have been, Walter Benjamin clearly identified himself as such (I must say that I do not find your efforts to render him as essentially “Jewish” and “theological” at all convincing). At any rate, prior to the end of the World War II, my opposition to and ignorance of Marxism was complete. Looking back at my 1934 journal it seemed quite natural to condemn National Socialism precisely because it had “become completely or almost completely identical with Bolshevism”.⁵

You can therefore see why I surprised even myself with this new-found faith. How can I explain it? In the immediate post-World War II reality, it seemed to me that this was the choice of least evil. I was palpably suffering, in body and soul, from the trauma of National Socialism and it was the Communists alone who seemed to be pressing for a radical elimination of the Nazis. At any rate, this is how I saw my own metamorphosis on 3 February 1946: “The transformation in me! When Wollschlüger told me a short time ago that he wished there was a Soviet-Bundesstaat here, I was shattered. Now I want it myself. I no longer believe in the single German Patria. I believe that we can very well cultivate German culture as a Soviet State under Russian leadership.”⁶ And by June 1953 I could write, admittedly as much out of personal as ideological considerations: “*For me the Soviet panzer functions as a dove of peace. I will feel secure in my skin and position only as long as I am protected by Soviet power.*”⁷

For all that, I never really fully persuaded myself as to the correctness of my choice. Looking back, I see that already in 1949 I observed (in italics!) that Stalin’s “*primitive deification proceeds way beyond Hitlerism.*”⁸ Yet, for a long time I rationalized this by arguing that the capitalist West was even worse, even

4 See Scholem’s letters, written when he was sixteen years old, to his brother Werner (who was murdered by the Nazis in July 1940) in Gershom Scholem, *Briefe I: 1914–1947*, ed. Itta Shedletsky (Munich: C. H. Beck 1994). See Letters 2,3,4 and 5.

5 See Entry for 19 March, 1934 in *I Shall Bear Witness: The Diaries of Victor Klemperer 1933–1941*, ed. Martin Chalmers (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1998), p.58.

6 See Klemperer’s two volumes of diaries covering the post-war DDR period (1945–1949 and 1950–1959 respectively), *So sitze ich denn zwischen allen Stühlen*, edited by Walter Nowojwski with Christian Löser (Berlin: Aufbau Verlag), Volume I, p.187.

7 Ibid. Volume II. Entry for 22 June 1953, p.390. Emphasis in the original.

8 Ibid. Volume I. Entry for 6 November, 1949, p.699.

more repugnant to me. “We are still the better people”, I mused in 1952, “the truth and the future are with us [...] without being blind towards our own narrowness and errors.”⁹ Yet by 1957 I had reached a – still qualified – point of no return, one where I perceived a kind of symmetry of evil. I wrote then that there was “deception on both sides and everywhere. Everywhere it is a matter of power [...] At the moment is it most brutal with us, more Asiatic than in the Adenauer State. But there, there is an open return to Nazism – with us to Bolshevism. De profundissimus [sic].”¹⁰ All this came to a head in my 1958 trip to China when I confided the following to my diary: “It has become clear to me that communism is suited to bring primitive peoples out of the primordial slime and to return civilized peoples back to it. In the latter case it goes deceptively to work and operates not only in a dumbing fashion but also de-moralizes, in that it educates through hypocrisy. Through my China journey and through the violent acts here I have finally become an anti-communist.”¹¹

As if this were not enough, I need, alas, to make my confessional even more personal. For if I berated you, Frau Arendt, for ignoring my *LTI*, there is also much room for self-blame in this respect. Of course, I am still very proud of that work and am aware that, unlike my voluminous efforts in the field of Romance literature which, I bitterly note, will probably be forgotten and dismissed as rather mediocre, it alone may endow me with posthumous fame. Of course, *LTI* was based upon earlier diary observations which I made as a Jew who somehow survived the nightmare of the Third Reich. Those journals, I believe, would provide me a measure of posterity if one day they became known to the world. Still, both of you are probably and correctly asking yourselves why I was so sensitive to the debasement, distortions and manipulations of language under the Nazis and yet have not published a single word about similar Orwellian manipulations perpetrated under the communists (and not just in the DDR).

