

Elisabeth Young-Bruehl

## Return to Germany

Hannah Arendt was born in Hannover in 1906, and she lived here in your city until 1910, when she was four years old and her

**I first want to thank the Mayor of the City of Hannover for inviting me, as Hannah Arendt's biographer, to celebrate her birthday with you and to help inaugurate this symposium, which the City officials intend to convene every year at this time to honor Hannah Arendt's memory.**

father, Paul Arendt, was declining into the parietic syphilis of which he died in 1913. Hannah Arendt's mother took her ill husband and her daughter back to Königsberg, where both she and her husband had been born and raised in middleclass Jewish business families: Frau Cohn Arendt's family had emigrated in the 1850's from Russia, Paul Arendt's having been in East Prussia since the mid-18th century era of Moses Mendelssohn. Until her father, who was moved into a sanatorium, could no longer recognize her, Hannah Arendt visited and helped care for him, as her mother said "like a little mother."

Leaving Hannover for Königsberg, Frau Arendt and her young daughter also moved, of course, into the path that the Russian Army took across East Prussia in the year after Paul Arendt's death. Or, to put the matter another way, they moved into the era of war and displacement and deprivation and bitter resentment that eventually, over the course of the next two decades, produced the political and economic conditions out of which National Socialism grew up in your country. Hannah Arendt, after a brilliant career in three of Germany's finest universities – Marburg, Freiburg, and Heidelberg – studying with the two greatest German philosophers of 20th century – Martin Heidegger and Karl Jaspers – was displaced again by the first anti-Jewish acts of Adolf Hitler's Chancellorship. After a brief imprisonment by the Gestapo in 1933, she fled Germany, then spent nearly eight years of exile in France, and finally became a refugee in America.

In America, she became a writer and political commentator, producing in English a series of essays and articles on wartime events and then on the post-War world and

its possibilities. She wrote about Germany for the American readers of *Partisan Review*, *Commentary*, and other journals, beginning to play a role she played for the rest of her life: interpreter of Germany to the Americans. And, at the end of the War, when American troops were occupying part of vanquished Germany, she used her contacts to find an outlet for her essays in Germany, eventually connecting with the journal *Die Wandlung*, edited by Dolf Sternberger. She also reconnected through the military post to her teacher Karl Jaspers and his Jewish wife Gertrud, who were in Heidelberg. This correspondence was, she told Jaspers, her true "return to Germany" and it prepared the way for her first physical return in 1949. After she had written and published *The Origins of Totalitarianism* in 1951, a book which is certainly the single most important work of interpretive political history in the post-War period, she was able to return to Germany on an almost yearly basis, combining these trips with those she made to the Jaspers's new home in Basle, Switzerland.

In 1948, the articles that Hannah Arendt wrote about the post-War world – about which I will speak a bit later – were collected and published as a book. I have a copy, yellowed and crumbling, of this essay collection, which Hannah Arendt gave to me when I was her student many years later, in 1974. I used it when I wrote her biography in the years following her death, from 1976 to 1982, years during which I made two trips to Germany, and specifically to the Deutsches Literaturarchiv in Marbach, to read her correspondence with Karl Jaspers. I have not returned to Germany since then, since 1979.

But, in a particular way, I do return to Germany four mornings a week now, in my more recent profession as a psychoanalyst. For several years, I have been analyzing a patient who is German, whose childhood was spent in the small town where her parents, Displaced Persons, ended up after having been wrenched off their family lands in the East, which the father's family had farmed since the 15th century. This summer, before my patient, who is almost 43 now, born in 1956, made her annual return to Germany to visit her 84 year old mother, I found myself while I was

listening to her thinking about Hannah Arendt, about Germany, about this day and what I would say to you.

Because I have been dwelling so long and intensively in this patient's German childhood, I can no longer think of Hannah Arendt's German childhood as I did twenty years ago, when I was her biographer. I now think these lives together, feeling the common elements in them, the links, as part of my internal process of meaning creation.

