

THOMAS MANN AND WALTER BENJAMIN IN EXILIC SITUATION

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to establish the forced migration during Nazi rule in Germany. Among them the most affected lot was that of the Jews who migrated en masse. The songs about the migrations and the obituary words about the fallen ones were written by Bertolt Brecht, the pioneering German writer-emigrant. For the intellectuals, this event in the history brought misery as well as some kind of alternative stability. The universities and libraries abroad, prominently among them these institutions in USA and France provided academic footing to the emigrated writers, in that some of the masterpieces were produced there. Thomas Mann and Walter Benjamin can be assessed as emigrants in this light during the Nazi-rule in Germany. The commitment and creations left behind to the posterity by these authors testify to the poverty of the autocratic ideology vis-à-vis the clarity of purpose guiding the literary-critical and literary activities of the writers abroad.

Key Words: Jewish emigration, Bertolt Brecht, Thomas Mann, Walter Benjamin, US universities, Benjamin's death on border

INTRODUCTION

On account of his opposition to the National Socialism, Thomas Mann's citizenship was revoked. He was forced to leave Germany in 1938. Being an academic-Jew working at the Frankfurt Institute of Social Research and his ideological leanings, Walter Benjamin, like so many of his colleagues had to decide German soil for good. For Thomas Mann, the reception in USA was warm and he was welcomed for lectures at US Universities and public lectures as well. Benjamin's lot was different. It needs not repeat that the daily struggle with the financial misery consumed much of his energy in France. What the misery could not stop, was the fact that Benjamin left to the coming generations profoundly rich essays, books and fragments which he was able to complete or left incomplete in Paris. Thomas Mann returned to Germany after the end of war, Benjamin in his attempt to leave France in the face of the march of the National Socialists troops took his life on the French-Spanish border in the small city of Port Bau.

ASCENDANCE OF NAZI FORCE TO POWER

The ascendancy of the Nazi forces to power in 1933 in Germany brought about the misfortune and torturous existential hardship in a number of ways. Scores of the intellectual and literary figures were driven away from the German soil which was a homeland to them. Many chose to leave the country on their own decision. Most unfortunate scenario was the plight of the Jew men of letters, who fled en masse and tried to secure existence in distant corners of the world. According to one estimate, the Jews emigrated every year during the Nazi rule around 20,000 every year. It would be erroneous and preposterous to argue that the Jewish authors, intellectuals and common among them fled Germany to save their skin. If one would be arguing on this line, one can never come to explain why a number of German-Jewish scholars and authors committed suicide during war years in other parts of the world, where they had sought a refuge. Walter Benjamin took poison in 1940 in Port Bau on Franco-Spanish border, Joseph Roth drank to death in Paris in 1939, Ernst Toller hanged himself in New York in 1940, Stefan Zweig along with his wife poisoned themselves in Brazil in 1942. They had all left Germany with a resolution and commitment for their creative energy, though the agony of having lost the homeland weighed finally hard on their heart and their lives



came to a tragic end. Thomas Mann spoke about the 'epidemic of death' in this connection and wrote in 1940: "In Poland, Norway, Denmark, Holland and Belgium an as yet untabulated number of our friends were either shot on the spot or took their own lives in order to escape the kind of death Hitler had in store of them."¹ As a matter of truth, the intellectuals on emigration choose death offshore despising the kind of death which Hitler would have meted out to them.

In this presentation, I am dividing the German intellectual on emigration during Nazi rule broadly in two categories. I shall present the discussion of the authors in exile and next on the intellectual in general in exile.

BRECHT'S POEM

Apposite is here to relate to the lesson plans of the UNHCR for the students aged between 15-18 meant for the study on "The Depiction of Refugee Experience in Literature" in 2007. In that lesson-plan, two literary texts were emphatically included. They were:

- The poem titled "Concerning the Label Emigrant"² by Bertolt Brecht, a German playwright, who himself had experienced exile during Nazi rule in Germany
- The short-story titled "All tomorrows are the same" by MisganawWorknehe

It suits the inauguration of this study by quoting the entire poem "*Concerning the Label Emigrant*" by Bertolt Brecht. To begin with presenting this poem by Brecht:

"I always found the name false which they gave us: Emigrants.
That means those who leave their country. But we
Did not leave, of our own free will
Choosing another land, Nor did we enter
Into a land, to stay there, if possible for ever.
Merely we fled. We are driven out, banned.
Not a home, but an exile, shall the land be that took us in.
Restlessly we wait thus, as near as we can to the frontier
Awaiting the day of return, every smallest alteration
Observing beyond boundary, zealously asking
Every arrival, forgetting nothing and giving up nothing
And also not forgiving anything which happened, forgiving nothing
Ah, the silence of the sound does not deceive us! We hear the shrieks
From their camp even here. Yes, we ourselves
Are almost the rumours of crimes, which escaped
Over the frontier. Every one of us
Who with torn shoes walks through the crowd
Bears witness to the shame which now defiles our land.
But none of us
Will stay here. The final word
Is yet unspoken."