Let me say in my own defense that I was indeed fully aware of, and privately sensitive to, such barbarisms. I can tell you that already by June 1945, I had actually invented *LTI*'s successor, *LQI*! My journal entry reads thus: “I must gradually begin to systematically pay attention to the language of the *fourth Reich*. It seems to me it is less distinct from the *third* than Dresden Saxon is from the Leipziger version. Thus when Marshall Stalin is described as the greatest living man of his time, the most brilliant strategist. Or when Stalin in a speech from the beginning of the war, naturally quite correctly, spoke of ‘Hitler the

⁹ Ibid. Volume II. Entry for 10 February, 1952, p.245.

¹⁰ Ibid. Entry for July 10, 1957, p.636.

¹¹ Ibid. Entry for 24 October 1958, p.723.

cannibal'. In any case, I wish to [...] exactly study this sub-specie *LQI*.”¹² From then on, there are almost daily jottings of *LQI* examples, which I indeed regularly compared to Nazi language. Here is just one early notation: “This awful identity of LTI & LQI, the soviet and the Nazi, the new democratic and the Hitler song! This is pushed everywhere from morning to night, in every word, every sentence, every thought [...] the undisguised imperialism of the Russians!”¹³

But I do admit that, with the exception of my diary entries, I never did or could write *LQI* and, worse still, never drew the obvious critical conclusions about not being permitted to publish my findings. I remember only once – after noting a particularly offensive example of such language – commenting in my diary: “That belongs in my LQI and is not allowed to be said.”¹⁴ In other words I sought to suppress, dared not even admit to myself, the fact that one could not openly speak about something that was glaringly obvious. I was thus thoroughly shaken when I received an anonymous letter proclaiming that I was “‘a frustrated Nazi’ [...] in LTI I had attacked that with which I was now complicit.”¹⁵ Indeed another such note that I received even declared that I had betrayed my vocation “for the present government is the same as Hitler’s and I must write an LQI. LQI is actually written in this letter.”¹⁶ To my shame, I hastily smoothed over such accusations by arguing that while they may have been philologically correct, the differences in substance were significant (at the same time that, in other parts, of my diary I was explicitly drawing the Nazi-Soviet comparison!)

And yet, and yet... having lived under the yoke of two totalitarian regimes, as far as my own experience goes, the distinction certainly must hold. Under Nazism, I was nothing but a victim, a despised and hounded Jew; in the DDR – even if often and increasingly I felt isolated, irrelevant and disaffected – I received official professorial recognition, was appointed to the German Academy of Science and received numerous official prizes. Indeed, after the death of my beloved wife Eva in 1951 (I do not for one moment forget that my union with this brave and faithful woman saved my life as a “*Mischehe*” in the Third Reich), I have found renewed personal happiness through my betrothal to Hadwig Kirchner, even though (or perhaps because) she is 45 years my junior!

But I have strayed from my main concern, for on the existential scale of our disagreements the question of Marxism and totalitarianism seems to be relatively minor, certainly not as emotionally charged as our positions on “Jewish” and

¹² Ibid. Entry for 24 June 1945, p.26. Emphasis in the original.

¹³ Ibid. Entry for 8 November 1945, p.139.

¹⁴ Ibid. Entry for 16 April, 1950, p.24.

¹⁵ Ibid. Entry for 30 September 1950, p.91.

¹⁶ Ibid. Entry for 8 January, 1952, p.237.

“German” matters. So let me get straight to the heart of the matter. I have always railed against Jewish separatism, tribal habits and what I think of as ghetto narrowness, and it is this that, more than anything, you probably both find so distasteful in me. Judging by your writings, I must be a classic example of what you both contemptuously take to be Jewish self-denial, self-deception, even self-hatred. I could easily turn this accusation around, Herr Scholem, and argue that your fanatic dissociation from all things German, your repudiation of the culture that formed you and made you what you are at the deepest level, is equally a form of self-denial or self-hatred, indeed, a provocation. Usually, one encounters non-Jewish antipathy for things Jewish. In your case, you inverted the order and openly dissociated yourself from all things German – while still at school! Your mother, Betty, recalls that one day at the beginning of 1915, the director of the school, Dr. Meyer, summoned your father and told him that you demanded that Germans and Jews be separated in the school. “We Jews and Germans”, you declared, “do not go together.”¹⁷

