

Dialogue Amid the Deluge

By Richard A. Shweder

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Dialogue Amid the Deluge

HANNAH ARENDT — KARL JASPERS: CORRESPONDENCE, 1926-1969

Edited by Lotte Kohler and Hans Saner.

Translated by Robert Kimber and Rita Kimber.

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THE correspondence begins at the University of Heidelberg in 1926, in the years before what now might be called the “ethnic cleansing” of the German universities and the Holocaust. It starts with a skeptical query from a 19-year-old German Jewish student, Hannah Arendt, to her German and non-Jewish professor, Karl Jaspers, about the impossibility of learning anything from history. It ends 43 years later, six years before Arendt’s death in 1975, with the student delivering a eulogy for “the greatest educator of all time” and declaring him “the conscience of Germany.”

“Hannah Arendt — Karl Jaspers: Correspondence, 1926-1969,” edited by Lotte Kohler and Hans Saner and translated by Robert Kimber and Rita Kimber, is not a volume of letters between Plato and Socrates. Yet, on a scale just slightly below the immortals, it permits the reader an intimate and ennobling view of the scholarly life. The student and the teacher lived in the age of the deluge in Heidelberg, Munich and Berlin, not in the age of Pericles. Their dialogues are about nationalism, citizenship, ethnic identity and the moral responsibilities of intellectuals in the contemporary world.

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The student, Hannah Arendt, the political historian, social philosopher and journalist, fled Germany in 1933 on her way to becoming one of the great itinerant intellectuals of our century. She describes herself in one letter as having "an open mind for temporary arrangements." Arendt was a scholarly nomad who, under the protection of various academic titles — today's lecturer, this year's fellow, professor for the spring quarter — migrated among intellectual centers at Oberlin College, Princeton, Wesleyan, Harvard, Bard College, Columbia, the University of Chicago, the New School for Social Research and the University of California, Berkeley. She offered seminars and courses on such subjects as "Basic Moral Propositions From Socrates to Nietzsche" and "Political Theory From Machiavelli to Marx." She was the author of several influential books: "The Human Condition," "The Life of the Mind," "On Revolution," "The Origins of Totalitarianism." She spoke with an authoritative voice about Nazism, Israel, ethnic identity and other aspects of Jewish existence.

SHE was also an interim reporter for The New Yorker who covered the trial of Adolf Eichmann in Israel in 1961 and then wrote the controversial essay "Eichmann in Jerusalem." She argued that there was no "demonic profundity" to Eichmann's character, that the Nazi who was in charge of the "final solution" was an ordinary and rather uninteresting bureaucrat who had no particular hatred of Jews and was in possession of a normal conscience. She advertised a terrible truth, "the banality of evil": the motives that move human beings in administrative bureaucracies to commit atrocities are themselves average or commonplace, like the desire for promotion.

When Arendt left Germany, she moved to Paris and then to Manhattan. New York City became home base for her breathless wanderings between academic water holes and other forums for moral reflection on the political events and activities of the mid-20th century — the Holocaust, Zionism, Palestine, McCarthyism, Korea, Indochina, the Cuban missile crisis, the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, the student protests of the 1960's. She was constantly on the move, traveling to Europe and Israel, meeting with publishers, on tour on the lecture circuit, dashing off letters and memos, reading and writing in taxicabs. "Alienation and rootlessness," she wrote to her professor, "if we will only understand them aright, make it easier to live in our time."

Karl Jaspers, her professor, lived a more settled life. He was a philosopher and psychiatrist who is sometimes credited with having coined the term "existentialism," although he remarked that "the 'existentialists' consider me a kind of old-fashioned theologian." As a young scholar, Jaspers wrote prolifically about an "axial age" in human history (800 B.C.-200 B.C.) when the most important thoughts worth thinking were first thought. His *magnum opus* is a three-volume work called "The Great Philosophers" (1957). He was a college student at the turn of the century, yet he lived long enough to have received a letter from Arendt about the student protests in Paris in May 1968, in which she wrote, "It seems to me that children in the next century will learn about the year 1968 the way we learned about the year 1848."