More broadly: there is a mental capacity in me – my imagination – where my patient and Hannah Arendt both exist as exemplary figures, where they represent Germany of the Nazi time and Germany after the War. I am going to talk about them today as exemplary figures, and consider as I do the theme that their lives suggest to me: losing and regaining – or being unable to regain – trust in the humanity of people. Please allow *me* to invite *you* to this theme today.

**1. Any person whose** vocation it is to understand, to search for the meaning of events, will, of course, have a complexly determined desire to understand. With Hannah Arendt, I think, the key determinant from childhood of her need to understand was the effect upon her of her father's illness here, in Hannover. She was, as her mother noted in her *Unser Kind* notebook, witness to the "entire horrible transformation that her father went through in his illness." After his death, when Wasserman tests became available for syphilis, Hannah Arendt and her mother had to be tested periodically for his disease. No child, no matter what explanation was given by the mother, could comprehend such an illness or such a death or such a threat to her own health. But Frau Arendt reveals herself in her journal as bewildered by her child's lack of any signs of distress or upset, and puzzled by her child's seemingly unaffected energy.

Frau Arendt did not have the benefit of Freudian psychoanalysis to help her realize that her child's reaction was not at all unusual, certainly not callous. She did not have an understanding of traumatization to guide her in seeing how a child, losing one parent and suffering the other's grief, can

split inwardly, developing into a precociously competent, adult-like person, a companion and caretaker – "like a little mother" – while remaining, invisibly, a shocked child, needing and expecting care. And also expecting disaster. The child seems at once knowing beyond its years and helpless – "a wise baby" in the phrase of Sandor Ferenczi, the first of Freud's followers to study children with backgrounds of traumatization. The inwardly divided wise baby also frequently becomes, Ferenczi noted, "the family psychiatrist." And Hannah Arendt did assume this position until puberty, when, her mother's *Unser Kind* journal reveals, she began to be beset with fears and illnesses. Then Frau Arendt began to worry desperately over her girl's unhappy hypersensitivity, her vulnerability.

As she reached the end of her adolescence, in the safety of her mother's second marriage and with a circle of friends, Hannah Arendt recovered, stabilized. But her hypersensitivity remained, woven into the precocious intellectuality that also recharged. Interestingly, however, as this family psychiatrist grew into adulthood, she concentrated her helping and understanding mind not on the interior lives of people but on how they do and do not appear in public, come into relationships with others, stay steady and reliable and responsible, or fail to. Her great psychological theme was: How does a person acquire understanding of the world, or good judgment about the world? Who has it? How is it preserved in disastrous times? There is in her theme a tremendous – and tremendously controlled, contained – fear that the common world will disappear or that people will go crazy and disappear from the common world. As they did. As her father had.

My patient, too, has this fear. This expectation of disaster. And her fear is directly connected to her father's story. He was a farmer from East Germany, a tall, strong man who had been crippled in the First World War before he was captured and imprisoned by the Russians. He fought again in the Second World War, having joined the German Army as a nationalist, the sort of nationalist who eventually opposed Hitler as a leader who was destroying the nation. When he and his family

were displaced into West Germany after the War, he participated in the post-War denazification but was deeply disillusioned when all the Nazis ousted from the Ministry where he worked were returned to their positions several years later. He retired into bitterness and ill health and crazy alcoholism, hopeful only about his daughter, who was born when he was sixty-five and seemed to him the only sign of redemption, meaningfulness. As a teenager, my patient, who had loved her father deeply as a child, found him a terrible burden as he declined into his illness – and suffered great guilt for her feelings, too. My patient's mother, who had lost a first child during "the flight" of the eastern Germans in 1945 and barely survived the American bombing of Dresden, could never regain any internal peace. She was chronically anxious, intruding into her daughter's life constantly with her worry and her expectation that the child would die, that the husband would collapse, that the world would end. The entire extended family was and is a study in traumatization: it is riven with mental illness, addiction, and xenophobic and paranoid political ideas.