Tell me, how can we divorce the Jewish insistence upon a separate essence, upon basic difference, from non-Jewish resentment of us? Did you not realize that attitudes like yours – “I am occupying myself always and at all times with Zion: in my work and my thoughts and my walks and, also, when I dream [...] All in all, I find myself in an advanced state of Zionization, a Zionization of the innermost kind. I measure everything by Zion”¹⁸ – simply fanned, rather than extinguished, the already burning fire? Certainly this is the way I responded to such declarations. Indeed, when the Nazi’s came to power, I noted in my diary what I had said even earlier,¹⁹ that with its separatist, nationalist mode of thinking, Zionism “justifies Hitler and prepared the way for him”,²⁰ and later went so far as to claim that Herzl’s “racial theory is the Nazi’s source, not the other way round.”²¹ I admit now that this may have been too extreme – I wrote the latter as the death machines were in their highest gears – but I still hold to the general idea which I noted in 1933, that anyone who immigrates to Palestine

¹⁷ See “Aufzeichnungen von Mutter” in the “Anhang” in Betty Scholem, Gershom Scholem, *Mutter und Sohn im Briefwechsel 1917–1946* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1989), p.531.

¹⁸ Letter 19 to Harry Heymann, 12 November 12 1916, *Briefe I*, op. cit., p.58.

¹⁹ See diary entry for 29 June 1923, *Leben sammeln, I*, op. cit., p.706, where Klemperer writes that the Zionists were no more broad-minded than the people of the swastika.

²⁰ See *Curriculum Vitae, II*, op. cit., pp. 480–481.

²¹ Entry for 10 December 1940, *Ich will Zeugnis ablegen*, II, op. cit., p.348. For more on Klemperer’s obsessive insistence – even at the height of Nazi anti-Jewish actions – on the Herzl-Hitler comparison, see my *Scholem, Arendt, Klemperer*, op. cit., especially pp.91ff.

“exchanges nationalism and narrowness for nationalism and narrowness.”²² In any case, were I a friend of yours, I could only address you by your German name “Gerhard”. The Hebrew “Gershom” would somehow get stuck in my throat and I note with some delight that Walter Benjamin always addressed you as Gerhard, the name you disinherited. You would probably retort that non-Jews would view your self-affirming attitudes with respect, while my own visceral negative reactions are prompted by a cowardly fear of Jewish conspicuousness and a compensatory need to placate the “goyim”.

All this, I know, will reinforce your notion of me as the very quintessence, the embodiment of your negative archetype (or should I say stereotype?) of the craven German Jew – deeply assimilationist; a twice over convert to Protestantism – once for opportunistic reasons, the other out of conviction; although I must add that after the Nazi nightmare, on 19 August 1945 to be exact, I officially abandoned the evangelical Church which, as I noted a few days before that, had “so shamelessly stabbed me”²³; ecstatically committed to – you would say, blinded by – German culture and *Deuschtum*; and radically – you, no doubt, would argue, obsessively – anti-Zionist. Even though both of you have gone your very separate ways, you would concur, especially in the light of the Nazi experience, that my stance was not just undignified, but quite deluded. The fact that I still clung to the conviction within the Third Reich that I had reached many years before – “I did not feel myself to be a Jew, not even a German Jew, but rather purely and simply a German”²⁴ – would be for you an example of how I inhabit a kind of cloud-cuckoo land, cut off from all perceptible reality. You would doubtless regard my 1933 comment to a former friend living in Jerusalem that “I am German forever” as ridiculous and my retort – that it was not me but the “Nazis [who] are un-German”²⁵ – as a grotesque and dangerous evasion of reality.

Obviously, Frau Arendt, my stance seems to go entirely against the grain of your principle “that one can resist only in terms of the identity that is under attack.”²⁶ You insist, in your biography of *Rahel Varnhagen* that “one does not escape Jewishness”, and your scathing 1943 judgment on Stefan Zweig, as an

²² Entry for 9 July 1933, *I Shall Bear Witness*, op. cit., p.22.

²³ See *So sitze ich*, Volume I, op.cit. Entry for 30 July 1945, pp. 59–60.