THOMAS MANN'S REPUTED RECOGNITION IN USA

As is discernible from these lines, the shame of culture had inhumanly gripped the German soil during the Nazi rule. There were those, who spoke against this shame with daunting spirit. I first speak here of Thomas Mann. His outspoken opposition to the Nazis had resulted not only in the burning of his books but eventually it had led to the revocation of his citizenship in 1938. In the same year he proceeded to USA and remained there till 1952. He enjoyed an outstanding intellectual reputation in USA. He had been associated with the faculties of different prestigious universities like Berkley,

1 Jeffrey Meyers: "Thomas Mann in America" In: Michigan Quarterly Review, Vol. 51, issue 4, Fall 2012

<https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/mqr/act2080.../-thomas-mann-in-america?g...> accessed 24.12.2017

2 Source, Brian Coleman: "Refugees: An Anthology of Poems and Songs", Ottawa 1998

<https://www.artforwhat.wordpress.com> accessed 24.12.2017



Columbia, Princeton and Yale universities. In these universities, he held yet unforgettable highly polished lectures on German literature and the questions of culture.

If He had left behind a land of shame, he had entered into a land of well-bred cultural milieu. He, more often than not, held his head high in USA and spoke eloquently about the sense of pride which this land had charted out to him with honour and profound respect. He travelled on the lecture-tours and in one of his lectures at Princeton University, he spoke of the warmth which he received and felt in USA. To quote him: "It is a blessing for me to sink roots into this soil, and every new tie confirms me in my feeling of being at home...I find people here good-natured to the point of generosity in comparison with Europeans, and feel pleasantly sheltered in their midst."¹

It is in this light that one can truly fathom the meaning of one line by him on his arrival in USA in 1938: "Where I am, there is Germany."² To say it otherwise, he had left behind his home and in USA he had the intensity of the feeling to be at home. The remorse had been compensated with recovery.

Wherever he lectured in USA, he never left behind the German question. He spoke passionately about the questions of the crisis of the civilization in Germany and Europe. People thronged to listen him on radio and in the universities. He gave in all of his talks, touching these aspects of crisis, masterly performance. In one of his letters to one of his friend Agnes, he wrote: "In Boston something like 1000 persons had to be turned away. I ask myself every time: What do these people expect? They declare it was the greatest thing they have ever heard."³ In a series of lectures, he eloquently articulated himself on the irony of the fate of Germany and the questions of cultural dangers. He spoke on such themes like:

1. The war and the Future
2. Germany and the Germans
3. Goethe and Democracy
4. Nietzsche's Philosophy

It is evident that he was trying to keep alive the memory of Germans to the classical glorious past of Germany by talking on Goethe and Nietzsche.

Thomas Mann's lectures were regularly relayed by BBC to the German people at home. Later on, after the end of the war and fall of the Nazi rule in 1945, these lectures were compiled and published in the book form titled "*Listen, Germany*"⁴

The heart-felt honour which he received from the people and academicians of USA is reflected but in the fact that he received seven honorary doctorates from the peer universities, among them:

Berkley, Columbia, Yale, Princeton, Harvard, Rutgers, and Hobart College

THOMAS MANN'S WRITINGS IN USA

American soil gave him enough peace and inspiratory environment for high-standing literary creation. He was able to complete some of his master-pieces in America only. A number of his novels like,

- Buddenbrooks
- Death in Venice
- The magic Mountain
- Doktor Faustus

1 Jeffrey Meyers: Op.Cit.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

Were completed and published first in USA only.

The question of human crisis penetrated his soul to such a degree that he undertook to depict the entire time-period of the Nazi rule in Germany through one of his greatest works, the novel "Doktor Faustus". Making a scathed critique of Nazis by hurling on them the loss they had inflicted on the German classical glory, he presented in this novel the fictional biography of Nietzsche, showing his years of illness drawing a parallel to the sickening of Germany by the Nazis. This novel sold an astonishing 250, 000 copies in America.

Thomas Mann knew the courage of protection. He undertook to provide shelter to the emigrated authors in and around himself also. He wrote once: "Our house has become a rescue bureau for public in danger, people crying for help, people going under."¹

WALTER BENJAMIN'S EMIGRATION TO FRANCE

While debating on the issue of the migrations of the intellectuals during Nazi rule in Germany, it would be immodest to generalize the case of Thomas Mann. Having left a homeland, he could comfortably nestle in USA. Quite different is the case of Walter Benjamin, whose fate this paper would like to shed some light on. Walter Benjamin has been, as per the contemporary research, conceived as a refugee and less a migrant. He was on a constant move from 1933 to 1940 during the Nazi rule in Germany. In these seven years, 28 changes of addresses occurred in his life in different parts of Europe before with some sort of stability of existence he could secure in Paris. It was this kind of unending move and interminable search for home over years that he represents the unique case of shuttling between exiles as a refugee.

