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Victor Klemperer. *Ich will Zeugnis ablegen bis zum letzten, 1933-1945.* Berlin: Aufbau Verlag, 1995. 763 + 928 pp. 98 DM (cloth), ISBN 978-3-351-02340-9.

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A Jew in Germany, 1933-1945

On June 13, 1942, a day after his apartment building had been raided by the Gestapo and he and his neighbors had been beaten and humiliated, Victor Klemperer wrote in his secret diary: "I want to give testimony until the last" (II, 124). This outburst of grim determination the editors have used as the title of his posthumously published two-volume journal of the period 1933 to 1945. Klemperer, a decorated World War I veteran, cousin of the famous conductor Otto Klemperer, was born in Landsberg on the river Warthe (Prussia) in 1881, the son of a rabbi who moved his family to Berlin in 1890. He gave up a business career to study and become first a journalist and finally a professor of Romance languages at the Technical University in Dresden. He survived the Nazi era in Dresden in part because he was married to an Aryan, in part through sheer luck. His chronicle of the life of a Jew in Germany during the Third Reich offers a minute, often day-by-day description of ever increasing persecution. Since its appearance last year, thirty-four years after his death, the book has gone through eight printings in Germany and was featured in December on "Das literarische Quartett," Marcel Reich-Ranicki's well-known TV program, which enjoys some popularity among the German audience. It will soon be published in English by Random House.

When Hitler came to power, Klemperer, a Protestant convert, had for many years considered himself fully assimilated and in every way a German. Although he clearly recognized the dangers of Nazism from the outset, he, like so many other Germans, felt that it would be a passing phenomenon. In the beginning his diary is a true mixture of personal and family events and political observations. He notes his progress in writing a history of French literature in the eighteenth century, his plans for building a house in the town Doelzschen near Dresden, his successful attempt (at the age of 55!) to obtain his driver's license, the purchase of an automobile, and the subsequent excursions in it throughout northeastern Germany with his wife Eva.

Equal or greater space is devoted to the politics of the 1930s. Time and again Klemperer notes his belief and that of many others, Jews and Christians, that the Nazis cannot last. Rumors abounded, rumors of *putsch* (especially after events like the Roehm affair, the occupation of the Rhineland, the *Anschluss*), struggles within the party, takeover by the military or the communists, disastrous harvests that would ruin the Nazis. Yet more perspicacious opponents of Nazism began to leave Germany and to emigrate to safer, foreign climes. Although urged to do so himself, Klemperer, who had been forced into retirement in 1935, hesitated, partly out of despair of ever establishing himself abroad. His mastery of the spoken language in English and even in the languages of his field, he realized, was too poor to allow him to gain a foothold in a new country, let alone climb to the status he had enjoyed in Germany as professor and houseowner. And in the end he was too attached to his homeland, although he was made increasingly aware that he was to become a pariah in his country. In late August 1938, after a pleasant outing in his newly acquired car he writes, "How beautiful Germany would be, if one could still feel oneself a German and feel German with pride. (Five minutes ago I read the newly promulgated law about Jewish given names. It would be laughable, if one couldn't lose one's reason over it. The new names are for the most part not Old Testament names but curious sounding Yiddish or ghetto-names, in the direction of Franzos, Kompert. So I myself am required to inform the civil registries of Landsberg and Berlin as well as the Community of Doelzschen that I am called Victor-Israel and must sign official letters in this manner. Whether Eva has to use Eva-Sara, I still have to determine)" (I, 419).

The most difficult time period began after the *Kristallnacht* and intensified progressively to the unbearable after the war began. In the years before hostilities came to German soil in the form of extensive Allied bomb-

ing, bureaucracy had more time to occupy itself with the persecution of Jews. There were privations in the area of food distribution. Jews were soon banned from all restaurants. Eva Klemperer was still able to glean a meager meal here and there in restaurants on her daily trek into town to collect food supplies. Certain foods were withheld from Jews. Being caught with an illegal cauliflower could mean death. Tobacco, hard to obtain anyway, was denied to Jews; they began smoking blackberry tea. Hardly a month went by without another prohibition for Jews. At one point the author sets up an inventory of prohibitions, everything from buying flowers to owning pets. (Indeed, the Klemperers had to have their cat put down to comply with the latter restriction.) Especially difficult for the academic was the restrictions on his use of lending libraries. As an educator he labels it one of the most shameless acts of the Nazi party that it forbade all instruction to Jewish children. For a while he secretly tutored a Jewish boy, who, he soon noticed, lacked the most elementary educational prerequisites.

