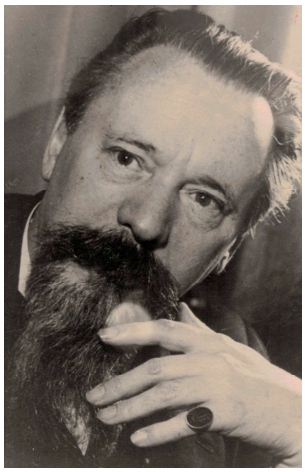
Theodor Lessing (1872 – 1933)



During the night of August 30/31, 1933, Theodor Lessing, having fled Germany for the relative safety of the Czech resort town of Marienbad (today's Mariánské Lázně), was assassinated by two rightist contract killers. For the rumored reward of 80,000[1] Reichsmark posted by the newly empowered National Socialist government of Germany, Rudolf Zischka and Max Eckert climbed a ladder to Lessing's upper-story apartment and shot him twice in the head through a closed window while he worked at his desk. He died in a local hospital shortly after, the first known victim of the Nazis outside of Germany.[2]

Two days after Lessing's death, Joseph Goebbels, who purportedly approved the bounty for the murder, referenced Lessing at the Nuremberg party conference in declaring that it was "*not surprising that the German revolution . . . was now shaking off this yoke.*" The *Niederdeutsche Zeitung*, a pro-Nazi paper published in Lessing's hometown of Hannover, maliciously reported: "*Now this unfortunate ghost has also been wiped away.*" Lessing's old literary nemesis, Thomas Mann, wrote in his diary: "*I dread such an end, not because it is the end, but because it is so miserable and might befit a Lessing, but not me*."

Notwithstanding Nazi celebration and Mann's elitist contempt, many more mourned Lessing's passing. Following his death, Albert Einstein, Bertrand Russell, Romain Rolland, and Max Brod, among others, sought the formation of a Theodor Lessing Fund to finance the publication of Lessing's unpublished works. Tellingly, Lessing's death also helped convince Albert and Elsa Einstein to flee their holiday rental in Belgium for England that September (Einstein would never set foot in continental Europe again). And at Lessing's funeral at the Jewish Cemetery in Marienbad, his widow, Ada Lessing, presented the Czechoslovak President (and former philosophy professor), Thomas Masaryk, with Arthur Schopenhauer's walking stick, on which Lessing had been leaning for over thirty years.

While Lessing had been a somewhat controversial and confrontational figure during his public life in Germany, from a 21st Century perspective, there is little to indicate that he would be such an early target of the Nazis or that his murder would mark such flashpoint. Indeed, much of Lessing's work was directed, in concurrence with his philosophical principles (philosophy as action), toward effecting public good. Early in his career, he formed a popular Anti-Noise Society to combat some of the ill-effects of rapid industrialization in urban Germany. As a determined pacifist, he served as doctor in military hospitals in the First World War. And he committed himself to improving the lives of the German working class through education, especially adult education, eventually and

[1] In 1933, a U.S. Dollar was worth approximately 3.2 Reichsmarks, making the value of the bounty about $25,000 in 1933 and over $500,000 at the time of this writing.

[2] While Eckert was prosecuted and imprisoned for the murder for a time after the war by the Czechoslovak authorities, Rudolf Zischka went unpunished and lived as a "blameless citizen" in the DDR (then East Germany) until his death in 1978.

enduringly founding, with his dynamic wife Ada Lessing, an adult education school which today bears their name, The Ada-und-Theodor-Lessing-Volkshochschule Hannover.

He engaged in these efforts in addition to his primary work of teaching and writing philosophy and paying his bills through journalism, commentary, and theatre review. Unfortunately, the principal controversies in his life arose from this paid work. In 1910, Lessing wrote a nasty satire of the popular literary critic, Samuel Lublinski, which generated public blow-back from German authors, especially Thomas Mann, who owed Lublinski for positive reviews of their own work. In a 1924-1925 journalistic series (collected in book form as *Haarmann, Story of a Werewolf*) on the trial of the grisly Hannover serial killer, Fritz Haarmann, Lessing outraged local officialdom when he revealed that the Hannover police had long used Haarmann as an informant and declared that they, together with all of Hannover society, were essentially complicit in his crimes. Most dangerously for Lessing, in a subsequent 1925 article on the potential election of General Paul von Hindenburg to the German presidency, Lessing called this WWI hero (at least in the mind of the German public) an empty vessel, a question mark, a zero, but presciently warned that "*behind every Zero, there is always a future Nero*."

