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Mann, Klaus

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Old Acquaintances

Thomas Mann's son returns to Germany to discover that friendship's cup can have a bitter taste

by Klaus Mann



Actor Gustaf Gruendgens was "indestructible darling of pre-Nazi, and post-Nazi Berlin"

WE had known all along that our old German friends would eventually become a problem. With the end of the war and the fall of the Hitler regime, we had to face it.

For twelve years, from 1933 to 1945, there had been no connection between their world and ours. They had stayed behind in that darkened, corrupted country we had been compelled to leave—not so much by the Gestapo as by our disgust, our horror, and our forebodings of inevitable disaster. While we, uprooted vagabonds, wandered from one provisional refuge to another, they settled down under the shadow of the swastika. While we were making our more or less futile efforts to warn the world against the unspeakable German regime, they were profiting by the hectic boom caused by Hitler's rearmament.

We found a new home in the United States; they stuck to their power-intoxicated, aggressive Fatherland. When their country declared war on ours—Nazi Germany on the U.S.A.—they became our enemies in the most direct, most brutal sense. While we did our bit to help the Allied cause, they fought and worked for Nazi victory. If they had won the war, people of our kind—former Germans who had turned against Germany—would have been at the mercy of the most merciless foe. In such a case would our old pals have remembered past loyalties and affections?

But they did not win. So of course, they remembered. . . .

We had known all along that this was going to happen. Our side would be victorious and certain old acquaintances back there in the defeated Fatherland would promptly try to renew half-forgotten friendships. But would these friends still speak the same language?

In the beginning I was quite prepared to take chances. Touring the occupied Reich as a soldier-correspondent of *Stars and Stripes*, I had to see as many Germans as possible. Should I keep away from interesting people just because they happened to be old friends of mine? True, from the viewpoint of strict political ethics, some of my former pals were by no means beyond suspicion. But it would be interesting to hear their side of the story—just as a matter of curiosity if not for the sake of fairness.

And quite apart from any personal impulses and considerations, there was the professional angle. I had my journalist's job.

At the time of my first trip to the old country, just after the end of the war, some of Germany's most colorful celebrities had not yet been located by Allied newspaper men. Emil Jannings, for one. None of my scoop-hunting colleagues had "covered" him, yet a conversation with the veteran screen and stage favorite was sure to make good copy.

"I am here, not as a friend, but as a reporter on duty." It was with this stern announcement that I introduced myself at the Jannings' home—a lovely country estate on the Lake of St. Wolfgang near Salzburg where I had spent many a pleasant weekend in pre-Hitler days.

"All right, all right," Emil said with unruffled cordiality. "Let's sit down and have a drink, old boy. Remember that Moselle wine you used to be so fond of? Well, I think there are still a few bottles of it, hidden away in my cellar. I've been saving them for just such an occasion."

So the reporter on duty had a few glasses of Moselle with his old acquaintances. Emil and his still attractive wife, Gussy, told him stories. How they had suffered under that accursed Nazi regime! How Goebbels, that fiendish cripple, had hated them on account of Emil's Jewish grandmother and Gussy's much-quoted anti-Nazi cracks! It was Goebbels in person who blackmailed the partly non-Aryan star into accepting the title rôle in one of the most shocking German propaganda films, *Ohm Krüger*.

"And now certain people blame me for having played that part," Emil complained with the pathos of slandered innocence. "Jealous colleagues, malicious gossip-mongers, have the nerve to denounce me as a Nazi, just because I was forced—literally forced, mind you!—to do a job assigned to me by highest authority. Can't you do anything, dear friend, to stop those obnoxious rumors designed to ruin my career? You, as a journalist and an old friend of mine, are just the man to help me in this predicament. You can tell the world that you know me as a man of liberal principles, a good democrat and responsible artist."

That was not exactly the way I put it, yet the Jannings interview I cabled to my paper was rather on the mild and understanding side. Emil's apologetic eloquence had not quite failed to impress me. Besides, there were memories of his delicious Moselle, Gussy's piquant charm, the glorious view from their terrace. In short, I did not feel like writing a nasty piece. Not that I presented him as an anti-Nazi hero: but I ventured to write that "he isn't a Nazi either. If he made compromises, he hardly enjoyed doing so and made only as many as were absolutely necessary to protect his position and his bank accounts under a totalitarian regime."