In 1940 Jews were forced into selected "Jew-houses" (*Judenhaeuser*) in Dresden, not a ghetto in the traditional sense, since they were not all located in one particular area. Klemperer himself had to move three times. Assembled in various individual buildings, they were easy targets for the Gestapo, who conducted regular house searches. Agents of that dreaded police organization would barge into an apartment and under a steady stream of spit and verbal abuse they would–with or without the excuse of searching for contraband–devastate an apartment, upsetting furniture, tearing out clothes, books, papers, overturning open containers of food. That was the scenario, if the Jewish apartment dwellers were lucky. If they were not, they were robbed of money, valuables, or scarce food, beaten unmercifully, and perhaps ordered to Gestapo headquarters near the main railway station for another round of maltreatment. Incarceration or deportation were also threatening possibilities. Klemperer too spent an hour of humiliation in Gesatpo offices, and his apartment building was subjected to a number of visitations; he was lucky enough to experience only one himself (the one mentioned at the beginning of this review). Yet he also had to deal with the misery of other victims. A woman in his apartment building, Mrs. Pick, in her late seventies, tried to commit suicide after being beaten up in a Gestapo raid. Klemperer tried to talk her out of it and called for help to have her revived when she overdosed on Veronal. (Her second attempt in August 1942 shortly before her scheduled deportation was successful.)

Yet for all the persecution he and his wife endured, there are many instances when Germans showed solidarity with Jews and tried to help them. When threatened with having to sell his house (at a ridiculously low price), Klemperer engaged the lawyer Dr. Heise as "Aryan administrator," who repeatedly staved off the necessity of a sale, until he was removed from the case for being too friendly to Jews. His successor, a Dr. Richter, was, however, just as friendly and again used legal tricks to delay the forced sale of the house. He even made plans to hide Klemperer when–as they all expected–the wholesale open slaughter of Jews in the streets would begin during the disintegration of the Third Reich. Richter's reward for his all-too-close relations with Jews was Buchenwald. In the various jobs he was compelled to take, shoveling snow or in a factory packaging herbal teas and remedies, Klemperer was treated humanely. Even in jail, where he spent a week as punishment for failing to darken his apartment window during an air raid alarm, there were moments of rough-edged kindness from the guards. (One suspects that the author's former social status as a professor may have evoked vestiges of respect and contributed to his survival.)

Klemperer records–as much as his restricted situation allowed–the attitude of the everyday German toward the Nazis, the war, toward the Jews and the Germans' treatment of them. "Vox populi" or "voces populi" he often labels these gleanings of public opinion (pro-Nazi and anti-Nazi, philo-Semitic and anti-Semitic) and frequently questions what the true sentiment of the general populace might be. As before, at the begining of the Nazi era, so many people believed that this was a regime that in war had once again overextended itself to such a great degree that its demise was imminent. So there were many whispered encouragements by passers-by: "Chin up! It won't last long."

German youth fares poorly. The children he meets, usually in groups, often wearing HitlerYouth uniforms, invariably take the opportunity to taunt the Jew. (The older adolescents, however, pass by without molesting him.) Klemperer realized that it would take a long time to detoxify these young minds. The German working class makes a much better showing, as the following incident indicates. The diarist writes, "An older man, probably master in a manual trade, came toward me. 'I guess you're working out here?' 'Yes, as snow shoveler.' 'But you're already somewhat older, aren't you?' 'I am sixty.' He, to himself, passionately under his breath, while walking on: 'Those bastards, those cursed, goddamned bastards"' (II, 39). But members of the upper class showed compassion too. "On the park way of the Lothringer Strasse as I came back from the cemetery on Sunday af-

ternoon an old gentleman–white goatee, approximately seventy, retired higher ranking civil servant–came right across the path toward me, stretched out his hand to me, and said with a certain ceremoniality: 'I saw your star and I greet you, I condemn this ostracism of a race, and many others do so likewise.' I: 'That's very kind of you–but you're not allowed to talk with me; it can cost me my life and bring you into prison.'–Yes, but he wanted to, he had to tell me that" (II, 406).