²⁴ See Klemperer’s memoirs of his Wilhelminian years, *Curriculum Vitae, Erinnerungen 1881–1918* (Berlin: Aufbau Verlag 1996), Vol. I, p.248

²⁵ Entry for 21 July 21, *I Shall Bear Witness*, op. cit., p.123.

²⁶ See “On Humanity in Dark Times: Thoughts about Lessing”, an address accepting the Lessing Prize of the Free City of Hamburg in 1959 and published in Arendt’s *Men in Dark Times* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1968), pp. 3–31. See for the quote p.18.

apolitical “bourgeois Jewish man of letters, who had never concerned himself with the affairs of his own people” could just as easily have been applied to me: “For honor never will be won by the cult of success or fame, by cultivation of one’s self, nor even by personal dignity. From the ‘disgrace’ of being Jewish there is but one escape – to fight for the honor of the Jewish people as a whole.”²⁷ To be sure, I never even remotely saw myself in this role.

Yet, even in the light of the subsequent tragic history and fate of German (and European) Jews, things are not as simple as you make out. I would agree with your friend Karl Jaspers’s judgment of your thought at this time as characterized by Zionist tendentiousness. In a personal letter to you, he rightly noted that you reduced the totality of Rahel’s complex life to this single Jewish component, and that your anti-Enlightenment animus blurred your understanding of the fact “that Rahel was a human being, liberated by the Enlightenment”. Indeed, I must admit that as I look back at my past, Jaspers’ conclusions about Rahel’s fate sadly and uncannily apply to my own life, lived as it always has been under the *aegis* of a belief in culture and liberal Enlightenment. But while Jaspers concedes that Rahel “traveled individual paths that didn’t work out for her and ended in blind alleys” [sic!], he adds significantly “but she also remained on the one true way, and that persists despite her failure.”²⁸

Perhaps, however, Frau Arendt, you will be more sympathetic to my cause, because over the years, quite unlike Herr Scholem, you have considerably tempered and moderated your position (even to the happy point, for me, of repudiating your earlier Zionist commitment). Indeed, you too married a non-Jew and even declared that giving up such an option would have been “inhuman and in a sense crazy”.²⁹ I do not claim that this would make you more sympathetic to the various political stands I have taken over the years, whether they be “totalitarian communist” or “German-nationalist”, but then your critique can hardly be said to occupy the high moral ground, can it? Your secret and continuing infatuation with, and inexplicable support of, your ex-lover, the later Nazi rector, Martin Heidegger has not gone unnoticed nor has it been forgiven.

²⁷ See “Portrait of a Period” (October 1943), review of Stefan Zweig’s *The World of Yesterday* in Hannah Arendt, *The Jew as Pariah: Jewish Identity and Politics in the Modern Age*, ed. Ron H. Feldman (New York, Grove Press, 1978), p.121.

²⁸ See Jaspers Letter (no.134) to Arendt, of 23 August 23 1952 in Hannah Arendt and Karl Jaspers, *Correspondence 1926–1969*, eds. Lotte Kohler and Hans Saner, transl. Robert and Rita Kimber (New York: San Diego, London: Harourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1992), pp. 192–196.

²⁹ Ibid. Letter No.4, Arendt to Jaspers, *Correspondence*, 29 January 1946, p.29. In this statement Arendt also declared that giving up interest in Jewish affairs would have been equally inhuman and crazy.

You, of course, Herr Scholem are a far more stubborn, indeed doctrinaire, case. Given the attitudes which you have formulated since your early adolescence, you probably regard my betrothal to a Protestant, and after that to a Catholic woman, as a distasteful mixture of opportunism and apostasy. Didn't you once call this the "blood-letting" of the Jewish elite and intelligentsia? Yet, are not my happy (in one case, literally life-saving) marriages the most profound refutation of your notion of the inevitably one-sided, submissive and delusional nature of what you call the "German-Jewish" dialogue?³⁰ On this, Frau Arendt would certainly agree with me – her marriage to Heinrich Blücher seems exceedingly successful. And her remarkably candid and very long-lasting friendship with Karl Jaspers is surely a powerful refutation of your youthful and misguided declaration that authentic German-Jewish friendships were impossible: "For the immanent distance between *Deutschtum* and *Judentum* is such and of such an essence, that perhaps here *everything* is possible, but only one thing not: a common life, in the serious sense. Only a miracle could bring it forth – a miracle that has not often happened, if ever – namely, a Jewish non-Jew."³¹ You wrote this in 1917 when asked whether or not Fritz Heinle, Walter Benjamin's close friend who had recently committed suicide, was a Jew and you, quite mistakenly, responded in the affirmative. The "miracle" of which you spoke must have occurred, for Heinle was indeed a non-Jew!³²

