

LETTERS FROM PRISON

Rosa Luxemburg

The three letters that appear below are translated into English for the first time. They illustrate the two sides of Rosa Luxemburg: a tough and combative political fighter and a woman of fine sensibilities. Since it has long been the fashion among American radicals to sentimentalize the figure of Rosa and to think of her, largely because of their ignorance, as a "beautiful soul," the first of these letters may come as a shock, but a useful one. The violence of her political letter and the tenderness, at times skirting sentimentality, of the personal letter were elements of a unified personality. She was both a fighter and, to use her term, a "Mensch," a sensitive woman and a determined, even rigid, political polemist.

The Tilde of the first letter is Mathilde Wurm who, together with her husband Emanuel (Emmo), was an active member of the German Social Democratic Party. When the Social Democracy uncritically supported the Kaiser's regime during the First World War, the Wurms joined the Independent Social Democrats who split from the majority, urging a speedy peace, resumption of the class struggle and only critical support of the war. Luxemburg's position was, of course, strictly anti-war and the men she so violently attacks in this letter were all leaders of the Independents whose wavering position between the official Social Democracy and the small anti-war Spartakus Bund she found particularly distasteful.

The Haenschen of the second letter was a young intimate friend, Hans Diefenbach, a medical doctor, born in 1884 and killed at the front in October 1917.

The Martchen of the third letter is Marte Rosenbaum, a close personal and political friend of Rosa's. She played an important if inconspicuous part in the left socialist movement of Germany during the First World War. She died, obscurely, in Zurich in 1940.

These letters are taken, with permission, from a new collection edited by Benedict Kautsky (Rosa Luxemburg, *Briefe an Freunde*, Europaeische Verlagsanstalt, Hamburg, 1950.)

ON BEING A 'MENSCH'

Wronke, 28/12/1916

My dear Tilde,

I am answering your Christmas letter immediately, while I still feel the wrath it caused me. Your letter made me terribly, wildly angry, because, for all its brevity, every line of it shows that you have again totally succumbed to the environment in which you move. This tearfully complaining tone, this self-pity and wailing over the 'disappointments' you have suffered—you say you have been disappointed in others, but why not look into the mirror, where you might discover the whole misery of mankind accurately portrayed. And when you speak of 'we' you mean your society of frogs croaking in their swamp; but during our old relationship, you meant *my* company. Naturally, I must identify you with the people you now associate with.

You complain in tones of melancholy that I find "too little aggressiveness" in your attitudes. "Too little," that's good! You don't march forward at all; you crawl. And the difference is one of kind, not degree. You and your kind belong altogether to a different zoological species than I, and never was your morose, peevish, cowardly and half-hearted kind more alien, more hateful, to me than it is now. You wouldn't mind more 'aggressiveness,' you say, only one gets pinched for it and that 'profits but little.' O, miserable shop-keeper's soul! You would be ready to offer even a bit of 'heroism' but only against cash; the profit must be on the counter immediately, be it only three moldy copper pennies. The simplest words of that honest and upright man, *Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise, so help me God*—these were not spoken for you.

It is fortunate that the history of humanity was not made by people like you, or there would have been no Reformation and we would probably still be living under the *Ancien Regime*. But so far as I am concerned, while I have never been soft, I have recently become as hard as polished steel and from now on I will not make the slightest concession, either politically or in personal relations. I need only think of your gallery of heroes to be nauseated: the sweet Haase, Dittman with his beautiful beard and beautiful parliamentary speeches, Kautsky that vacillating shepherd, who is naturally followed through thick and thin by your Emmo, the wonderful Arthur—ah, *je n'en finirai!* I swear to you that rather than 'struggling' with your heroes or even to have anything to do with them I would sit for years, not here where I feel as if in paradise after what I had before, but in that hole on the Alexanderplatz where in a cell measuring eleven cubic meters, without light in the morning or evening, squeezed between the C (but without W) and the iron plank-bed I could read my Moerike aloud. I prefer Count Westarp—and not because he talked of my 'almond shaped

velvet eyes' in the Reichstag, but because he, at least, is a *man*. I warn you that as soon as I will be free to taste fresh air again I will chase and hunt your company of frogs with trumpets, with cracking whips and blood hounds—I was going to say like Penthesilea, but God knows you are no Achilles.

