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# A Witness to the Holocaust

## Wiener Library Translation Competition

20th June 1946

Dearest Berthold and Phila,

It was with great pleasure that we received your letter yesterday — there are at least some friends and relatives who have survived and are emerging from the horrific mound of corpses, and some of whom discovering that we are, miraculously, still alive...

Ourselves, we were saved in the most incredible way. I in particular must have had at least half a dozen guardian angels, and even they would not have succeeded had it not been for Eva's relentless energy and Native American/Karl May-style talents. I would never have held out, had she not repeatedly reassured me in the most horrific moments that our day would come.

For years we were tortured and an abominable death was ever round the corner. They took our house and every last possession. We were locked in Jewish tenements and harrowed by so-called 'house searches'. These were true pogroms and ordeals: they punched us with their fists and kicked us with their feet, spat on us, threatened to kill us, and committed every possible act of cruelty (placing sewing needles in our beds, smearing shoe polish in the pillows, etc., etc.). I myself had to perform forced labour

such as road sweeping, and physically demanding work in machine rooms day and night, to the detriment of my health. Whether in the morning or in the evening, whenever I left the house we parted as though it was the last time. People were arrested on the streets and at their machines and disappeared forever — a few weeks later the now widow would receive a death certificate from Auschwitz, which stated alternately: Cause of Death: Heart Failure or Shot During Attempted Escape. I became familiar with Gestapo interrogations — you have probably read about these interrogations — in solitary confinement and with my glasses confiscated. For years I was allowed to eat only a fraction of the ‘Aryan’ diet. Eva was also discriminated against, but for belonging to a Jewish household — “You Jew whore, worse than a Jewish swine, you race traitor pig!” That was the conversational tone of the Gestapo, mingled with punches, spitting and chokeholds. She had to share her already insufficient meals with me. Suicide after suicide was committed around us, deportation after deportation. A not uncommon phrase among the Gestapo was: “Are you pigs so poor that you can’t even buy yourselves some ten pence gas? We’ll come again and kill you at long last, save us all some effort!” One by one the rooms around us became empty. They only left mixed couples alone, but even people in mixed marriages were being done away with with ever greater success. Finally the order came on the 13<sup>th</sup> of February 1945: on the 16<sup>th</sup> of February, the remaining seventy members of mixed marriages were to be separated and the Jewish partner removed. They had definitely intended to gas or shoot us immediately on the train; they had to dispose of us. But then, in the night of the 14<sup>th</sup> of February, the English executed an air raid on Dresden and destroyed the entire city in forty minutes. Only the outskirts remained intact, and under the ruins a quarter of a million were reported to be dead. We were separated from one another at the last minute. The wood of the window frame hit Eva’s head, but her East-Prussian skull withstood the impact; my face was hit by the splinters of an incendiary bomb, and my eye wounded. We searched for one another among corpses and scraps of corpses the entire night, each believing the other to be dead. In the morning we found one another. I ripped off the Jewish badge and we fled. If the Gestapo had caught us we would both have been hanged - Eva for assisting an escapee. Despite facing ever new dangers and trials, threats from the Gestapo and bomb attacks, we managed to reach Upper Bavaria. The Americans had finally liberated the area, but now there was no chance of return.

And so — a story just as fascinating as it was gruelling to experience — we returned to Dresden from Munich, on foot.

On the 10<sup>th</sup> of June 1945 we arrived, utterly exhausted and disarranged, once more in Dresden. One day later we received our old upland house back. But in what a state! Everything which had belonged to us, Eva's organ and grand piano, my library and its four thousand volumes, the chairs, the cups, the socks; everything had been stolen by the Gestapo and burned in a warehouse in the city. A greengrocer had been using our music room as his storeroom. Even today we are living with furniture which neither belongs to nor suits us; even today we desperately lack clothing and underwear. Our health has suffered severely. Due to the terrible weight loss Eva has come through with dreadful gastroptosis and I have serious heart pains. Neither of us can recover due to the poor food provision. There is no meat, no fat, no potatoes. We can only dream of coffee, tea and tobacco!