Between 1921 and 1937 Jaspers taught at the University of Heidelberg and kept company with Martin Heidegger and other German existentialists, until he was dismissed by the Nazi regime. He and his wife, Gertrud Mayer, a Jew, sat out the war, in Germany, in silence, but as soon as the war was over he began writing about "German guilt." In 1948 he moved to Basel, Switzerland, a city so pristine and cloistered that Jaspers described it as "a last island in the flood."

Basel was a suitable home for Jaspers, who appears in these letters as the most appealing of philosopher-kings. He would write to Arendt, "Oh, if

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FROM "HANNAH ARENDT — KARL JASPERS CORRESPONDENCE, 1926-1967"
Hannah Arendt, 1963.

only you were sitting here so we could talk!" and "I'd like to talk with you for hours, for days on end." She would make her pilgrimage to that medieval city that was "spared in the Thirty Years' War," armed with a long list of items for discussion, from Plato to galley proofs.

Jaspers lectured about Kant and Spinoza and pondered the essential nature of the German and Jewish tribes. He worried that the creation of Israel marked the beginning of the end of the greatness of the Jewish people, which he associated with their role as wanderers, and he thought Israel would act like any other state. In 1933, shortly before Arendt departed from Germany, Jaspers had written to his young student, "I find it odd that you as a Jew want to set yourself apart from what is German." In 1947 he proclaimed, "I will never subscribe to a concept of Germanness by which my Jewish friends cannot be Germans or by which the Swiss and the Dutch, Erasmus and Spinoza and Rembrandt and Burckhardt, are not Germans." In 1959 he still wanted to claim Arendt as a German who happened to be a Jew. He appointed her the executor of all translations of his work into English.

The circle of scholars, intellectuals, artists and writers surrounding Arendt and Jaspers embraces two centuries and some legendary personalities. Jaspers was himself a student of Max Weber, one of the founders of modern sociology. He dined at Weber's house. He was present at the funeral of Weber's sister.

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Through this volume of letters one has a glimpse of the personal side of a network of teachers, friends and associates that extends from Weber to such contemporary figures as Randall Jarrell, Robert Lowell, Alfred Kazin, Eric Hoffer, Mary McCarthy, Leon Botstein, the president of Bard College, and Gerhard Casper, the president of Stanford University. Arendt and Jaspers seemed to know and develop similar opinions about almost every major German and French intellectual of the century: Martin Heidegger, Edmund Husserl, Thomas Mann, Karl Mannheim, Theodor Adorno, Paul Tillich, Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus. Their opinions are not always flattering.

Heidegger is the *bête noire* of the correspondence. Intellectuals are not supposed to be bureaucrats, and Arendt seemed to judge them by a different standard. She held it against Heidegger that, as rector of the University of Freiburg, he

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dutifully followed superior orders from the National Socialist Government and forbade the philosopher Edmund Husserl, a Jew, from entering the philosophy building. In 1933 Heidegger, who believed that philosophy was a sacramental activity and that true philosophizing could only be done in German or in Greek, broke off his friendship with Jaspers, and there was suspicion it was because Jaspers was married to a Jew.

Here is one snippet, Jaspers on Heidegger in 1949: "Two and a half years ago he was experimenting with 'existence' and distorted everything thoroughly. Now he's experimenting more seriously, and, again, that doesn't leave me unconcerned." The philosopher and sociologist Theodor Adorno, another dark figure in these letters, is described by Arendt as a "repulsive" human being who tried unsuccessfully to go along with the Nazis (he later wrote a book called "The Authoritarian Personality"). Nineteen thirty-three was a moment of truth, and some very fancy people did not pass the test.

Arendt and Jaspers lost touch with each other during the war years. After 1945 they wrote frequently. If a letter didn't arrive in four weeks, it was "long overdue." If it didn't arrive in five weeks, it was a "scandal." A typical letter from either, announcing itself as "written in haste," contained a mix of philosophy, politics, gossip, opinions, candid criticism, editorial business, travel plans, discussions about health and updates on writing projects, awards, academic appointments.

