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My Former Countrymen.

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MY FORMER COUNTRYMEN

By Sgt. Klaus Mann

First came the Greetings from the President, then came the Physical Examination. When I was through with the Physical, and was found all right, the psychiatrist had a word with me. He was a busy man, the psychiatrist at the Grand Central Palace, New York. Rather in a hurry as he seemed to be, he asked me only one question:

"You're of German origin, aren't you? -- Well then, do you really feel capable of fighting Germans?"

I said, "Yes, Sir, I do!" And I am afraid that I grinned a little while saying it. The question struck me as funny.

But in the course of my life in the Army, I was asked the same question repeatedly again: "How do men like yourself, of German birth and, until recently, of German citizenship, feel fighting against former countrymen?"

Maybe the question isn't so very funny, after all. It is not quite easy, perhaps, for any non-German person to understand why those most familiar with Germany are most eager and most determined to fight Nazism and to help in wiping out that obnoxious, murderous plague. I am sure that I speak also of the thousands of other former German citizens now active in the various armies of the United Nations, when saying that our militant resolution has a twofold psychological and moral source: first, our natural loyalty to a new homeland to which we are deeply indebted; and, second, our intimate, first-hand knowledge of the mortal danger which Hitlerism means to human civilization.

To me, as to most of the other German fugitives from Nazi terrorism, it was a matter-of-course to contribute our humble bit to the war effort of the democracies. In fact, I hardly felt that I was changing my status or

the essential purpose of my life when I became an American soldier. Rather, it seemed to me that my new job was, to continue doing with new weapons and under new conditions what I had been doing all along, for the past ten years. To fight Hitler and everything he stands for, was indeed my main occupation, ever since the Nazi dictatorship was established, in 1933.

My family and I left the Reich -- voluntarily, as did many other clear-sighted and decent Germans --, as soon as Hitler came to power. We left, although -- not being Jews and not being affiliated with any political party -- we might have been acceptable to the ruling gang. We left because we felt that a country taken over by the Nazis would be an impossible place to live in -- a place where the very air ^{was} ~~was~~ ^{ing} ~~became~~ stifling and poisonous. We ~~we~~ left because we realized that ^{Hitler} would inevitably lead the German nation to war, disgrace, and disaster.

We might have thought and acted differently -- in fact, we might have found that it would be more useful and more honorable to stay at home, if there had been a chance to fight Nazism within Germany. But there was no such chance -- especially in the case of people who were so notorious, from the Nazi point of view, as was the Mann tribe: including my father, who had given quite a bit of trouble to the German nationalists, even before 1933; my uncle, Heinrich Mann -- a veteran champion of German liberalism and anti-Fascism --; my dynamic sister Erika, now a U.S. war correspondent, and my scholarly but tough younger brother, Golo -- also a member of the American Army. Too numerous and too conspicuous to go underground, we had to choose between compromise and exile. We had to make up our minds -- either to play ball with the Nazis; or to give up our country. Naturally we preferred the latter.

By doing so, we did not betray what had been fine and lovable in pre-Hitler Germany; on the contrary, we made a desperate effort to save it.

The German anti-Nazis in exile -- that is, those among them who were politically conscious and active -- had the double mission of warning both the world and their former countrymen against Nazism. We kept imploring the Germans: Get rid of Hitler! He is your undoing, he will ruin you! ... But the Germans were deaf. Most of them believed in Hitler as the Messiah -- sent by God to increase the greatness and glory of the Fatherland.

So we cried out to the world: Beware of Hitler and of the German people who follow him! Hitler means war. Get rid of him, lest you will have war on a world-wide scale!... But the world was not able, or not willing, to accept, or only to consider, any advice or warning coming from those who had no illusions about the deadly seriousness of the Hitler challenge. The world wanted peace at any price -- even at the price of appeasing the arch-enemy ^{of} peace, Adolf Hitler.

The arch-enemy, meanwhile, became stronger and stronger. In the end he was so powerful that he could no longer be appeased. The great showdown had become inevitable.

Could people of our kind and with our record stay aloof, under such circumstances? Could we waver? Could we hesitate?

We had failed twice in our historical duty. We had not succeeded in preventing Nazism in Germany, and our voices had been too weak to arouse world public opinion to the imminence of the Nazi danger. Now we had the opportunity to make good, to a certain extent, our previous failures. Now we had the chance to prove the sincerity of our convictions by participating in the fight against Nazi barbarism -- the very fight which the Germans ^{failed} ~~unwilling~~ to wage in 1933.

I find it difficult to understand those German refugees -- there were only few of them! -- who objected to taking up arms "against former countrymen" -- in other words, who ~~excluded~~ excluded themselves from the fight against

Nazism. One of my former friends, for instance -- Prince Hubertus Zu Loewenstein, a German politician and lecturer who used to play a certain role in American liberal circles -- came out with a public statement to the effect that he, for one, could never bring himself to shoot at German troops; for -- the Prince argued -- by doing so, he would risk to hurt some upright German anti-Nazi and meritorious member of the Underground.

Not to fight Nazism, out of fear to hurt anti-Nazis! What a preposterous paradox!

To begin with, there are, alas, not very many upright anti-Nazi or meritorious members of the ~~German~~ Underground in the German army -- or, for that matter, ^{any} ~~any~~ where in Germany. But if there are any, there will ~~be~~ certainly be the first to disapprove sharply of the Prince's hypocritical, unrealistic, illogical and stupid point of view. Those among my, and the Prince's, former countrymen who have maintained any common sense and are still capable of thinking honestly and independently, cannot but realize that whatever we do to lick Hitler and to break, once and for all, the evil power of German militarism, is also done in the interest of all sincere German anti-Nazis.

The complete defeat and extinction of the Hitler regime is a vital necessity, not only for my new homeland, the United States of America, but also for the whole world and, in particular, for my former country, Germany. The Germans who still fail to see this, will have to be taught a terrible, lasting lesson.

I do not hate my former countrymen. I agree -- as, I suppose, most Americans do -- with the generous statement President Roosevelt made in his speech of 22 October, 1944:

"We bring no charge against the German race as such, for we cannot believe that God has eternally condemned any race of humanity; for we know in our

land how many good men and women with German ancestry have proved loyal,
freedom-loving, peace-loving citizens."

But if we, Americans of German stock, cherish freedom and peace, we have
to help in defending those supreme values -- even if the aggressors happen
to be our former countrymen.



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