

Ernst Rose

## A Historian's Creed

When I retired in 1966, I had been teaching for forty-two years, and I thought that this was quite a long time. Now, in 1983, I have been living in retirement for almost twenty years, and the time of my professional activities no longer appears so exceptional. It is shrinking with each subsequent month and is gradually acquiring its lasting historical significance, a small significance indeed. Colleagues whom I knew in their inspiring prime have gone. The M.A. and Ph.D. theses which I directed have been put into dead storage, and the books I produced are gathering dust or are being remaindered. When I peruse the professional journals to which I am still subscribing, I discover too many articles on subjects with which I am but vaguely familiar or which are completely beyond my vision.<sup>1</sup>

Yet the distance from my former haunts also has its compensations. I find myself in a situation where I no longer have to consider personal sensitivities among my presumable audiences and where the lasting outlines of my former problems and solutions come through more clearly. I have been reading fewer special monographs and far more general philosophies and surveys on related and on not related subjects. The scientific treatises of Sagan, Bronowski, Attenborough, the political surveys of Giselher Wirsing, Klaus Mehnert, Edward Mortimer, the philosophical discourses of Nicolai Hartmann, Karl Jaspers, Helmut Thielicke, Hans Küng, all have added to my general understanding and have taught me more than another article on Brecht, or Benn, or Frisch, or Musil.

On February 20, 1960, about 140 professors and teachers of German gathered at the College of the City of New York to look for new directions in a field which even at that time was becoming questionable. Lienhard Bergel of Queens College spoke on the problems of literary history. Victor Lange of Princeton explored the meaning and purpose of poetry. Erich Berger of New York City's Lycée Française pointed at Friedrich Gundolf as the protagonist of a new synthesis of detailed fact-finding and inspired intuition, and André von Gronicka of Columbia



University led a heated discussion of the contributions and shortcomings of the Marxist critic Georg Lukács. Among the debators one found such important names as Heinrich Henel and Hannah Arendt. I myself contributed the general overview and summary.

I recently came across this summary when I was sifting through my papers, and I was astonished how little had changed in the general situation of our subject, although in the intervening decades quite a few details had been added or corrected.<sup>2</sup> But the feeling of a basic crisis remained, and I was able to take up my statements of more than twenty years ago and formulate them forcefully today.

We are still living in an age where the industrial revolution is at an end<sup>3</sup> and where a new approach to reality becomes urgently necessary; the problem is not merely a problem of a temporary inflation. In our speciality also we can no longer take things for granted and proceed along well-trodden pathways. We can no longer be satisfied with the gathering and investigation of largely irrelevant details and must instead concentrate on their display for popular and general academic inspection and on choosing the essentials which are meaningful for the representatives of other cultures and for the scholars from other branches of knowledge.

The future belongs to the generalists who can talk about German-American concerns in the languages of the evolutionists and the theologians, the economists and the sociologists, the psychologists and the archaeologists. To be sure, nobody can master the totality of human sciences and philosophies, and one can at best only approach a general knowledge. But such approaches are not without value, just as the size of  $\pi$  is but an approach and can never be circumscribed exactly. And furthermore such approaches are necessary, if we want to somehow solve the dire problems of our existence and not withdraw into hopeless isolation or yield to the horrible compulsion of self-destruction. Humanistic Germanists will have to learn to talk to scientists, language-bound Americans to developing nations communicating in strange idioms, xenophobic Russians to socializing Europeans.<sup>4</sup>

Within this wide context, our special field of endeavor—the investigation of German contributions to American culture—also assumes new significance. The field as such is, of course, no longer new. On February 8, 1964, the language teachers organized in the *Verein der New Yorker Deutschlehrer* and the Metropolitan Chapter of the American Association of Teachers of German were able to devote their Fifth New York Germanists' Meeting at Hunter College exclusively to our speciality. At that time a large group of younger scholars had been at work following such pioneers as Julius Goebel and Albert Bernhardt Faust. Many detailed investigations had been enumerated in twenty-three yearly issues of the "Bibliography Americana Germanica." Henry A. Pochmann had summarized their results in *German Culture in America* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1957) and A. E. Zucker had edited the definitive book on *The Forty-eighters* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1950). Naive popular legends about the German origins of Peter Minnewit and Abraham Lincoln had been disproved, and the whole discipline had



gained a solid footing. It had even acquired the blessings of the historians in the old country, as any comparison of the *Allgemeine deutsche Biographie* with the recent *Neue deutsche Biographie* will show. The older biographical dictionary treated the German-Americans as lost sons, while the *Neue deutsche Biographie* includes biographies of all Germans who have contributed significantly to Western culture, no matter of which country.<sup>5</sup>

The contributors to that 1964 meeting were, without exception, scholars of substance, to whom it was a pleasure to listen. Adolf Eduard Zucker of the University of Maryland was able to shed new light on such a famous German-American figure as General de Kalb. And Karl J. R. Arndt of Clark University was just completing his monumental bibliography of *German-American Newspapers and Periodicals 1732-1955*. A younger colleague, Hanns G. Reissner from the Leo Baeck Institute, delivered a well-reasoned summary of contributions to American culture by the latest group of German immigrants, who came to the New World between 1933 and 1963 as a result of national socialistic persecutions and post-Nazi developments in Central Europe.