This last article, originally published in the *Prager Tagblatt*, incited student protests against Lessing when a distorted version was reprinted in a local Hannover paper, forcing the administration of the Hannover Technical University, not entirely unwilling, to effect the resignation of Lessing's professorship. Later in 1930, Goebbels, used the article to propagandize Hindenburg's libel suit against Goebbels, stating—falsely—in a public address in Leipzig that, " . . . *the Jewish history professor Lessing compared the Reich President in foreign newspapers with the mass murderer Haarmann, for which the national student body chastised him, but the Marxist ministry rewarded him with a research assignment*."

In response, Lessing pointed out seven falsehoods in just that one sentence noted that the reputation of any historical figure quite often only rests upon one or a few mentions of him or her that are handed down through time. *"What if all that remained of me were the sentence from Doctor Goebbels' speech, just as nothing remained of Catalina but Cicero's speech?"*[3]

Lessing's response was entirely in keeping with his own philosophical outlook on historiography, as published in the seminal, *Geschichte als Sinngebung des Sinnlosen (History as Giving Sense to What is Senseless)*[4]. In his view, history is just a tale told by historians, without, in philosophical terms, delivering any real truth. As such, written history says as much about the times and temper of the historian(s) as it does about the subject. For instance, every era and culture views Napoleon through a lens that reflects the needs and ambitions of that era's and that geography's authors: a Napoleon as a military genius, a Napoleon as a lawgiver, a Napoleon as a tyrant, a Napoleon as a clown. And, as Lessing predicted, the treatment of his own reputation has varied over time,

[3] Original: *„Wenn nun alles, was von mir übrigbleibt, der Satz aus der Rede des Dokter Goebbels wäre, so wie vom Catalina nichts übrigblieb als die Rede des Cicero?"* Cited in Herman Simissen's Mythical Afterimages.

[4] This work, though written at the start of WWI, was not permitted publication until 1919. He largely rewrote the book as a 4th edition in 1927.

both during his life and in his subsequent treatment by biographers, historians, philosophers, and cultural critics.

Lessing wrote on a variety of topics that enjoyed a wide readership in the German-speaking world, but he was also vilified during his life both by the German right and certain literary figures like Thomas Mann (who had initially taken a dislike to Lessing when Mann's sister became friendly with him during their student days in Munich). His death and the Nazi regime effectively buried his reputation for a time. His post-war reputation, which has grown slowly since, varies with decade and locale, mostly in a positive way, but very much informed by the ambitions of the particular author and the colors on his/her palette board. For instance, he was embraced as a socialist and indeed 'Prophet' by writers of the former East Germany (Deutsche Demokratische Republik, DDR, *See, e.g.* Günter Kunert, *Der Prophet*, Donat Verlag, Bremen); as a philosopher by specialists in 20th C. philosophical studies (*See, e.g.* Herman Simissen's writings); and as a Zionist and analyst of the state-of-mind of the German Jews (as author, *inter alia,* of 1930's *Jewish Self-Hate*). Particularly as a 'Jewish' writer, he has been widely reviewed by scholars specializing in Jewish thought and German-Jewish history (*See, e.g.* the excellent body of scholarship and translations by Elke-Vera Kotowski , Peter C. Appelbaum, and Paul Reitter. Of course, the greatest effort at restoring Lessing's name and place in history has been made by Dr. Rainer Marwedel in his biography of Lessing and compendia, with copious notes, of his shorter missives, articles, reviews, and feuilletons. But Lessing has also become the target of modern criticism from polemicists like Yascha Mounk who look at Lessing and find him to be wanting, not for what for he was in his time, but for what they might look for in a heroic public-intellectual today. Mounk, for instance, indicts Lessing's philosophical output as derivative and inconsistent and accuses him of never overcoming his own Jewish antisemitism. In short, he was not philosophical enough, not anti-Nazi enough, not Jewish enough by the standards of a millennial-age Baltimore academic (*The Strange Afterlife of Theodor Lessing* (2017).