If I had thought this plea moderate and reserved enough, I was soon to find out how mistaken I was. My article provoked a storm of indignation in initiated circles. For several weeks to come my mail consisted mostly of disgusted and angry letters *re* Emil.

"What's wrong with you?" people wrote me from Hollywood, London, Berlin, Vienna. "Why do you try to whitewash that evil, greedy old man? Don't you know that he was one of the most notorious figures in the Nazi menagerie? Now, all of a sudden, he remembers his Jewish grandma! But at the time of the Nuremberg Laws, anybody who mentioned that non-Aryan ancestress was sued for libel by her race-conscious grandchild!"

"Oom Krüger", der Film vom Kampf der Büren



The Nazis didn't like Renée Sintenis' liberal leanings or fame as a modern sculptress



At their Austrian estate, the Jannings': left, Gussy; above, Emil emergent



In 1941 Emil Jannings played the rôle of Oom Paul in a propaganda film which drew a parallel between the Germans and the Boers in their "fight for freedom against a common enemy—England"

One of my correspondents enclosed a German book containing the life story of the Boer patriot and rebel: *Oom Krüger*; preface by Emil Jannings. In this introductory piece the actor pointed out how much he had enjoyed playing that particular rôle; how proud he was of his contribution to that patriotic masterpiece, the Kruger film; how ardently he admired both the anti-British Boer hero whom he had impersonated and the great statesman and leader to whom he owed that privilege, Dr. Paul Joseph Goebbels.

There it was—unmistakably, neatly printed! The most embarrassing, most revealing sentences were marked by the person who had mailed the booklet to me. "How do you like this confession of faith of your pal and protégé?" the sender inquired. "Why don't you write another Jannings story, with quotations from his charming preface?"

I am afraid I did not know how to answer these sarcastic questions. Non-plused and ashamed, I decided not to call on old acquaintances for journalistic purposes, any more.

But the more wary and reserved I tried to be, the more numerous and urgent became the appeals from the camp of my former associates. As time passed by, and as I prolonged my stay in the old country, I discovered, not without surprise, that practically everybody I had ever known in Germany was

still alive and busily writing letters.

One of the first to present me with a long-winded epistle was Erich Ebermayer, a prolific and successful writer with whom I used to be on the most cordial terms. Just before the outbreak of the Nazi plague, in 1933, we had been collaborating on a play, a dramatization of Saint-Exupéry's novel, *Night Flight*. When I left the country, our teamwork and our friendship came to a sudden end. Erich, needless to say, kept away from "traitors" and "outcasts" such as myself. All I knew about him was what I occasionally read in the papers. Clearly, he was doing all right in the Third Reich—writing movie scripts, novels, magazine stories, making more money, enjoying more prestige and publicity than ever before.

The letter I received from him after the end of the war sounded quite different. Life under Hitler was hell, Author Ebermayer explained to me, for upright democrats and liberals like himself.

"All my books, except two, were suppressed by Nazi censorship. Constantly watched by the Gestapo, I was not allowed to broadcast or make public speeches. The only field of action left to me was the film; gradually I established myself as one of the leading German screen writers. In spite of countless obstacles and difficulties, I managed to write three or four decent films, out of

a total of twenty-six. But all this was just a kind of drug, an attempt to escape from a terrible reality, a pastime while waiting for the day of liberation. . . ."

Infinitely more important to him than any movie job, his confession continued, was a secret diary in which he had kept a daily record of Nazi follies and atrocities. So subversive and dangerous, from the official point of view, was this clandestine journal that its author had buried it in the park of his newly acquired baroque castle near Bayreuth. (Never before had Erich owned any castles. Clearly, it paid quite well to escape from the prosaic problems of Hitler-controlled movie industry.) The diary had been unearthed as soon as the Yanks moved in, and was to be published (in seven volumes!) under the title of *Night over Germany*.

"I am impatient to read to you certain passages from this revealing document," Erich wrote. "Come and see me, dear friend. Come soon! If you knew how often I thought of you during those years of struggle and loneliness; how close I was to you in my thoughts and dreams! For my plight resembled yours: I, too, was an exile, right here in my own country. . . ."

It was with curiously mixed emotions that I perused this message. Could I believe in the sincerity of Erich's affectionate phrases? Was he indeed the loyal friend and (Continued on page 158)

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stouthearted liberal he described himself? Had I been wrong in suspecting him of moral laxity and opportunism?

