

A Great Dissenter

(To Erich Luth on 70th Birthday, Feb. 1972)

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"A mon ami Erich Luth, militant courageux.. tres sympathique hommage." So runs the handwritten inscription in a book that the 23 year-old Mendes-France sent to his 28 year-old friend. Many people have used similar words to express their affection for the German writer Erich Luth.

It was twenty-one years ago that Luth's manifesto, "We ask Israel for Peace," became widely known. This is not the only one of Luth's actions to have attracted the world's attention. In 1953 he was the first German to be invited as a guest of the Israeli government.

Luth's recollections, MANY STONES LAY BY THE WAYSIDE, which appeared in 1965 with the subtitle, A GADFLY REPORTS, assume a special place in the extensive literature of memoirs published since the Second World War. To the future historian who wishes to learn the essentials of our time, Erich Luth's book will be a more important source than the reminiscences of many a statesman and general. It contains no sensational revelations but plain accounts of fact. These accounts are particularly sober and reticent wherever the author speaks of those of his own actions that have made history. Restraint and objectivity make the book a notable "human document"; for the "gadfly" Erich Luth, with his unusual simplicity and candor, is one of those men of imposing character who are rare at any time in the world.

Luth's friend Max Tau once wrote to him:

"It is simply incredible that a human being could do and achieve so much in so short a time... Your war against Veit Harlan (director of the hate-film Jew Suss), which sounded a warning to all good men and reunited them... Your work for Israel, for Christian-Jewish cooperation... No one can ever forget the pilgrimage of youth to Bergen-Belsen that you inspired, and many will have tears in their eyes when they recall how the young people placed flowers on all the graves."

The Harlan case to which Tau alludes began in 1950. It had a symptomatic significance. It was indicative of the situation of the Federal Republic at the time that one of the "most prominent exponents of the onslaughts upon the Jews," the scriptwriter and director of the film JEW SUSS, took it for granted that his career as prestige director number one, which the fall of Hitler's Reich had interrupted, could be resumed "just as though nothing had happened." The case is an early and gross example of one of the great dangers then threatening German political reconstruction: the danger of a successful comeback of the worst representatives of Nazism. If summoned to trial at all, these men, no matter how notorious their crimes were, would plead that they had cooperated only under duress. Harlan did the same. The maker of a film the demonstrated effect of which was to spur the concentration camp torturers to still more dreadful acts of cruelty against Jewish prisoners was indeed found, in the judgment of a Hamburg assize court, to fulfill the conditions, both objectively and subjectively, of the charge of crime against mankind. But he was acquitted because he allegedly had acted under duress. Now producers were eager to have Harlan as director, and he released his first post-war film.

At this stage Luth intervened. He declared that the acquittal had been merely "formal" and urged the public to boycott the well-known former Nazi's new film. The Hamburg courts sided with the producers and distributors of the film, which had cost millions, and stigmatized the demand for a boycott as behavior "opposed to public morality." But Luth's condemnation had aroused the public. As soon as the film was shown, demonstrations started. In some cities it had to be withdrawn. Luth's opponents tried to ruin his reputation, but they could find nothing to do it with; their so-called material evidence was recognized by the courts as a forgery. After seven years the case was decided in January 1958 by the highest tribunal, the Constitutional Court of the Federal Republic.

It was an unconditional victory for Luth's cause. A precedent had been set. After that, no former Nazi of note could dare to attempt a comeback.

Barely a year after his intervention in the Harlan case -- and many years before its conclusion -- Luth, in conjunction with his friend Rudolf Kustermeyer, started the project "Peace with Israel." It was 1951, six years after the collapse of the Nazi regime. The citizens of the new Federal Republic were proud of their "economic miracle." The world seemed ready to forget and forgive. By the summer of 1951, a total of 47 nations had expressed their willingness to regard the state of war as at an end even without a formal conclusion of peace. Ben-Gurion raised a protest against this way of ending the war. The Federal Republic, he asserted, had not yet disavowed in any official manner Hitler's murderous attack upon the Jews, nor had it displayed any concrete evidence of a change in sentiment. It was true that the occupying powers had passed decrees ordering restitution payments, but there had been no sign of any German initiative to make amends.

Even though the newspapers had reported Ben-Gurion's protest at the beginning of August, there was no reaction from the Federal Republic. The Bonn Government remained silent.

Luth's historical merit consists in having spoken out at a moment when all official agencies were silent. He declared in his manifesto, "The Germans dare not evade the Jewish problem! The words 'collective shame' may further our psychological understanding of the German situation... But they are not yet the words that must be spoken in order to prepare the way for reconciliation and for the reparations that must be made. We must say: We ask Israel for peace! This plea should resound from every pulpit, every lecture hall and every legislative chamber of Germany as an appeal to Israel and to the smallest and most forlorn congregation remaining in Germany. In the name of humanity, of the justice to which we would return, and in the name of a happier future!"

The effect of this proclamation beyond the borders of Germany was extraordinary. Here was a German who "was passionately convinced that the material progress of his nation must be accompanied by an equally strong moral development." That was how Hubert Humphrey, at that time junior senator from Minnesota, expressed his impression of Luth's action.

In his memoirs Luth describes what he felt at certain moments during those years of the fifties:

"... I was less irritated by my mudslinging opponents than by those smart-Alecks who frowned the more deeply the longer the rat's tail of law-suits was drawn out. They gave me

to understand over and over again that it would have been wiser not to have started the whole controversy in the first place. According to them it was the duty of a high official (Luth then held a position in the administration of the city-state of Hamburg) to refrain from critical proceedings against the courts, to practice restraint, and to do everything to avoid stirring up trouble." These last words could serve as a motto for a description of Luth's years as a fighter: time and again he stirred up trouble, swam against the current, spoke out when others were silent. In an era and in a country dominated by conformity he upheld the great tradition of nonconformity, to which the world owes so much. But it is important not to forget that this quotation reflects only one side of his nature. Luth is a prolific author, with a wide range of interests, who writes on the most diverse topics, and frequently on his native city of Hamburg, for example: on Gabriel Riesser, on Hamburg's mayor Carl Petersen (in collaboration with Hans-Dieter Looze), on the Israeli general David Shaltiel - a native of Hamburg. He is a keen observer, an original delineator, and an acute critic. The absolute integrity of this strong, sometimes self-willed personality impresses everyone, even those who do not agree with every opinion he puts forward.

Why does such a warm-hearted man become a "gadfly" every now and then? In answering this question it may be noted that the passion which has involved him in such grave struggles is always inspired by one and the same problem. No matter whether it is a question of the manifesto "We ask Israel for Peace" or of the fight against a comeback of a Nazi apostle of hate; whether he is appealing to youth to march to Bergen-Belsen or to donate olive trees for Israel. All these undertakings have the same aim in view; repentance for the terrible crimes committed against the Jews and against Jewry.

A considerable number of Germans have been making the same demands for more than twenty-five years. But Luth is alone in saying that for him no more important task exists than implementing this repentance. In the chapter of his memoirs significantly titled "Cain, Where is thy Brother Abel?" he says:

"Up to now I have touched only casually upon the great, not to say dominant theme of life. It is the theme of the reencounter with our Jewish brother, the theme of reconciliation between Germans and Jews, the problem of my generation's guilt and its failure to cope with it, of moral and material reparation, the problem of reconstructing a just image of the Jew as a human being."

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