All through the tumultuous years of his life as a refugee, he constantly received support from his close friends of the Institute of Social Research, who had immigrated to the universities of USA during Nazi era. It is a late truth that the final attempts by his friend Theodor Adorno to bring him to USA failed because Benjamin lacked the exit visa from France. The truth in terms of regular support lay in the form of exchange of words of encouragement in his intellectual pursuit in the years of exile in France. He received regular letters from his closest friend Adorno from USA. With him, he could share his anxiety and the deep sense of melancholy in exile. In one of his letters to Adorno from Paris in 1938 he wrote of this melancholy that befell him on the alien land: "I had been worrying for some time about the long-awaited arrival of your letter, when I came across a passage in *Regius* just before hearing from you. Under the title 'waiting' it reads as follows: 'Most people wait for a letter every morning. That no letter arrives-or, if one does arrive, it contains only a rejection of some kind-generally holds true for those who are sad already.' When I came across this passage, I already felt sad enough to take it as a foretaste or presentiment of your own letter. If, ultimately, there was something encouraging for me in the letter, then it is in the fact that your observations...should not be interpreted as a rejection."² This letter captures in one among many instances the melancholic predicament of Benjamin.

BENJAMIN'S MISERY AND SCHOLARLY ACHIEVEMENTS

The financial misery apart, Paris became for Benjamin a flourishing ground for the development of his capabilities as a penetrating analyst of modernity. Here, most of his outstanding masterpieces emerged and recognized. As the initial contribution to literary scholarship, he began with his translations of Baudelaire and attempted for its publication relentlessly in the dailies and journals of his time. All through his stay in Paris, Baudelaire was the centre of his literary concerns. His lengthy treatise on Baudelaire titled "Baudelaire: A Lyric-Poet in the Era of High Capitalism" remained to his time and to the posthumous generations of French literary studies and culture studies a path breaking study of the literature under the circumstance of bourgeoisie capitalism.

1 Ibid.

2 <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/2283-walter-benjamin-the-refugee-and-migrant-by-esther-leslie> accessed 24.12.2017



His second significant work relating to culture studies in general and French social studies and cultural scholarship in particular titled "Paris: The Capital of 19th Century" has since the beginning of its completion till present a document of the culture and society around the middle of the 19th century in France. His pioneering work "Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" which still enjoys the status of a cardinal analysis of artwork and its relation to modernity was written in Paris. The list of his works which he undertook to complete in Paris is long, among them further, the essay on Surrealism, On the Concept of History, German Men of Letters. Namvar Singh has mentioned that Benjamin wanted to write a book of references. This work of references was the magnum-opus of Benjamin, an incomplete fragment titled *The Arcades* or *The Passagenwerk*. In this work Benjamin outlined in detail his deep analysis of the modernity, art, culture, fashion, architecture and narrative space.

What British Museum was for many scholars in England, *Bibliothèque Nationale* was for Benjamin in Paris. Benjamin's last days in France were threatened by the growing sense of fear generated by the anticipation of occupation of Paris by the Nazi troops. Before Benjamin left Paris, his notes on his work *The Arcades* found their place in the safekeeping of his friend George Bataille in the *Bibliothèque Nationale*.

WALTER BENJAMIN'S LAST MOVE TO EMIGRATE

Benjamin's last days in France represent his restless search for leaving France towards borders and seek any means to emigrate by legal or illegal means. Having no exit visa from France, he joined a guided party that crossed the Pyrenees in an attempt to enter as a refugee in Spain. Turned by the custom officials, Benjamin took life in the small town Port Bau on France-Spain border in September in 1940. As a refugee Benjamin entered in France and seeking refuge he left life on the border.

Hearing about Benjamin's suicide, Brecht wrote a short and affecting poem on him:

"I am told you raised your hand against yourself anticipating the butcher
After eight years in exile, observing the rise of the enemy
Then at last, brought up against an impassable barrier
You passed, they say, a passable one.
Empires collapse. Gang leaders
Are strutting about like statesmen. The people
Can no longer be seen under all armaments
So the future lies in darkness and the forces of right
Are weak. All this was plain to you
When you destroyed a torturable body."

Some argue that Benjamin had a presentiment. He had collected the letters of the authors from the 18th century onwards and published them in his book *German Men of Letters*. It is said, he had perhaps recognized his own fate in his emotional nearness to what Georg Forster had written during the time of his exile in Paris: "I now expect the worst. I strongly doubt whether I shall ever see my personal papers again."¹

CONCLUSION

Solely on the ideological pretexts the Jews during the Nazi rule were either evicted or they opted out the only alternative to leave Germany. A considerably large number among the refugees were the Jewish intellectuals. It can be hypothesized that this emigration of the Jews and the Jewish intellectuals was to be considered as the cultural emigration. For, these intellectuals were part of the cultural representatives of Germany through their profession writing about the cultural aspects of German life. It has to be noted that the emigration did not represent the similarity of fate. This is evident from the life of Thomas Mann and Walter Benjamin in exile. The finest of the works produced

1 Patrick H. Hutton: "Walter Benjamin on the French Exile of German Men of Letters", University of Vermont. In: *Journal of The Western Society for French History*, Vol. 36, 2008
<http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.0642292.0036.018> accessed 24.12.2017



by Thomas Mann and Walter Benjamin in exile testify to the fact that the exile cannot in all circumstances be the curse to creativity.

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