I was still wondering whether or not I should accept his invitation when I happened to come across another letter by Erich Ebermayer. Under the heading "A political and moral document," the American-operated newspaper in Munich, *Die Neue Zeitung*, featured a truly amazing message my old friend had written back in 1942 to a literary critic by the name of Schnack. While Author-Ebermayer unearthed his anti-Nazi diary, Critic Schnack dug out and released for publication an only slightly anti-Nazi piece of writing composed by the diarist when there was still night over Germany.

A novel by Erich Ebermayer, *Under Another Sky* (one of his two books presumably not suppressed by the Nazi censor!) had been reviewed by Schnack in an uncompromising manner. Ebermayer didn't like that at all.

"Your diatribe against my book," he chided Schnack, "is the most shocking example of irresponsible, unfair criticism. As such, it has been brought to the attention of my Minister (i.e., Goebbels) to whom I have forwarded a copy of your review. . . . But why argue with you? My novel has been acclaimed by many thousands of unbiased readers. The highest dignitaries of the Reich—Minister Goebbels, Reichsmarschall Goering, Reichsleiter Bouhler (my cousin!)—have congratulated me on this work. But you, Herr Schnack, think my epic style tainted with movie clichés! It is true, I have written some great and important films by order of Minister Goebbels. But there is certainly nothing film-like about the novel you criticize! Under Another Sky deals with a profound and timely subject, the contrast between Germany and America."

And so forth. Two typewritten pages full of boasts and threats, leading up to the logical, inevitable conclusion, *Heil Hitler!* Signed, "Dr. Erich Ebermayer."

I was grateful to Herr Critic Schnack. If it hadn't been for his disparaging book review, I might have renewed my old acquaintance with "Reichsleiter" (Under Secretary for Enlightenment and Propaganda) Bouhler's cousin.

But in certain instances my curiosity was stronger than my moral

qualms. Gustaf was such a case—Gustaf Gruendgens, the actor, one of the most colorful personalities I have ever met.

Outside the German-speaking world, his name is all but unknown. In his own country, however, Gruendgens enjoys an almost fabulous popularity. Handsome, clever, glamorous, sophisticated, he tries very hard to be a German Noel Coward. The story of his career is not without amusing features.

At the age of twenty-five or so, Gustaf had already established himself as the star of one of Germany's vanguard theatres, the *Kammerspiele* in Hamburg. It was there that my first play was produced, in 1925, with enterprising young Gruendgens as director. He also played one of the major parts, co-starring with my sister, Erika, who later became his wife.

Gruendgens was soon discovered by the theatre czar of pre-Hitler Germany, Max Reinhardt, and became one of the favorites of the stage-intoxicated capital. But he was not content with being just a popular entertainer; he was also intellectually ambitious, a left-wing high-brow, the most fashionable parlor-pink. He startled the snobs with his bold artistic experiments and introduced himself to Communist meetings as a champion of the revolutionary cause.

When the Nazis took over, in 1933, our rebellious matinee idol found himself in a slightly awkward position. Fortunately, my sister, member of a notorious political clan and a well-known anti-Nazi in her own right, had just divorced him, otherwise poor Gustaf might actually have been in trouble. Even so, he had the reputation of a "cultural Bolshevik," and could not be sure whether his new masters would forgive him for the subversive vagaries of his past.

Yet, being immaculately "Aryan," he decided to take a chance and stay in Germany, while most of his liberal friends left the country or disappeared into concentration camps. Of course, the ex-Communist had to be a little careful at first. But before long fortune smiled at him again, this time in the person of Hermann Goering's fair-haired fiancée, Actress Emmy Sonnemann. The moderately gifted ingénue, formerly hidden away in a provincial town, had been called to Berlin by her powerful lover. How could she face a metropolitan audience? She needed a good director. Gustaf, famed for his skill in handling clumsy beginners, seemed just the fellow she was looking for. He made friends with Emmy. Grateful for his instruction, she



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persuaded her fiancé to pardon the naughty boy and allow him to play again.

Goering was smitten with Gruendgens' performance as Mephistopheles in Goethe's *Faust*. How delightfully demonic he was! How elegantly corrupt! How irresistibly wicked! The jolly Reichsmarschall took a fancy to the graceful devil—the beginning of Gustaf's second rise to glory.