When she came back to the psychoanalysis after her return to Germany this summer, my patient, who had visited with a number of her mother's friends and family members in different cities and attended a conference in Berlin, remarked: "The whole older generation feels to me just crazy. They are locked in the past; they speak of the immigrants now as though the War had never happened, as though nothing had been learned. They are racist. They talk all the time about 'German blood' as a criterion for citizenship. My mother, who has received support from the Government all her life, whose medical care is completely taken care of by the Government, rails at the use of public money to help even Germans from the East, much less immigrants from the Third World, the very people who care for her when she is ill."

**My patient, the psychiatrist** in her family, the one who feels compelled to save them, rescue them, has a particular question that focuses her anxiety. When she was a young teenager in the late 1960's, just before her father's death, she discovered that an empty lot on an unmarked road in her village had once been the site of a Jewish synagogue, that the road had once been Synagogeweg, that the entire Jewish population of her village had been deported and executed. No one in the village had ever spoken about this fact. Not a word had been said in the Volksschule.

She imagined herself one of those Jews. She imagined herself in a concentration camp. "I would be tested, every day, to be a good person. But I am afraid that I would fail this test. I am afraid that I am bad. This is my constant anxiety: that I am really bad." This, we come to realize again and again as we work on it, is the anxiety of a child who cannot perform the rescue, who cannot heal the family, who cannot save anybody - including herself - from pain. She punishes herself. She makes a Jew of herself.

My patient is compelled to find traumatized families and to work with them, trying to restore them to health and order; her service profession has her doing this on a daily basis. She devises techniques for getting people to face their fears, their habits of self-defeat, their habits of being oppressed. She is very successful, but she is always plagued by her own fears, her persistent anxiety that she is bad, that something is wrong with her. Hannah Arendt was not anxious to this degree, and I think the differences can be accounted for by noting that as a young child Arendt did not have to bear narcissistic parental expectations that she be a redeemer; her father died of a mysterious disease, but not a mysterious *political* disease that made the political world seem dangerous; she did not have to receive from her parents daily doses of their own anxiety and bitterness; and her mother, who was a basically strong and thoughtful woman, appreciated and cherished her in her individuality as she grew up. You can hear this supportiveness in Hannah Arendt's description (from an interview conducted by Günter Gaus) of how her mother taught her to deal with the inevitable anti-Semitism at school:

*"...all children encountered anti-Semitism. And it poisoned the souls of many children. The difference with us was that my mother was always convinced that you mustn't let it get to you. You have to defend yourself! When my teachers made anti-Semitic remarks – mostly not about me, but about other Jewish girls, eastern Jewish students in particular – I was told to get up immediately, leave the classroom, come home and report everything exactly. Then my mother wrote one of her many registered letters; and for me the*

*matter was completely settled. ...But when it came from children, I was not permitted to tell about it at home. That didn't count. You defended yourself against what came from children. Thus these matters were never a problem for me. There were rules of conduct by which I retained my dignity, so to speak, and I was protected, absolutely protected, at home."*

Hannah Arendt was also able as an adult to find homes – to make homes – in which she could feel once again absolutely protected, even though she had felt completely without protection in 1933, when she was briefly arrested and then had to flee into being a “stateless person,” a person without a passport. She found protection with her second husband Heinrich Blücher during her exile in France and in America, and then with Karl and Gertrud Jaspers after the War. She wrote to Jaspers in 1957 (November 18): “When I was young, you were the only person who educated me. When, as an adult, I found you again after the war and a friendship grew between us, you provided me with a guarantee for the continuity of my life. And today I think of your house in Basle as I would of my homeland.” In these private relationships, she was able to maintain that personal quality which is, she understood, the foundation for action and for judgment, the political activities that make possible relatedness in public spaces. And that quality is “trust in what is human in all people.”

This humanness of people is not something that can be defined as such, although the conditions permitting it, and thus making up “the human condition,” can be compassed, as Arendt showed in her own work. It must be sensed, as a matter of common sense, *Gemeinsinn*, a sense for people’s representations and understandings of themselves and others. The humanness of people, in Arendt’s understanding, is not something they have as a matter of “human nature.” Rather, it is what they come into as they meet each other in a common world, as they bring about a common world by talking and acting together. So humanness requires the freedom to meet and act; it requires the differences among people – their plurality – that spurs them to the exchange of views.