You state that "the talk one occasionally hears today of a fusion that would have made excellent progress had not the advent of Nazism come between the great majority of Jews and the 'citizens of a different faith' [...] is nothing but a retroactive wish fulfillment."³³ But I think your perspective is an ideologically driven, distorted reading of the full historical record. It may be that from the viewpoint of 1933 (or, even worse, 1942) your insistence on the delusional nature of the German-Jewish dialogue takes on a modicum of generalized historical validity. But it does so only on the basis of a highly selective and deceiving hindsight, one which conveniently blanks out and erases the fact that prior to that there were so *many* successful German Jewish and non-Jewish intermarriages, friendships and collaborative projects. There may have been many tensions and ambiguities, but that is only part of a much more complicated, richly textured story. Viewed in this light, your claim seems to be remarkably thin!

30 Scholem's famous thesis is given in most detailed elaboration in his "Jews and Germans" reprinted in Gershom Scholem, *On Jews and Judaism in Crisis: Selected Essays*, ed. Werner J. Dannhauser (New York: Schocken Books, 1976). On "blood-letting", see p.83.

31 See Scholem, letter (No.49) to Werner Kraft, 28 December 1917, in *Briefe I*, op. cit., p.135.

32 Ibid. on Heinle not being a Jew see note 9, p.373.

33 "Jews and Germans", op. cit., p.81.

It is true that, rather exceptionally, you always rejected the genuineness of the German Jewish and non-Jewish encounter, but that rejection had nothing at all to do with foreseeing the Nazi attack upon the Jews. Yours was less a political prophecy of German behavior than a moral indictment of Jewish cravenness and what you regarded as the undignified comportment of the Jews. Perhaps, like Kafka, this critique and your anger stemmed from an oedipally unresolved conflict with your bourgeois father. Already in 1916 you wrote: “What I have now [...] come to see with irrevocable clarity, truth and distinctness, is that I do not fit in with these people here, the German Jews [...] without exception a heaven-wide abyss separates me from these people [...] they know nothing of greatness, have seen nothing of the un-bourgeois nature of things (Unbürgerlichkeit der Sache).”³⁴

I will grant you that you always believed that German Jewry had lived “a lie”. You claimed that eventually that lie had to resolve itself one way or another (a fascinating yet highly contestable position). But as you yourself have emphasized, in no way did in any of this necessarily have to lead to extermination. As you put it, “*none of us thought that*”.³⁵ And while we are on this, you too, Frau Arendt, have admitted that your critique of assimilation, as it appeared in your *Rahel* book, could lead to serious misunderstandings and “was as politically naïve as what it was criticizing.” “I am afraid”, you went on to say, “that people of goodwill will see a connection which does not in fact exist between these things [assimilation] and the eradication of the Jews. All this was capable of fostering social hatred of the Jews and did foster it, just as it fostered, on the other side, a specifically German breed of Zionism. The truly totalitarian phenomenon – and genuine political anti-Semitism before it – had hardly anything to do with all this. And precisely this is what I did not know when I wrote this book.”³⁶

We are agreed, then, that the extermination of the Jews (*Judenmord*) was never an inevitability, nor was it “caused” by Jewish defections from their own heritage. To argue this way would surely constitute an obscenity. Our differences, therefore, do not consist of your greater perceptive realism as opposed to my naiveté and self-deluding assimilatory behavior and desires. Even if to my everlasting shame I opportunistically took the Nazi loyalty oath in 1933, I was not blinded to reality. On the contrary, already in the

³⁴ *Tagebücher*, op. cit. Entry for 23 July 1916, p.339.

³⁵ Scholem Letter 137 of 31 August 1968 to Karl Löwith in *Briefe II, 1948–1970*, ed. Thomas Sparr (München: C. H. Beck, 1995), pp. 213–214. The quote appears on p.214.

³⁶ See Letter 135, 7 September 1952, *Correspondence*, pp. 196–201 (esp. pp. 197–198).