If he had been successful in the days of the Weimar Republic, now he had not only success but also something much sweeter and more precious, power. His fat protector gave him a country estate, a palace, and a title: Gustaf was appointed *Staatsrat* (State Councillor). And, even more important, he became *Intendant* (supreme chief) of the Prussian State Theatre. He toured Europe with his own troupe; he produced films, operas, classical dramas, musical comedies; he acted, directed, supervised; he inaugurated cultural policy; he was the indefatigable, ingenious *maitre de plaisir* of Greater Germany.

When Hitler's might began to totter, towards the end of the war, Gruendgens decided that the moment had come for him to abandon the sinking ship. Rumor has it that he quarreled with Goering, with whom he had managed to get along for so many prosperous years. In any case, the boss of the State Theatre quit and tried to make himself invisible. The safest hiding place in the disintegrating Reich of 1944 was the Wehrmacht, so our versatile mime became a soldier, playing, for a change, the rôle of a humble army interpreter in the German-occupied Netherlands. Nazi defeat brought him back to Berlin.

Maybe nothing would have happened to him if he had had enough tact and common sense to keep quiet for some time. But he was impatient—overly eager to repeat his little stunt of 1933 and change sides once more. The old operator, trying to be smart, got himself into trouble. He was arrested by Soviet authorities.

His imprisonment lasted nine months—a pretty long time for a man of Gustaf's temperament and ambition. According to his own report, life in the Russian-operated jail was quite bearable and the prisoners were fairly well taken care of. And Gruendgens had enjoyed special privileges, for he had captivated the Russian commander's heart, just as he had once bewitched the most blasé audiences of republican Berlin and the most ruthless chieftains of the Hitler gang.

So brilliant was the job he did as a director and master of ceremonies of the improvised prison theatre that the Russians were reluctant to let him go: he was too useful to them as an entertainer. But competent actors were badly needed in the capital, and some of his friends were doing their best to clear Gustaf's dubious political record.

I happened to be in Berlin when Gustaf made his comeback. His first rôle was the leading character in Carl Sternheim's comedy, *The Snob*, a clever satire on the German bourgeois, still uncannily timely even though written in the faraway days of Emperor William II. The opening night at the Deutsches Theater, formerly the scene of Max Reinhardt's triumphs, promised to be the greatest theatrical event in

Germany since the end of the war. With the theatre sold out weeks in advance, black-market prices for seats soared to staggering heights. *Tout Berlin*, or what remained of it, would be there to celebrate Gustaf's return.

Naturally I did not want to miss this spectacle. Somehow I managed to get myself a seat in the front row. It was a great evening. Never before had I seen so festive and animated a crowd in gloomy post-war Berlin.

When the curtain rises "the snob," according to the author's directions, is all alone on the stage, standing behind a desk, with a letter in his hand. Gruendgens had to stand there for five or six minutes at least, smiling and taking bows, before the roaring applause calmed down and he could finally get his opening lines across. It was indeed an extraordinary ovation and was repeated at the end of the show. The stage was covered with flowers; the audience, hysterical with enthusiasm, might have gone on clapping and shouting for hours, if the police had not closed the house at last.

Was handsome Gustaf cheered as a political martyr? Was the inordinate applause meant as a demonstration against those who had arrested him? Was he moved or embarrassed? If so, he did not show it—or, rather, he showed it just once, for one fleeting, dramatic moment. That was when he noticed me.

Yes, he saw me, an American soldier, standing there in the front row. I applauded politely. He looked at me, started, and looked the other way. The smile with which he acknowledged the homage of the crowd was twisted as if by a pang of momentary pain. But it did not take him long to overcome this emotion. Soon he was his old glamorous self again, as attractive as ever, with white tie, pink complexion, blond toupee—the indestructible darling of pre-Nazi, and post-Nazi Berlin.

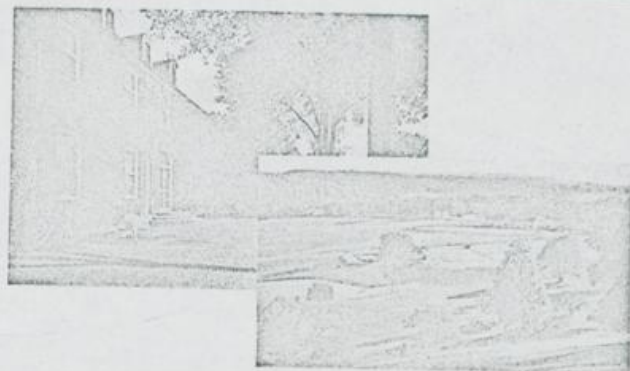
After the show, a mutual friend tried to persuade me to go backstage with her and shake hands with my ex-brother-in-law. "Come along, be a good sport," she insisted. "He'll be so happy to see you?"