Klemperer, the intellectual, tried to read as much Nazi literature as possible: newspapers, books and articles by Rosenberg and Goebbels, especially articles from the magazines *Der Freiheitskampf* and *Das Reich*, in order to get for himself a clearer idea of the mentality of his oppressors. The philologist assiduously collected newly coined words and expressions of the new empire, examples of what he calls "lingua tertii imperii," the title he chose after the war for his book on the language of Nazism. At the same time the outcast tried to educate himself about his Jewish origins by reading books on Jewish history and Zionism. With the latter he cannot reconcile himself and even repeatedly compares its dogmatic fanaticism to the mentality of the dictatorial regime he lives under.

In August 1941 Klemperer notes that one speaks generally of the euthanasia of the mentally ill and in the latter part of the year he writes more and more about Jews being deported to the East. "Evacuation" was the euphemism used. Klemperer records the news that, faced with imminent deportation, 2,000 Berlin Jews had committed suicide in the fall of 1941 (II, 92). (Mrs. Pick's fate later brought that closer to home.) Concentration camp names like Buchenwald, Ravensbrueck, and Dachau crop up in his entries. Being sent to one of these, he realizes, is tantamount to a sentence of death, and he has heard the infamous words that mask murder: "shot while trying to escape" and "death due to heart failure." He is not constantly aware of the wholesale, systematic slaughter of Jews, although he hears of individual mass killings: "Paul Kreidl [a Jewish acquaintance of Klemperer] reports–rumor, but imparted convincingly from several different sources–evacuated Jews were *shot* in Riga row upon row as they left the train" (II, 9). The name Auschwitz, too, came to his attention as early as March 1942: "In these days I heard named as the most terrible concentration camp Auschwitz (or something like that) near Koenigshuette in Upper Silesia. Mining work, death after only a few days…" (II, 47). Later he notes again that Auschwitz seems to be a "busy charnal house" (II, 259). In October 1944 he records the visit of a man named Konrad who, from reports of soldiers, guesses quite accurately that in the East six to seven million Jews have been murdered either by shooting or gassing (II, 606). What remains unclear is whether this too represents information that is spreading generally among the German populace or whether it is news that reached only a few people–especially Jews who sought out stories about the fate of fellow Jews.

Almost shocking for him is the growing insensitivity to the plight of other Jews he perceives in himself. At the Jewish cemetery the sight of urns containing ashes of people, some of whom he has had contact with only a short time before, inspires only terror, and that only for a while. He becomes inured to the experience. The news of the death of Jewish acquaintances and the grief of their loved ones leave him inwardly cold, he finds. When he is called upon to tell others of the death of a loved one, he sees that he remains emotionally detached. This perhaps is indeed testimony of the necessity for many people in Germany, Jews and Aryans, to adopt a callousness in order to maintain some emotional equilibrium. The substitute for his emotion is, of course, the diary itself. It takes on the aspect of a chronicle, which the author hopes somehow, someday, to present to the world. The words of the title, "I want to give testimony," are repeated several times. Klemperer continues to write doggedly even though he knows that if pages of his journal were discovered by the wrong people (during a Gestapo raid for instance), it would mean certain death for him, or for his wife, who carried the manuscript bit by bit as it was finished to a physician friend, Dr. Annemarie Kohler, in a nearby town. Since Kohler, too, was unpopular with the Nazis, her clinic was not the safest repository.

One cannot be less than overwhlemed by the immediacy of the writing at certain points. This is not a memoir, attended by the problems of retrospection, but a day-by-day record of uncertainty and terror that gains suspense from the reader's historical knowledge. One is all too aware of the significant historical markers, the Roehm-Putsch, the occupation of the Rhineland, the Anschluss and the infamous *Kristallnacht*, the outbreak of the war, the beginning of the annihilation of the Jews, the Staufenberg plot against Hitler, or the bombing of Dresden. How is Klemperer's report going to present these events? one asks oneself repeatedly. Indeed, the annihilation of the city ironically saved his life by allowing him to tear off the hated star and submerge himself in the ensuing chaos that took hold in Germany until the end of the war. Although Klemperer's diary cannot pretend to be a comprehensive depiction of the German attitude toward Jews and the war, it tries to capture as much of the detail as possible.

In the present discussion of the culpability of ordinary Germans during the Nazi era, this diary (cleansed, I hope, of the many typographical errors that mar the German version) will surely add one more piece of fascinating evidence.

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