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Thomas Mann and his Family.

Mann, Erika

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Thomas Mann and his Family

by Erika Mann

Of course, it was very jolly for me to show my parents the United States when I joined them on a lecture tour in March, 1938. All they knew of America was New York and Washington, and immediately upon their arrival, I could tell them with the air of the initiated: "New York, you must know, is not America - neither is Washington. They nodded eagerly. "Is Tulsa, Oklahoma, America?" they asked. I said, yes, that would be considered as such and so, in my opinion, would Kansas City and Salt Lake City, for which places we were bound.

We began ~~the~~ the lecture tour, and for a few days we had a wonderful time. My parents were interested in everything new, like intelligent children. They are extremely inquisitive and have extraordinarily receptive minds. They ~~are~~ ~~meet~~ meet strangers with ready affability. On the trains, they shared a compartment while I spent the nights in a lower berth, behind green curtains. They enjoyed the comfort of American railroads with childlike pleasure. And when, as a climax, we listened ~~to~~ a wonderful Wagner Concert, coming from Philadelphia, in the Club-car (while we were passing through the desert, Heaven only knows where), their joy knew no bounds.

On March 11, Germany absorbed Austria. And suddenly, our tour, which had begun so cheerfully, became difficult. At that time, my father spoke little English, and so it was I who, during the press conferences and question periods, conveyed the answers he gave me in a low voice, to press and public. I tried to cheer him up and told him something about an important football game I had seen in the fall. "I don't understand very much about baseball," he said sadly, and I abstained from calling his attention to the slight difference between the two games. His supply of Swiss cigarettes was exhausted, and he didn't believe he could smoke the American ones. He received letters in which he was asked to sponsor one thing or another. "What is a sponsor?" he asked me, with a look of despair.

Then he said, that he couldn't possibly work, if he had to travel around continually and that he wasn't born for that kind of life. "I need a small house," he said, "in which my writing-desk, heavy and reliable is placed; but where shall I find it?" My mother said: "We shall find a small house again - just watch! We shall live here in America and feel at home - just leave that to me!" I looked at her - her voice ~~was~~ had sounded confident - but her eyes had in them a sad look.

In the fall of 1938, I returned from a trip to Sudeten-German districts and blinked at the sun that shone over Princeton, New Jersey.

The attractive low house of red brick - 65 Stockton Street - that lay before me was our new home in America. Here my parents were now living and with them four of my five brothers and sisters (the fifth was still in London and was due to arrive soon). Beautiful, splendidly-hued autumn flowers were blooming in the garden, the trees bore many-coloured foliage - the fall in Munich had presented the same picture, so had Southern France, where we had been "at home" in 1933; and in Küsnacht near Zurich, that for a few years was our home, it was something like this.

I entered the living-room just at tea-time. The picture that presented itself to me was at once familiar and strange. My parents and brothers and sisters were seated about the round tea-table, Father with the New York Times on his knees, from which he was reading aloud, somewhat hesitantly, but with a fair pronunciation. A Negro man-servant, in white jacket, offered crackers; on the gramophone (it was the instrument from Munich, our good, old Victrola - I recognized it immediately) there were a few American magazines. The beautiful Empire bookcases, treasures from the home of our grandparents in Lübeck, stood slender and venerable in the background of this large room, undeniably permeated with the spicy and somewhat sweetish smoke from American cigarettes.

For a moment I stood at the door, before unloosing a storm of greetings with a rather American "Helloh". They all jumped up, all talking in wild confusion. "How do you like it?" they said. "Isn't it fine here? - and quite American - and just like home?" Pointing to the coloured servant, Father said, "This is John; he

doesn't remind you very much of our Marie in Munich, but he does his work very well." My Mother said: "Besides there is Lucy. To-night she is to make 'dumplings' (Knödel) for the first time. We are all in quite a state of excitement about it; Lucy, naturally, most of all."

I am served with tea, but Father insists that I inspect his study, "my studio", he says, in English, and I agree that that is more important than tea. There it stands, the writing-desk, "heavy and reliable", I think to myself, as we both stand in front of it. "It is very strange", my Father says, "here it stands, and all the small objects are placed upon it in the old order: the large ivory paper-knife and the coins and the photographs. The servant dusts them, and I ask him in English, not to displace anything. He understands me at least as well as our Marie, who also had her troubles with me, since she actually only understood Munich dialect, while I use the idiom peculiar to the northern part of Germany."