My refusal seemed to disappoint her considerably. "I am sorry," she said. "Sorry for him, and for you. After all, Gustaf used to be a

(Continued on following page)



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Jorge R. André, and Mrs. André as they arrive at the St. Regis Roof for the cocktail party held to benefit New York's Tonsil Parkway Hospital

ACQUAINTANCES

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 159

friend of yours—and besides, he's such a colorful, brilliant person! So why not forgive him for his past mistakes? Why not enjoy him the way he is, with all his shortcomings and weaknesses? You should be more tolerant, more open-minded, more Shakespearean, not so virtuous and puritanical!"

I now made it my policy to see only those among my old German acquaintances whose anti-Nazi record could be traced back beyond May, 1945. My social life became monotonous, for there were not many Germans whom I could really trust, and those few were discouraged and isolated. While the ex-Nazis or neo-Nazis in occupied Germany seem to be quite spirited and hopeful, the true anti-Nazis are indeed despondent and disillusioned.

Take a person like my old friend Renée Sintenis, one of Germany's outstanding artists, a sculptress of international reputation. She stayed in Berlin during the whole period of dictatorship and war, even though she was in official disgrace on account of her liberal leanings and the modernistic style of her work. Her studio was destroyed by an air raid, which also cost her three fingers of her right hand.

"Those were terrible days," she told me as we were sitting together in the bleak, miserable room now serving her as both home and workshop. "But, believe me, what I'm experiencing now is even worse, even more depressing. For when the war was still on and Hitler still in power, it was possible to indulge in illusions. I had a few anti-Nazi friends, and I tried to think that most Germans were secretly feeling the same way we did. I was always hoping, waiting for something to happen, some kind of dramatic change, a national upheaval, the German revolution."

She shrugged her shoulders, and her beautiful, clear-cut face had an expression of infinite weariness. "It was only after the end of the war that I found out how mistaken I was," she continued. "For now I've realized that there was never anything like an anti-Nazi movement among my countrymen. On the contrary, they adored Hitler. This is the awful truth! They would be only too glad, even now,

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if they could get him back. Wherever you go in Berlin, you have to listen to the same evil talk: that things were better under the Nazi regime, that democracy doesn't work, that we need a strong man, that our army will play a leading rôle in the coming war against Russia, and so forth. I'm so tired of it all. I can't tell you how tired."

This kind of pessimism I often found in those who had actively opposed the regime and, in so doing, risked their lives. Now they were bitterly disappointed—a reaction only too understandable considering the state of world affairs in general and of the German nation in particular.

"Of course, you have to go on struggling and working," my friend K. H. said to me. A veteran of German left-wing politics and former inmate of many a Nazi concentration camp, he now holds a fairly important office in one of the regional governments.

"You must keep trying," he told me. "But it isn't easy to be a German democrat these days. Will the Germans ever understand democracy? Will they ever become a politically mature, responsible nation? Will they ever change?"

I asked him whether, in his opinion, the majority of the German people was still Nazi at heart.

"I'll tell you how you can find out," he said. "Let all Allied troops be withdrawn from German territory, or at least hidden, but leave behind a clandestine army of reliable observers. At the same time, stage a comeback of the Fuehrer, in the style of Napoleon's return from Elba. The next day, all those putting out Nazi flags or wearing Party insignias can be arrested, and shot at dawn! You might have to liquidate 90 percent of our population. . . ."

How many of my old German acquaintances, I could not help wondering, would survive such a test?

The author: An old T&C contributor who has also written several books since coming to live in the U.S.A. with his father, Klaus Mann served in our Army in Europe as an enlisted man from December, 1942, to October, 1945, when he arranged to be demobilized in Italy in order to work on the script of "Paiza," ("Buddy") the new Italian movie directed by Rossellini of "Open City" fame. He has been back in New York since last July writing a play—"The Seventh Angel"—and working on a book for the Philosophical Library, Inc.



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