Weimar Republic, I was acutely aware of the growing xenophobia and anti-Semitic currents. There is surely nothing complacent about my diary entry in December 1930: “No one knows what will happen but everyone feels the coming of a catastrophe.”³⁷

It may be true that your Zionist narrative rendered you endemically sensitive to non-Jewish hostility (perhaps even happy when you found it) and thus provided you with a kind of intellectual and psychological shock-absorber which I lacked. I was aware right at the beginning of Nazi rule that my attachment to Germany and *Deutschtum*, rendered me especially vulnerable³⁸ and that a “positive” Jewish identity would have given me at least a modicum of spiritual self-immunization in the face of external attack. For all that, I had to face this reality in ways that neither of you could imagine. After all, Herr Scholem, you left Germany already in 1923, and as you readily admitted to Walter Benjamin about the persecution of Austrian Jews after the *Anschluss*, such events took on a more or less “abstract character”: “it’s just too far away and nobody has any real notion of what it might be like”.³⁹ And although you, Frau Arendt had a brush with these brutal authorities, you left the country in 1933, before the real nightmare began. So if anyone of us three can lay claim to immediate and direct experience of this nightmare, it is me.

Our real differences therefore remain moral-philosophical and existential and it is to these that I now want to turn (I have not forgotten the confessional and conciliatory aspects of this letter to which I will return at the end.) It all comes down to this – all my life I have been a liberal, an adherent of the Enlightenment and its humanizing values, a believer in the value of culture and its integrative (not divisive) powers. To be sure, the Nazi experience has helped me to clarify and purify the real nature of this commitment. I realize now that before that, I too often and too easily conflated *Deutschtum* with lofty ideals of humanity and culture and did not see it for what it often was: a conventional and chauvinist form of nationalism. Thus, before 1933, I really believed in “national character” and group essences. Indeed, I was a practitioner of “Völkerpsychologie” – in which inevitably the Germans emerged as the ideal

³⁷ See the entry for 7 December 1930, in his *Leben sammeln, nicht fragen wozu und warum*, vol.1, *Tagebuecher 1925–1932*, eds. Walter Nowojiski and Christian Loeser (Berlin: Aufbau-Verlag, 1996), p.672.

³⁸ Entry for 30 June 1933, *I Shall Bear Witness*, op. cit., 21.

³⁹ See Scholem’s letter, no.106, to Benjamin, 25 March 25 1938 in *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem 1932–1940*, edited by Gershom Scholem, transl. Gary Smith and Andre Lefevere. Introduction by Anson Rabinbach (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992), pp. 214–215.

standard.⁴⁰ (I outgrew this, Herr Scholem, while you determinedly hold to this essentialist attitude; to your credit, Frau Arendt, you have always turned your back on such postures.)

When I volunteered for the front in 1915, my attitudes to the war and Germany's enemies were as xenophobic as all the others. I really believed that the "Hate Song against England" by Ernst Lissauer (another "assimilated" Jew) was truly felt and authentic and that "we Germans were better than the others, freer in thought, quieter and more just in commerce [...] the really chosen people".⁴¹ I know, Herr Scholem, that you refused to serve in the Germany army during the Great War, but before you get on your high moral horse, let us remember that you did so for determinedly nationalist and selfish reasons and not on universal, humanitarian grounds. This is how you put it in 1915: "We want to draw a dividing line between Europe and the Jews, 'My thoughts are not your thoughts and my ways not your ways.' We have not sufficient people to throw them voluntarily to the wrath of Moloch. No, we need people who are close to their own people [...] For we want to be drunk and intoxicated with our own Volk."⁴²

It was only in the dark years of the Third Reich that I developed a far more critical view of Germany and a related, more sober, unequivocal commitment to the Enlightenment. By June 1942, in deep despair, I could no longer defend the notion that Nazism was indeed an un-German matter. "It is", I wrote, "an indigenous German growth, a carcinoma of *German* flesh."⁴³ (I know, Frau Arendt, that throughout the years you resisted such a *Sonderweg* view. Did you not – somewhat exaggeratedly – proclaim that the German tradition, "Luther or Kant or Hegel or Nietzsche [...] have not the least responsibility for what is happening in the extermination camps"?⁴⁴ But let us leave this aside – this takes us in a direction I do not want to pursue here.) Indeed, it may surprise

⁴⁰ See, for instance, Klemperer's *Romanische Sonderart. Geistgeschichtliche Studien* (Munich, 1926). On this tendency, see note 88, p.126 of my *Scholem, Arendt, Klemperer*, op. cit.