I doubt that anyone whose concern with this humanness focused on its philosophical or metaphysical status or definition would

ever have the capacity to realize that “what is human in people” can be lost, destroyed, as can trust itself. Someone philosophical in this way would not have the capacity to be so fundamentally shocked by, for example, how a totalitarian regime erases freedom, erases plurality, requiring of all people complicity in its policies, making everyone into an agent of inhumanity. Hannah Arendt once remarked that Death was the problem for the generation that survived the First World War’s trenches; but that Evil was the problem for her own generation. What she meant by “evil”, ultimately, was the possibility that human beings might destroy their humanity.

I could put this matter another way and say that Hannah Arendt had the insight that the political developments of the mid-century – of totalitarianism – had profoundly disturbed many people’s ability to judge, increasing in them all kinds of feelings, from indifference to contempt, that signal disconnection from other people, from what is human in all people.

She observed in one of her post-War essays, for example, that racism, ever since its emergence in the 18th century, but especially in its Nazi form, has correlated in racists with contempt for their own people. Those who call the “other” inhuman also feel that their own people are humanly worthless. So Hitler began his killing campaign with Germans who were tubercular and mentally ill, and stood ready to continue it, after he had finished with the Jews, by turning against any of his own “Aryan” followers who were weak and less than perfectly willing to obey him. There was in this leader, she noted, an “unswerving logic,” which is exactly what judgment is not, as judgment must face reality – always changing reality – and be responsive.

**2. In the essays that Hannah Arendt wrote about Germany during the last year of the War, anticipating the momentous political**

decisions that would have to be made as peace came, the theme that stands out is novelty, or, as she would later say, unprecedentedness. Each essay stresses that the world brought into being by the Nazi totalitarian movement was a new world, one that could not be understood in the political categories of the past or as a continuation of European traditions. She argued that the modern nation-state, and the modern nationalism that idolized the nation-state, had been destroyed. In the process, a new type of person had come into being, "the modern man of the masses," a functionary with no qualms about committing murder, indeed, with no sense that he had committed murder, no passion for killing, but only a functional responsibility.

*"The transformation of the family man from a responsible member of society, interested in all public affairs, to a 'bourgeois' concerned only with his private existence and knowing no civic virtue, is an international modern phenomenon. [...] Each time society, through unemployment, frustrates the small man in his normal functioning and normal self-respect, it trains him for that last stage in which he willingly undertakes any function, even that of hangman."*

**In theoretical terms, she argued** that no philosophical tradition, no matter how often invoked by the Nazis, could be used to either justify or understand their ideology or their innovations.

It is not an easy matter to understand in retrospect what a powerful contribution Hannah Arendt made to political understanding by the simple, but then unique, refusal to think in analogies. She refused to say that the totalitarian world that had appeared was like any other, or to say that the evil that had appeared was like any other. In order to speak of unprecedentedness, she had to have a vast knowledge of history and intellectual history, for you cannot, of course, see a break in tradition without knowing the tradition or point to the unprecedented without knowing precedents. You must be able to judge that the things before your eyes are strange, even if they come in some familiar trapping. National Socialism was not nationalism and it was not socialism, although National Socialism's orators used the languages of both doctrines; it was nation destroying and only consolidated the power of the property owning classes, par-

ticularly the industrialists. The concentration camp was not a means of killing differing from any means preceding only by virtue of its scale and its up to date technology, she argued, it was the logical outcome of a racist ideology that designates certain human beings as inhuman.

Through the 1950's, Hannah Arendt's purpose in returning to Germany in essays and books was to provoke her readers to "facing reality" without either falling back on an idealized past or entertaining delusions about the future. This phase of her work was, to say it summarily, a vast "no" to totalitarianism couched all in the terms of its novelty. It was a vast refusal of this novelty and a vast effort to fight totalitarianism with understanding of its novelties.