Again, my own task was the delivery of a summary of the results of our meeting. I was especially impressed by the truly cosmopolitan attitude of all the speakers. They represented no ethnocentrism and were entirely able to appreciate the contributions of other American groups, native-born as well as immigrant. Whoever has worked at German-American scholarly tasks for more than a few years, cannot fail to become more independent in judgement and more critical of the two cultures with which one is dealing. Whether one may be of native-born American or immigrant stock one will no longer be able to see any culture as the unique system of values it represents to the unschooled observer. The immigrant scholar in time may approach American culture more closely, but will rarely be completely absorbed by it. And likewise the American-born scholar will not become wholly Germanized. Both will end up as citizens of two worlds. This was not merely my subjective feeling, but was anticipated by the purpose of the meeting which was to deal with the German-Americans as "Spenders and Receivers of a New Culture."<sup>6</sup>

Our work now is freeing our minds. Even in a narrow sense it is an antidote against Northeastern and Middle Western isolationism and nativism. By teaching us the necessity to look beyond our provincial confines it enables us to appreciate transcontinental and transatlantic endeavors and makes us humble. It is history's mission to educate us into better human beings and thus contribute to a solution of the dire problems of our present-day existence.

As T. S. Eliot expressed it in a verse I quoted in 1960:

The only wisdom we can hope  
to acquire  
Is the wisdom of humility:  
humility is endless.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Every present-day scholar is, of course, familiar with the huge number of specialized articles produced annually in his/her field. Any glance at the successive bibliographies of the MLA or at the issues of *Germanistik* suffices to make one aware of the scholarly maelstrom.

<sup>2</sup> For a survey of the scholarly yields of the last decades one need but consult the new collective dictionaries and handbooks characterizing the present condition of our field. The second edition of Merker-Stammeler's *Reallexikon der deutschen Literaturgeschichte* is coming to conclusion with its fourth volume. Kosch's *Deutsches Literatur-Lexikon* and Stammeler's *Verfasserlexikon* are running through vastly improved new editions. The *Neue deutsche Biographie* has already covered half of the letters of the alphabet and will soon also make the rest of the *Allgemeine deutsche Biographie* obsolete. Etc. Etc. As a contributor to the annual *MLA Bibliography*, to *Neue deutsche Biographie*, and to *Dizionario Critico della Letteratura Tedesca* the author is certainly convinced of the value of summarizing the results of our scholarship. But mere summarization does not solve all of our problems and should no longer occupy the center of our attention.

<sup>3</sup> This statement is no mere whim of the author. It is, on the contrary, amenable to a considerable amount of proof. Friedrich Wagner's pioneering study *Die Wissenschaft in der gefährdeten Welt* (München: Beck, 1964), John Naisbitt's factual *Megatrends* (New York: Warner, 1982), and other similar studies have pointed out numerous details making my conclusion more than probable.

<sup>4</sup> The sciences, on the whole, have better understood the signs of the times than the humanities. This is attested by the books and television series of Sagan, Bronowski, and Attenborough, from whom any non-scientist can but profit. In the humanities the generalizers are still looked down upon, and the translators and therefore valuable communicators of Goethe, Shakespeare, and Dante are far too often dismissed as mere technicians. Cf. the author's article "Shakespeare auf der deutschen Bühne unserer Tage," in *Theatrum Mundi: Essays . . . Dedicated to Harold Lenz . . .*, ed. Edward R. Haymes, *Houston German Studies*, 2 (Houston: Houston Univ. Press, 1980), pp. 221-28.

<sup>5</sup> See my biographical articles on the Follen(ius) family in *Neue deutsche Biographie*, V (1961), 286-87; on Frederick Heuser in Vol. IX (1972), 46-47, and on Camillo von Klenze in Vol. XII (1980), 44-45.

<sup>6</sup> The meeting also overcame another dichotomy. The older of the two educational associations sponsoring it was narrowly masculine when I joined it in 1922. As a fresh Ph.D. not far removed from the German student generation of the 1920s I was bold enough to move that ladies of solid academic credentials be admitted as members, but my motion was defeated. In 1964 such male chauvinism had become outdated. Otherwise our meeting would never have taken place in a girls' college where Dr. Anna Jacobson and Dr. Anna Gutmann had presided over a German department. Besides being mediators between two cultures we were now also mediators between two sexual stereotypes and even in this respect gave testimony to the liberating spirit pervading our speciality. The printed program of the meeting also mentioned the Literary Society Foundation, Inc. as a third sponsor. This was founded by the merchant Georg Peters, who as treasurer of the *Literarisch-Geselliger Verein* invested the entrance fee of the *Verein* in a special fund for the support of German-American cultural undertakings.