⁴¹ See *Curriculum Vitae* I, op. cit., pp. 280–281 and p.315 respectively.

⁴² This "Lay Sermon" (Laienpredigt) was first written for Scholem's own youth movement journal *Die Blau-Weisse Brille* (September-October 1915) and is reproduced in *Tagebücher* I, op. cit., pp. 297–298.

⁴³ *Ich will Zeugnis ablegen II*, op. cit. Entry for 23 June 1942, pp.140–141. Given Klemperer's sensitivity to political language and the use of biological metaphors by the Nazis, one wonders if he was using these analogies ironically or whether he too had unintentionally internalized the bad linguistic habits he sought to expose.

⁴⁴ See "Approaches to the German Problem" in Hannah Arendt, *Essays in Understanding, 1930–1954*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1994), p.111. The essay first appeared in *Partisan Review* 13.1 (Winter 1945).

you both to hear that I wrote already in 1938 that I “could never again feel myself uninhibitedly to be a German”.⁴⁵ I even formulated (albeit very unhappily and reluctantly) a “Scholemian” analysis of my own situation: “How unbelievably I have deceived myself my whole life long, when I imagined myself to belong to Germany, and how completely homeless I am.”⁴⁶ The analysis may have been similar, but I could never adopt the obvious Scholemian solution to this dilemma and plunge wholeheartedly into Jewish commitment. Even when I was imprisoned in the *Judenhaus*, this remained for me always a half-hearted option. Still, there were moments, when I echoed your logic, Frau Arendt, that under conditions of persecution one responded in terms of the identity under attack. In April 1941, I wrote: “Once I would have said: I do not judge as Jew [...] Now: Yes, I judge as a Jew, because as such I am particularly affected by the Jewish business in Hitlerism, and because it is central to the whole structure, to the whole character of National Socialism and is uncharacteristic of everything else.”⁴⁷

All this went together, of course, with a revision of my previous nationalism and a corresponding, less rationalized, reaffirmation of the *Aufklärung*. I noted in my 1937 diary that “I myself have had too much nationalism in me and am now punished for it”⁴⁸ and soon after declared: “I am definitively changed [...] my nationalism and patriotism are gone forever. Every national circumscription appears barbarous to me. My thinking is now completely a Voltairean cosmopolitanism [...] Voltaire and Montesquieu are more than ever my essential guides.”⁴⁹ I will admit that I prefaced these words with the apparently contradictory declaration that “No one can take my Germanness from me.” This may seem paradoxical. But – even though you may consider this both naïve and misguided – you must understand that for me *Deutschtum* was never really an empirical matter, a function of how actual Germans behaved (or did not behave), but rather a kind of open, spiritual and regulative ideal, a standard of thought and action. It stood as an ideal; you can call it an idealization, if you will; of culture, *Bildung* and humanity, an essentially liberal, individualist, Enlightenment view of the world.

Surely, my ongoing attachment to these values is not vitiated or nullified by the fact that brutal powers sought to destroy them. Abandoning them, adopting another morality, would have meant capitulation to the power and categories of

⁴⁵ *Ich will Zeugnis ablegen I*, op. cit. Entry for 23 February 1938, p.240.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* Entry for 5 April 1938, p.242.

⁴⁷ *I Shall Bear Witness*, op. cit. Entry for 16 April 1941, p.365.

⁴⁸ Entry for 19 July 1937, *I Shall Bear Witness I*, op. cit., p.221.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* Entry for 9 October 9, 1938, pp. 260–261.

the immoral persecutor. It is not the drive to assimilate that constitutes the immorality, but the illiberal refusal to accommodate it. “The solution of the Jewish question”, I wrote in 1939, “can only be found in deliverance from those who have invented it.”⁵⁰ I know that this overly spiritualized conception of *Deutschtum* will strike you as strange and obstinate, and my ongoing reluctance to grant Jewish life and culture a dignified authenticity and autonomy as both misguided and deeply distasteful. But surely you are able to grant some respect and consideration to my refusal to capitulate to political brutality and to my struggle to maintain the values of culture and humanity when all around me these were being abandoned?