In the late 1950's and early 1960's, as she was writing reexaminations of Marxism and of revolutionary traditions, she entered into a second phase: an effort to salvage from the tradition of Western political thinking what might be helpful in the post-totalitarian world and an effort to forge new concepts where the tradition yielded nothing. She turned to the longer-range future, using historical analyses of much greater sweep. This period of her work resulted in the essays making up *Between Past and Future*, and two books, *On Revolution* and *The Human Condition*. I do not mean to imply that she left the history of totalitarianism behind, however, for after she finished these books she wrote *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, a book that also contains her reflections on a new political-legal concept – "crimes against humanity" – needed to try criminals like Eichmann in a post-totalitarian world.

While Hannah Arendt was embarking on this second phase of her work, Karl Jaspers, too, turned his attention to seeking positive political concepts for the post-totalitarian world. He wrote two political works directed to the future, *Die Atombombe und die Zukunft des Menschen* (1958) and *Wohin treibt die Bundesrepublik?* (1966). Arendt made these books available to American readers by arranging their translations, and she wrote a preface for the second, called in English *The Future of Germany*, which she described as

“politically the most important book to appear in Germany after the Second World War.” To introduce the earlier book to its German audience, she returned to Germany and gave an address when Karl Jaspers was awarded the German Book Trade’s Peace Prize.

No essay in all of Hannah Arendt’s enormous opus is more revealing of her as a person of political understanding than the *Laudatio* she made for Jaspers on that occasion. It hails in him everything that had made him precious to her, and it celebrates in him everything she had learned from him about being a person who makes a “venture into the public realm.” Here she speaks explicitly of the quality I noted before: she equates “the confidence which deeply underlies independence” with “trust in man, in the *humanitas* of the human race.”

It is also clear that writing this *Laudatio*, which sounded her theme about trust in *humanitas* so directly to her German audience, was preparation for the address she gave the next year when she herself was awarded a German prize, the Lessing Prize. She chose to speak about Lessing himself, and did so just as Jaspers was preparing the section on Lessing for his *The Great Philosophers*, where Lessing appears with Pascal, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche as one of the great “philosophers of awakening.” But she also chose to educate her German audience about how Lessing had valued the common world in which he held friendship across differences of tribe and religion as the great human possibility. She presented herself to her German audience as a Jew who, like all German Jews of her generation, struggled with trusting and with venturing into the public realm. The Jews of her generation, she said had tended to address only their private friends:

*“I am afraid that in their efforts they felt very little responsibility toward the world; [their efforts] were, rather guided by their hope of preserving some minimum of humanity in a world grown inhuman while at the same time as far as possible resisting the weird irreality of this worldlessness – each after his own fashion and some few by seeking to the limits of their ability to understand even inhumanity and*

*the intellectual and political monstrosities of a time out of joint...”*

She was recommending this search for meaning – her own – to her German audience as an alternative to the effort, so commonly invoked then, in the late 1950’s of Adenauer’s Germany, to “master” the “unmastered past” of Nazism. She said bluntly: “Perhaps that [mastering] cannot be done with any past, but certainly not with the past of Hitler Germany. The best that can be achieved is to know precisely what it was, and to endure this knowledge, and then to wait and see what comes of knowing and enduring.” She was recommending telling stories in which reality is faced:

*“However much we are affected by the things of the world, however deeply they may stir and stimulate us, they become human for us only when we can discuss them with our fellows. Whatever cannot become the object of discourse – the truly sublime, the truly horrible, or the uncanny – may find a human voice by which to sound into the world, but it is not exactly human. We humanize what is going on in the world and in ourselves only by speaking of it, and in the course of speaking of it, we learn to be human...”*

**3. Jaspers’s trust in the** Germans to whom he addressed *Wohin treibt die Bundesrepublik?* in 1967 is the model for Arendt’s trust in the Americans to whom she had a few years before addressed *On Revolution*. They were both offering political education to their fellow citizens. Jaspers told his German readers that their government, which they thought of as a democracy, was no democracy, that it was an “oligarchy of parties” still mired in the distortions of the Nazi time. He argued for open and free discussion of the Nazi past. He argued for rejecting the myth that the German people were not supportive of the Nazis, as though it had not been Nazi policy to turn everyone into a supporter to whatever degree was possible. He stood against any kind of emergency laws that would prevent public participation in government; and against any aspiration to reestablish pre-War German frontiers. As Jaspers summarized:

“There are two basic political attitudes. A politician will either fear and despise the people or he will seriously, not just in talking for public consumption, reckon with and

think of and for the people. In other words, there are politicians who do not want freedom, who are suspicious of it, who distrust humanity and accordingly wish to subordinate it – to place it under men who are just as human but supposedly called to rule, whether as vicars of God or as experts on historic necessity or as the vanguard of the future. And there are politicians who want all men to be free, whose every act or measure of law depends upon whether or not it promotes human freedom...

As Hannah Arendt in *On Revolution* had warned the Americans about the dangers of repudiating their heritage of freedom by opposing revolutions around the world, so Jaspers in his *Wohin treibt die Bundesrepublik?* – a book that is so obviously written with Arendt's political philosophy as its reference – warned the Germans about their lack of a revolutionary heritage, their long history of authoritarianism. Jaspers was, in effect, addressing the people who taught my psychoanalytic patient in her Volksschule and then in her regional school; well-meaning but politically passive people who did not realize, as Jaspers told them, that they really had no role in the "democracy" that they were living in, that they were not people with civic responsibilities or people who were teaching the post-War generation anything about being politically responsible. "In the 1960's," my patient told me, "I, like all of my friends, wanted our school to be a place where we could learn the truth about Germany, about the War, because we were all so very confused. But in Germany, no one wanted to tell the truth. Everyone kept secrets. Everyone was afraid of the past." In 1966, when the "grand coalition" of Christian and Social Democrats was formed, and only a few voices – Günter Grass's and Karl Jaspers's among them – were raised to protest the installation of an ex-Nazi, Kiesinger, as Chancellor, my patient's history teacher announced that the past had been mastered.

When my patient was sixteen, she left Germany for America, to return after that only as a visitor. "I could not stand the hypocrisy. But I also could not ally with the radical Left, because these were people who were completely unable to understand what my

parents had lived through and why they were so crazy." Although the Germany of today is not the "grand coalition's" Germany – although the two Germanys are united and no emergency laws are being debated in the Parliament – she is still struggling for a place to stand. And in America she feels isolated, despite her happy family life. She tells me that she cannot share her childhood with anyone: "Americans cannot understand the confusion in which I grew up, the lack of any talking about the world, the denial, the hiding." She told me this after relating a long, complex dream in which she, in the guise of a playful young lord, confronted an old cleric, dressed in black, frightening, who then shot the young lord in his shoulder – just where her father had been wounded in the First World War – and destroyed his joy in life. Talking about this allegorical dream, she toured German history – the history of her wounded family – right up to her fearful images of the Black-shirts, without any sense that I might know anything about this history. She cannot allow herself to believe that there is anyone in the world who can understand her; she cannot permit anyone to be the family psychiatrist for her. She must do the healing herself, for the others; receiving is too dangerous.

In Hannah Arendt's terms, my patient is worldless, she has no sense of the common world. Her condition, "General Anxiety Disorder," is certainly not understood in this way in American psychiatry and psychoanalysis, but her condition does have a political meaning – and I, as her psychoanalyst, will take the political meaning into account to help her find her way to trustfulness. My patient suffers from the condition that Hannah Arendt surmounted to be the pre-eminent philosophical and political storyteller of the late 20th century, that she surmounted to take the ventures into the public world that she took, to place her trust in *humanitas*, to make her returns to Germany, to speak to you and your children.

**Note:**

Quotations from Arendt are from her correspondence with Jaspers (edited by Lotte Köhler and Hans Saner, translated from the German by Robert and Rita Kimber [Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992]); from her conversation with Günther Gaus (1964) and her essay "Organized Guilt and Universal Responsibility" (1945), both in *Essays in Understanding* (edited by Jerome Kohn [Harcourt Brace & Comp., 1993]) and from her essays on Lessing and Jaspers, both in *Men in Dark Times* (Harcourt Brace & World, 1968).

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