Nevertheless, we are almost happy. The Gestapo no longer exists and we are living with human dignity again. Eva is able to work in her dear garden and plant vegetables, and I have become somewhat of a small big name, having taken three quite substantial positions. I am, as I was before 1933, a proper professor at the Technical University, as well as the first president of the Dresden Cultural Association and the leader of the new and quite important Dresden Adult Education Centre. In this capacity I shall be a point of consultation for the government in matters regarding the Education Centre and give numerous lectures in Dresden and beyond, speaking occasionally on the radio and publishing — my most recent recording required two hundred metres of tape! Because of Eva's unfailing courage my manuscripts have been saved from the reign of terror. Should my heart hold out for a few more years then some handsome new volumes shall be published... In any case I am pouring all my strength into my work and enjoying more success than ever before in my life. As I now accept everything I experience and achieve as fully unexpected and, one might say, unwarranted serendipity, and because I have spent all these years but a hair's breadth away from death, I shall live and go on to the grave without any particular fear or solemnity...

.... I recently received a sign of life from my brother Georg, who despite now being eighty one years old has written with incredible freshness and youthful handwriting, and his youngest grandchild has begun to study medicine. Cross your fingers that I reach eighty-one, or at least seventy-one! I cannot wait to help purify the cesspit which is Germany, that something respectable be made of this country once more, and I have been given the perfect opportunity to play my part: next week I shall appear at the governmental commission for Adult Education (Teacher Training) in Berlin again and do not intend to hold my tongue. Berlin is, I should mention, a terrible ruin and very bleak. I feel like a ghost. No one I used to live with is still there. Most are dead, and the others scattered throughout the world.

Excuse my muddled train of thought. Eva is already asleep — she still composes fine pieces, and even now she can get to a piano, albeit a loaned one...

And now all the best, and do write again soon.

Very best wishes, from Eva too,

Your Victor.

Oliver Gray  
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1 Apr 2015

# Kommentar:

## A Witness to the Holocaust

### Wiener Library Translation Competition

Wie jeder, der Klemperers Schriften gelesen hat, zugestehen muss, war er gleichzeitig wahrer Intellektueller und wahrer Patriot; zwei Kategorien, die sich häufig gegenseitig ausschließen. Ihm war die Gesamtheit menschlicher Gefühle durch hautnahe, allzu persönliche Erfahrungen bekannt gemacht worden, und seine Beherrschung der deutschen Sprache stellt ihn neben die begabtesten Schriftsteller des letzten Jahrhunderts.<sup>1</sup> Es ist also ein herausforderndes Privileg, solch einen locker geschriebenen Brief übersetzen zu dürfen, in dem der Leser einen tief sinnigen Einblick in seine alltägliche Weltanschauung gewinnt.

Die obige Beschreibung des Autors gibt schon ausreichende Gründe an, aus denen man den Text für wichtig halten sollte, aber auf seine poetische Technik möchte ich kurz eingehen. Die subtile rhetorische Kraft, mit der er seelische Empfindungen beschreibt, sucht ihresgleichen: „[D]a ich alles, was ich noch erlebe als ein völlig unvermutetes und sozusagen unberechtigtes Glück hinnehme... so lebe ich ohne sonderliche Beängstigung oder Feierlichkeit meinen Stiebel [sic] herunter.“ Den ganzen

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<sup>1</sup> Dass er selten als solcher anerkannt wird, darf wohl an der späten Erscheinung seiner Tagebücher liegen.

Text hindurch fesselt der Rhythmus der Worte den Leser; er wird in die tragischen Tiefen der Erzählung hineingezogen, und es kommt nie zu einem vollständig zufriedenstellenden Höhepunkt.

Es lohnt sich, von dieser Wehmut des Unerreichten erfasst zu werden. Dadurch wird Reflexionsraum geschaffen, der zum Nachdenken über staatlichen Machtmissbrauch und die Vergangenheit einlädt. In ihm kann man keine rein historische sondern eine menschliche Perspektive auch auf die Scheusslichkeiten der Gegenwart bilden und wird vom Innersten dazu aufgefordert, sich auf welche Weise auch immer zu engagieren. So hoffe ich, durch diese Übersetzung einen Text erschaffen zu haben, in dem diese durch Poetik hervorgerufene Wehmut aufgehoben und treu wiedergegeben wird, und ihre Wirkung ein weiteres Publikum zu spüren bekommt.

282 Wörter