While much abler hands have analyzed Lessing's work, it is the view of this author, that Lessing was entirely consistent in his thinking and that, unlike many philosophers of the past, and especially his age, he lived the philosophy he wrote. Overall, in a somewhat simplistic take, Lessing looked at man in his natural state as a creature in need, suffering. And everything that man thinks and has built, both physically and culturally, arises in answer to those needs. Following on Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, Lessing also saw the world as subjective representation, but he didn't key on man's will as the only 'truth' that could be defined objectively in an otherwise subjective world. For, to Lessing, *need* preceded *will*. We don't eat because we have a will to eat. We eat because we're hungry. Need begets action, or at least the will to action. On a larger scale, humanity has constructed a built-environment and societal cultures that respond to various needs that have evolved since man emerged from its base, natural state. Those constructs, whether it be our political structures, our religions, our theatre, our music, our laws, or our economy, all arise in answer to our individual sufferings and collective, societal needs, even if just to make sense of the world. Lessing, among others, e.g. his onetime childhood friend, Ludwig Klages, called this collection of human constructs, *Geist*. Geist has many possible translations in English. It can mean ghost, spirit, consciousness, culture, mind, thought, but there is no direct

translation for the larger meaning of the German word, which, for instance, when used to discuss a particular cultural aura at a certain point in time, still goes untranslated in English as *Zeitgeist*.

Geist exits as a consequence of humanity's natural state, but also, to some extent, in opposition to it. Lessing bemoaned the effect of Geist on man, and celebrated those forces, and particularly those Asian religions (See, e.g. *Europa und Asien*, 1918), which sought to restore man to a more naturalist mind-set and more natural state, out in the woods, on the land, surrounded by animals. To this end—again philosophy as action—Lessing taught in two separate land schools (*Landerziehungsheim*) that encouraged students to shed the trappings of urban, modern life, and cultivate both their natural wisdom and the land. Lessing was not unique in these views, which paralleled parts of the *Völkisch* movement that arose out of 19th C. Romanticism as both a back-to-nature movement and a return to the folk culture of Germanic peoples. Unfortunately, the *Völkisch* movement was corrupted by the German right in the late 19th and early 20th Centuries to support ideas of German nationalism and genetic exceptionalism. And this provides ammunition to Lessing critics who deride him as both an enabler and apologist for the German right and a self-hating antisemite; a bit like equating all evolutionary theorists with the eugenicists of prior decades.

Lessing applied his view of the societal balance between man's more natural state and Geist also to individual people and groups of people, including the German Jews. Again giving ammunition to his contemporary and modern detractors, Lessing decried the imbalance of Geist in German Jewry (*Judentum*), noting that Jews had moved too far from nature and were entirely overwhelmed by their high-minded cultural, intellectual, and economic pursuits. Critics cite this as an example of his own Jewish self-hate, but Lessing's view was meant to identify the source of Jewish discontent in the modern German state and to provide—because Lessing always sought—some remedy for this condition. Lessing noted that German Jews had become divorced from nature by their circumstances over the centuries: not permitted to own land, ghettoed in the larger towns and cities, allowed admission in only a few guilds and disfavored professions. Accordingly, they mastered what was allowed them. Lessing's call for rebalancing Geist was also a call for Jewish self-determination, to move past banking and law and embrace, explore, and cultivate the land, basic crafts, and their own true nature, if not in Germany, then perhaps in Palestine; a soft Zionism without nationalistic overtones.

Admittedly, Lessing often wrote very directly, unsparingly. He was prone to the occasional grand or harsh pronouncement that he might dial-back later in the paragraph or later in life. For this reason, his writings can be easily cherry-picked for quotes that bolster a critic's arguments, whether that critic be Goebbels, Mann, or a modern academic. Lessing, late in life, amused to learn of the rumored bounty on his head, called out the selective criticism and consequences thereof:

> *My God! What I've had to hear about my head all my life? At school, they said he had no head for learning. At university, he was muddle-headed. His colleagues said he was a headcase. One critic wrote that he no head for politics. Another, no head for history. Still others: My head was missing certain organs. The organ for metaphysics. For myth. For*

> *comedy. For mathematics. In short: everything in my head was negative. I racked my brains and earned nothing from it. And now 80,000 Reichsmarks! So, with my head, this fortune will fall to other people. I never thought it possible to earn so much with my head.*[5]

That cherry-picking by his critics did, and still does, more than just a disservice to Lessing. By helping to minimize, even erase his legacy, they take Lessing out of the context of his age and lend undue credence to his detractors and eventual murderers. And if that can be done to a Lessing, what can be done to those writers and artists, however imperfect, who seek to stand against the more technically-adept authoritarian institutions and totalitarian regimes that control the narratives today?

By George Phocas (2024)

[5] Quoted in Rainer Marwedel's biography, Theodor Lessing 1872-1933 (Luchterhand 1987) p357-8. Quote translated by George Phocas