ARENDT and Jaspers were bored, and apologetic, whenever they had to get down to business (royalty payments, copyright agreements), and the reader who does not care about phlebitis, the arrival of the potted blue hyacinths or what it says on a University of Chicago Press contract will find some of the letters tedious. The philosophy, the politics, the gossip and the opinions, however, are well worth the tedium of an argument about how best to abridge and translate yet another of Jaspers's fat books.

Arendt and Jaspers admired the United States as a bastion against a deluge of totalitarianism and "genealogical investigations," a deluge that Arendt seemed to expect with every downturn in political fortunes — the election of Dwight Eisenhower over Adlai Stevenson, the Red scare, the assassination of President Kennedy. In her letters she is outspoken about America's intellectuals, its universities and its political institutions. About Sidney Hook, the philosopher, who told her "that it was un-American to quote Plato." About the political theorist Leo Strauss: "He is a convinced orthodox atheist. Very odd. A truly gifted intellect. I don't like him." About Berkeley, where "the students are the donors of the future and therefore considerably more important than the professors." About Princeton, where the students "didn't even know that there had ever been such a thing as Austria-Hungary." Again about Princeton: "The idea of speaking here, of all places, about the concept of revolution has something ineffably comical about it."

Arendt conceived of the United States as a place where the melting pot was not even an ideal, and that is what she liked about it. For her, America had no national tradition. She described the United States as "an a-national republic ... in which nationality and state are not identical." Social separation was permitted, and there was thick ethnicity, but it had no political or legal significance. People weren't trying to disenfranchise you just because they didn't want you in their club. Truth was obligated "to go about in the guise of opinion." The state did not define reality.

She and Jaspers shared "a deep-seated prejudice" against government projects and administrative "solutions" to social problems. Where there was government there was bureaucracy, and where there was bureaucracy there was the banality of evil, and little room for dialogue and sensible reasons. No bureaucrat says, "I'd like to talk with you for hours, for days on end."

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FROM "HANNAH ARENDT — KARL JASPERS CORRESPONDENCE, 1925-1969"
Karl Jaspers, 1965.

It seems clear from these letters that the idea of "the banality of evil" is as much Jaspers's notion as it is Arendt's. As early as Oct. 19, 1946, he urges on her the view that "a guilt that goes beyond all criminal guilt inevitably takes on a streak of 'greatness' — of satanic greatness — which is, for me, as inappropriate for the Nazis as all the talk about the 'demonic' element in Hitler and so forth. It seems to me that we have to see these things in their total banality."

He cautions her, as well, to beware of "the false inhuman innocence of the victims." Arendt replies that she finds his view "half-convincing. ... We have to combat all impulses to mythologize the horrible." Fifteen years later, in "Eichmann in Jerusalem," she set off an uproar by documenting how "Eichmann was not Iago and not Macbeth" and how respectable Jewish society in Europe helped organize its own demise. The reaction made her feel B'nai B'rith was out to destroy her reputation. "I'm amazed," she wrote, "and never expected anything like this, and I can see, too, that it's downright dangerous." It seems to be Jaspers's brow from which the banality of evil originally sprang, full-blown.

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Arendt's father had died when she was 6, and she was an only child. Jaspers had no children. Throughout her life Arendt addressed Jaspers as "Lieber Verehrtester" (Dear Honored One) and found it difficult to bring herself to say the word "Karl." It took her 10 years to honor Jaspers's repeated requests for a picture of her husband, whom she referred to impersonally in these letters as "Monsieur" and whom she kept very much out of the picture, until Jaspers was nearly 80 years old. Arendt was married to Heinrich Blücher, a non-Jewish German whom she had met in Paris in the 1930's. Blücher taught philosophy at Bard College and the New School. Arendt and Jaspers refer to him as the "identical twin of Socrates." Jaspers, of course, was the fraternal twin. Arendt once wrote from America to her professor that "psychoanalysis has become a downright plague here or, more correctly, a madness." Undoubtedly, those who are psychodynamically inclined will have a field day with some of the idealizations in the letters.

A far better day can be had appreciating the wisdom of these two towering intellectuals whose lives were defined by their confrontations with the great ideas and events of history and by their dialogues with each other. It is a privilege to enter their studies. □