

GERMANY IN TRAVAIL

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Germany in Travail by Otto Manthey-Zorn

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OTTO MANTHEY-ZORN

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IN TRAVAIL**

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BY
OTTO MANTHEY-ZORN
PROFESSOR OF GERMAN, AMHERST COLLEGE



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FOREWORD

IN THE summer of 1920 Amherst College granted me a leave of absence until January, 1921, to go to Germany and attempt to analyse the state of mind in which the Germans were facing the conditions and problems resulting from defeat and the revolution.

As chance would have it, the summer and fall of 1920 were unusually opportune for such a study. The logic of events culminating in the conference at Spa had finally made the Germans begin to realize the extent of their defeat and of their obligations. An ever greater number were beginning to see the futility of wilful blindness or resentment, and coming to the conclusion that it was better to face conditions and seek a way of meeting them. Also the mere economic situation did not seem as hopeless to the Germans as it does today. Work was beginning to be generally resumed. The mark had depreciated until its value was about two cents, but compensation for most grades of work and returns on most varieties of investments had risen in proportion to the mark's fall. The purchasing value of the mark within Germany was then only a shade above its actual value on the world market. The entire social fabric seemed to be organizing itself upon a basis approximating the actual economic condition of the country.

Everything below the surface, to be sure, politics and the whole spiritual life of the country, was as chaotic as it is today. But the momentary physical and economic relief gave some real impetus toward an attempt at broad reconstruction, and made it possible for an observer to get an idea of the direction the reconstruction will ultimately take, the principles that have a chance to survive through the process, and the

spiritual resources which, released by the revolution, will give those principles the necessary force.

My chief concern was the study of these spiritual forces. These may indeed manifest themselves in any of the larger fields of activity: in economics and politics, religion, education, or in art. I am not a student of economics or of politics. My investigations in this field were merely to test the state of mind with which the people were meeting the political situation, and the spiritual attitude they assumed to the supreme economic problem of their daily bread. I found a situation so confused and so threatened by distress and passion, that positive spiritual forces were exerting no influence over it as yet. I have not dared to venture upon a description of the religious life of new Germany. There were evidences of changes that may in time have large importance, but they do not lend themselves to either fair or adequate treatment. The institutional church of Germany had allowed itself to become so entirely a part of the state that, when the latter fell, a full share of the discredit rested upon the church. The laws of the new government, intended to guarantee a greater freedom to religious expression, could do little to produce a new spirit. Whatever attempts at organized expression of a renewed religious spirit I could find were quite apart from the church and so vague that any description would lead to false impressions. In liberal education a new spirit is calmly exerting itself and is squarely and bravely meeting the new conditions. My main interest, however, is centered upon the mind and spirit of men and peoples as expressed in literature, and upon the spiritual forces that men and peoples evidence in their attitude to the great expressions of literature.

In teaching German literature the question of the relation of the drama to the ruling principles and forces of life is constantly brought into the foreground. The drama is considered by most German authors and critics to be the highest form of literary expression. Even the ordinary theater-goer has a peculiar reverence for what the German calls a drama as distinguished from a play, and he considers sacrilegious any attempt

to make the drama a mere form of entertainment or a source of profit. The object of the dramatist is to create in his characters living men, who embody, or come into conflict with, the fundamental forces of life. The German dramatist must have not only the ability to see and express such forces, but also a sufficiently strong faith in the possession of them by man to make the drama convincing. Where such faith is lacking, the dramatist is expected to show at least a strong longing for it. The German audience, by national habit, is constantly looking for evidence of this faith in the great characters before it, in order that each hearer may acquire an insight into the fundamentals of his own life.

The question often arose in my classes, whether this was really a guiding principle of the German drama. Therefore, when the opportunity came to test this thesis, by observing dramatist and stage and audience in a serious crisis, I was glad to seize upon it. My leave of absence gave me the opportunity which rarely comes to a student of literature: to test in the reality of actual events the statements concerning the German drama which I had taught in my classes. If, in the emergency, dramatists could be found attempting to express faith, or at least a strong longing for faith, in a new German character, if audiences could be found eagerly searching the dramas for a faith to serve as a basis for individual and national reconstruction, then an important question in the study of the German drama would be answered, and it would be possible to determine the state of mind which has the greatest chance of outlasting the present crisis and ultimately controlling reconstruction.

I devoted the largest part of my investigation to the situation in Berlin and Munich, because these cities are the most active and dominating centers of Germany, and because they are most opposed to one another in purpose and method. I went to Weimar to observe the interesting attempt to reestablish its traditional spiritual leadership. Such other German cities as I visited, among them Hamburg, Hannover and Leipzig, were in the main following the lead of Berlin and Weimar. They

were important simply in their special interpretation of the forces emanating from these centers. In Salzburg, I witnessed a strong concerted effort by the leaders of Austria to devise a program of spiritual reconstruction by enlisting the power of art in saving what remains of the country.

The first result that I must record is purely negative: not one of the poets, old or new, has enough faith or enough insight in redeeming forces to be able to express such faith clearly, or to present it to the people with strong conviction. It is encouraging, however, to note that the foremost poets of the nation are not giving themselves over to despondency, but are trying to rise above the confusion and to calm the disturbed spirits of the people, hoping that serenity will give them light and insight. A similar longing to prepare the way for faith in a new spirit governs the ventures of Weimar and Salzburg. The most important discovery, however, is that there has arisen throughout Germany a new audience which has developed a strong consciousness of the relation of the drama to personal and national character. In it are the people who are facing the vast responsibilities arising out of the revolution and are seeking for standards with which to judge them. They are convinced, moreover, that they cannot find such standards unless they know themselves and the fundamental national forces of which they are a part. They believe that they can gain this knowledge by studying the characters of the great dramas of their past and by encouraging the better dramatists of their own time to help them search. For this purpose they have organized powerful drama leagues.

It proved impossible to treat this audience merely in its relation to the drama and the theatre. The same people constitute that calm progressive element among the Democrats and Majority Socialists which is comparatively free from the general political confusion. The organizations for popular liberal education are composed almost entirely of these same people, and are able to maintain their strongly liberal, non-vocational character because of the high standards these men attain through their relation to art.

Because this new audience is still in the making, and its position within German life is far from being fully established or recognized, the description of its activity is constantly interrupted by personal interpretations. The results derive a considerable degree of certainty, however, from the fact that the activity of this group, especially in its relation to the drama, is not altogether new. The revolution has given it the first real opportunity and has enormously increased its size; but the history of its growth goes far enough back into German life to establish its permanency with some degree of assurance.

That which most impresses the observer with the power of this group, and gives him reason to believe that its standards will be those that ultimately will prevail in the process of reconstruction, is the extreme patience it shows in the search for standards and its serenity in the presence of the country's chaos.

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