This letter has become too long and I am growing tired. The time for ultimate confession and conciliation has arrived. I was born in 1881. Perhaps our differences are explicable in terms of this generational divide – I am 17 years older than you, Herr Scholem, and 25 years older than you, Frau Arendt. My life has traversed all the major events and crises of modern Germany from the Bismarckian Reich through World War I, the Weimar Republic, the Nazi trauma and the division of the nation into capitalist and communist blocs. I have tried in one way or another to grapple with, respond to and survive these turbulent times. I must admit now that, my public protestations apart, throughout I have always felt a certain ambivalence, regarded myself as half-outsider, never wholly at home in any of the worlds I inhabited. “Between the stools”, I wrote to myself in 1949, “always between the stools – that should have been my *Ex libris*!”⁵¹

I am now prepared to concede that, on both the personal and political levels, my life-long attempts to obliterate differences seem somehow doomed. Despite my happiness in my present marriage, when I relate to my young wife Hadwig and her Catholic parents, I feel “myself in the minority [...] I feel my foreignness, strangeness: a half-century, a faith, a totally different past.”⁵² How can an old man admit to himself and others that many of his cherished beliefs have become eroded and rather threadbare, even, self-deceiving? I will let you have a glimpse of a revealing diary entry I made five years ago, where I expressed “deep grief over my blindness. I have gone *thus* through life & now I am at its end. I was alone then – Jewish, indeterminately liberal & in a society that did not respect me; now I am in a society that does not trust me.”⁵³ How delighted you both will be, I am sure, to know of my 1957 declaration that I was never in a “fully legitimate

⁵⁰ Ibid. Entry for 10 January 1939, p.279.

⁵¹ Klemperer’s DDR diaries are thus correctly entitled *So sitze ich denn zwischen allen Stühlen*, op. cit. See Vol. I, Entry for 10 April 1949, p.637.

⁵² Ibid. Vol. II. Entry for 12 April 1955, p.478.

⁵³ Ibid. Entry for 23 August 1955, p.504.

place” and that, one way or another, my life has proceeded “from Jewish star to Jewish star”.⁵⁴

These admissions alone should tempt you both to recognize not just the differences but also what binds us, what we have in common. I am not referring to such accidental personal circumstances as the fact that we have all been married twice or that none of us have had children. In your case, Frau Arendt, this might be particularly noteworthy, given that you have rendered “natality” – the condition of birth and new beginnings – as the crucial feature of your post-Heideggerian thought. Nor do I want to dwell on what many observers have noted about our personalities – that we are all headstrong, opinionated and often quite infuriating. I am talking about commonalities at a deeper level. Despite all my attempted denials and evasions, I have finally come to realize that, just like you, (perhaps ironically) I am very much a part of German-Jewish history and being, and not just because I was forced by awful circumstances to become part of it. We are tied together by our passion for culture, the immersion in ideas, and the drive for understanding and humanizing the events around us. I vaguely intuited this already some time ago when I noted: “The Jews have an eleventh commandment: it is the only one they have never violated; it is the cause of all their suffering. It reads: ‘Thy son shall learn more than thou.’”⁵⁵

Over the years I have become increasingly convinced that these values and impulses are part and parcel of German-Jewish intellectual sensibility, and that we, all in our own ways, have inherited it and are its incarnations. All of us are its products, chroniclers and exemplifications. We are in numerous ways mirror opposites and yet also, I hope you will begin to agree, bound together by a common historical fate and an underlying spiritual and intellectual passion. To be sure, we all took radically diverse paths and found different solutions to our common dilemmas. But what harm would be done to recognize that, ultimately, our instinctive insistence on the humanizing values of ideas, culture and learning comes from a historical and existential source that is deeper than whatever may divide us?

I have written these final words in the hope that they will find even a small receptive echo. Would that be hoping for too much? I eagerly await your rapid replies – my time is running out.

Yours sincerely,
Victor Klemperer

⁵⁴ Ibid. Entry for 1 February 1957, p.601.

⁵⁵ Ibid. Vol. I. Entry for 10 April 10, 1946, p.226.