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Culture in Exile.

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Culture in Exile.

It happens sometimes that curious friends or friendly journalists ask me this question: "Can culture survive exile?" And then I feel pretty embarrassed, somehow like being in the position of a badly sick man whom a friend would ask: "Do you think you will succeed in remaining alive for another little while?" - The badly sick man, suddenly faced with this alarming question, makes a desolate effort to look brave and optimistic. All he has to reply, however, is this poor little phrase: "I'll try my best..."

Culture in exile is endangered but it is not lost. For the creative spirit is a tenacious ~~slow~~ thing - provided, of course, that it really *deserves the designation of* "a creative spirit" - , almost as strong and indestructible, indeed, as life itself. I am convinced the cultural ambition is a spontaneous impulse of mankind, and will not die out before mankind itself will vanish or change its character. A dictator, of course, can kill a man, or he can force him to leave his homeland. But if the victim of tyranny happens to be a genius or a gifted artist, he will continue his work in foreign countries. He simply must go on painting pictures, or composing music, or writing books, since these occupations are so natural, so necessary to him as breathing, eating and sleeping.

It is a matter of course that not all of those millions who had to leave Italy or the Reich or Austria or Spain or Czecho-Slovakia, are geniuses or possess a creative spirit. A comparatively ~~very~~ large number among the refugees, however, are intellectuals - which proves that Fascism and independent intelligence are deadly enemies, that they hate each other, and can never be reconciled.

Fascism became strong; intelligence didn't have any power. So intelligence had to escape. In a book dealing with refugees from varied European countries, my sister Erika and myself gave an optimistic name to this mass exodus. We called it "Escape to Life".

For it really is Life we escaped to, although a very complicated and invålved sort of life. Every refugee may find it difficult to adapt himself to costumes and to a language unfamiliar to him. But for the creative mind, and especially for the authors, the language and all the details of daily life possess a more vital significance than they do have for the average man. The poet or writer who left his country, lost much more than merely his home or his publisher or the public he used to work for. He actually lost the very soil he was rooted in.

It would be silly, even frivolous to deny the fact that exile has its very dreary sides. At certain moments our gloomy mood is not far from being despair, and suicide seems to be the only proper solution. The tragic case of my late friend Ernest Toller is certainly not quite exceptional, although we must remember that the strength of his noble spirit was undermined and finally destroyed not ~~purely~~ only by exile but also by those years he had to spend, soon after the War, in a Bavarian prison. ~~When he almost was still a boy,~~ There is a certain limit of our capacity to bear sufferings and to transform them into energy or wisdom. This limit, however, is flexible, and is a different one in each individual case. We may take comfort from the simple truth: that life means a great deal of struggle, sadness and pain, always and everywhere, whether at home or in exile. It means heaps of work, and a lot of disappointment, and plenty of troubles: we have to face it, and must convince ourselves that there are a few things in this world, which are making life ~~bearable~~ ^{endurable} or even precious, - at home, and in exile too.

Yes, there are important things we can gain by being forced to live in foreign countries. Wasn't it always the ambition of true

intellectuals to become "citizens of the world"? German writers, having the great example of Goethe, should understand what this notion means - :to be a citizen of the world, although remaining ^{faithful} to the finest traditions of our own nation. Perhaps our exile has taught us something toward this end, since it has enlarged and deepened our knowledge of foreign countries and people.

I don't like the question of "What have the exiles given to America or to any other country?" Another question seems to me more stimulating and more important: "What has America given to us, the European liberals and 'free spirits' who have been driven away ~~from~~ from our own soil? For it is little what we are able to give, compared with the vital goods that we have received, ^{and are still receiving.} Are we in the position of offering any values? The mere fact that the ideas or the achievements we ^{may} have to offer, are recognized as values in this country, and are ~~not~~ not refused but accepted and even praised - this very fact means a gift, and a fine one.

We could not go on working and creating without any hope and confidence. Without the "Promise of American Life", however, there would not be very much of a hope for the Western Man and his civilization. Without this Promise, hardships and confusion of our present state wouldn't be endurable. Harships and confusion can be even inspiring - provided that hope keeps remaining alive.

Some of the modern American writers seem to be more interested in the hardships of life than in its lovely aspects. Our life, and the lives of our friends from Italy and Spain and the other oppressed countries, also have their fascinating, inspiring hardships. Why should we complain of them? Why should we lament?

Perhaps exile, as every great experience in life, is not only a

misfortune but also a tremendous chance. It means a hard, decisive test of our actual strength. Friedrich Nietzsche, whose genius the Nazis misuse, has said:

"Was mich nicht umbringt, macht mich staerker."

"What does not kill me, strengthens me."

Klaus Mann.

New York City.

November 1939.