Mother comes in and tells us that tea is getting cold. The glance, with which my Father envelopes her, is one of deep gratitude. "Once more she has brought it all about," he says. "She found this house, that seems just built for us, and arranged the moving, so that I noticed almost nothing at all. The food tastes almost as good as at home, and when of a morning I sit at my writing-desk and enter into the heads and hearts of the figures I am endeavouring to bring to life, I sometimes actually do not know, where I am - in Munich? In Küsnacht? At any rate: I am obviously at home, and that is the main thing."

In the evening, at dinner, the first course is tomato-juice ("the coloured servants have educated us to that," Father says. "We are already quite used to it!") Sauerbraten (pickled beef), and Knödel (dumplings). The Bavarian dishes have turned out excellently, but Mother says, "the rolls weren't quite old enough. Lucy must learn that only old rolls are right for dumplings."

After dinner, we drink whiskey, evidently also the result of the "coloured" training - we never drank whiskey at home in former days. Father has arranged a fine program on the gramophone. We hear Beethoven, Brahms and Schubert, a few songs by Hugo Wolf as the finale - it is a very German concert. Between the numbers, we chat. The great game, Princeton-Yale, is imminent. "Our chances are good", Father says. "We'll undoubtedly win against Yale. In a baseball game?" I ask, and Father contemplates me with a look of deep scorn. "Football", he says laconically, but I can not rid myself of the suspicion that even to-day he could not clearly define the difference between the two games.

Later in the evening, he reads to us. He sits beneath the lamp, as he always has, as he did twenty years ago in our house on the Isar, when we were small children. He reads from a typewritten manuscript; but I happen to know that he writes only in longhand - nice and very illegibly, using German characters.

Our Mother has typed everything; she is the only one who can decipher this handwriting without difficulty. She takes care of Father's correspondence, also; he dictates to her, and it is she who negotiates with his publishers. She knows what royalties are due him (he himself doesn't know), she drives the car, she does all the buying (goes to the market where everything is a trifle cheaper, and herself collects the vegetables, using one of the small basket push-carts of the market), she consoles us all, when we are down-hearted, and advises us all in all our work.

"Michael's teachers and pupils are well-satisfied with his work", she says, as Father interrupts his reading, to ask the youngest, nineteen-year old Michael, whether he has understood everything. "Michael has pupils?" I ask. Yes, he is taking advantage of his Swiss teacher's diploma and teaching small American boys violin. "Michael and Elisabeth play together very nicely now," Father says. "To-morrow you must give a concert, children. Have you become accustomed to the new grand piano, Elisabeth? And day after to-morrow Klaus must read to us, or Eri. Is 'Escape to Life' finished?" We tell him that it is, but that we would rather have Golo read to us - "in order to cultivate our minds." Golo is a philosopher and historian and might have been a Professor at Heidelberg.

"Day after to-morrow?" he now says. "But day after to-morrow we're going to the movies!" Father loves to go to the movies. "I understand everything already", he says and laughs, proud as a child. "I have almost no difficulty in understanding the

the language; if I only belonged to an American family, I would soon be talking like an American waterfall." However, he looks at us so friendly, as he speaks, that we feel: as a family we suit him quite well, as we are.

At home, in exile, is correct, we are at home, once more at home. Tomato-juice and dumplings on the table, Hemingway and Goethe in the bookcase, Brahms in the record-library and jazz on the radio, German readings under the lamp and good chances "for us" against Yale. Germany is far away, and its landscape is shrouded in darkness. But wherever we are, there is Germany, and we are at home, where the writing desk stands.

"We will be permitted to stay in America," Father says. "Here democracy is ~~at~~ strong and sincere." We all nod assent. And young Michael, who understands nothing of politics, although he already has pupils, says: "And if we have to leave again - this time, perhaps, for the moon - then it won't be much different, either. Mother will show the moon angels how to cook dumplings, and she will look out that they do not displace all the objects on the writing-desk. And that's about all there would be to it!"

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DR. AND MRS. MANN PREPARING A CONCERT



DR. MANN'S DESK IN THE PRINCETON HOUSE



DR. MANN READING TO HIS FAMILY IN THE PRINCETON HOUSE



MRS. MANN TYPING DR. MANN'S MANUSCRIPT



DR. THOMAS MANN AND HIS DAUGHTER, MISS ERIKA MANN

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THOMAS MANN AND HIS FAMILY

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THOMAS MANN AND HIS FAMILY

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