Does this suffice as New Year's greetings? See to it that you remain a *Mensch*. To be a *Mensch*, that is the main thing. And that means to remain steadfast, clear, serene; yes, serene despite everything. To whimper is the business of weaklings. To be a *Mensch* means gladly to throw one's whole life, when need be, onto the 'great scale of destiny.' And it means, as well, to find pleasure in each clear day and each beautiful cloud. Oh, I don't know how to write recipes for being human, I only know how one *is*; and when we used to walk together in the fields of Suedende and the red evening sun lay on the wheat, you knew it too. Despite all its horror the world is beautiful, and if there were no weaklings and cowards it would be more beautiful still. But come: you get a kiss after all, for you are still an honest soul. Happy New Year!

R.

PRISON NIGHTS

Wronke 29/6/1917

Good Morning, Haenschen . . .

Every evening when I sit at my window with its iron bars, to breathe the fresh air and to dream, there begins somewhere in the neighborhood a persistent beating of rugs, or some sound like it. I have no idea who does this and where it is being done, but the regular recurrence of these sounds has led me to acquire an intimate, if indefinite, relation to them. They awaken in me some vague images of diligent homely work, of a small house in which everything is spotlessly clean and scrubbed—perhaps the home of one of our prison workers who only late in the day finds time to do her own work—some lonely old maid or widow, as most prison workers are, who uses her little bit of leisure to keep in meticulous order a few rooms which nobody enters and which she herself rarely uses. I really know nothing about it, but the few knocking sounds always convey to me a feeling of orderliness, quiet and at the same time a certain amount of anxiety caused by the narrowness and hopelessness of a life of poverty—cabinet with knicknacks, yellowed photographs, artificial flowers, an overstuffed couch. . . .

Have you also felt the impact of sounds whose origin is unknown to you? I have tested this in every prison. In Zwickau, for example, two ducks which lived somewhere in the neighborhood woke me every night at two with a loud 'Qua-qua-qua-qua.' The first of these four syllables were uttered

in accents of the strongest conviction, and then they would decline to a deep murmuring bass. When awakened by this cry I always needed a few seconds to find my bearings and remember where I was, lying there in the total darkness and on a mattress hard as stone. The constant feeling of slight oppression that comes with a prison cell, the special accentuation of the 'qua-qua . . .' and the fact that I had no idea where the ducks were and heard them only during the night—all these gave their cry a secret and significant meaning. It always sounded to me as if they were uttering some wise saying which through nightly repetition acquired a sense of the irrevocable, something which had been valid since the beginning of the world, like a Coptic maxim:

And on the heights of Indian airs,
And in the depths of Egyptian tombs,
I only heard the holy word. . . .

That I was unable to decipher the meaning of this duck-wisdom but only reached a vague presentiment of it, always caused me a curious anxiety, and I used to lie awake long into the night with a feeling of oppression.

In the Barnimstrasse Prison things were different. Willy-nilly, I had to go to bed at nine o'clock since the lights went out at that time, but naturally I couldn't sleep. Shortly after nine, in the dark stillness, there regularly began the crying of a two- or three-year old boy in one of the neighborhood apartment houses. It always started with a few low, broken-off whimpering sounds, fresh out of sleep; then, after some pauses, the little fellow would sob himself into a really pitiful weeping, which yet was not very energetic, did not express any definite pain or desire, only general discomfort with his existence, an inability to resolve the difficulties of life and its problems, especially since mama was clearly not at hand. This helpless crying continued for a full three-quarters of an hour. At exactly 10 in the evening I would hear the door energetically opened, light quick steps in the small room, and the sonorous youthful voice of a woman, still fresh from the outside air, saying: 'But why don't you sleep? Why don't you sleep?' Whereupon there followed three lively slaps, which made one feel the appetizing roundness and warmth of the afflicted little part of the anatomy. And—O, wonder—the three slaps suddenly and easily solve all difficulties and all the complex problems of destiny. The whimpering ceases, the little boy quickly falls asleep and a redeeming quietness descends upon the court. This scene repeated itself so regularly each evening that it became part of my existence. By nine I would be waiting with tense nerves for my little unknown neighbor to wake up and begin whimpering, my little neighbor whose every register I knew and could hear beforehand, and through whom

a sense of helplessness before life so fully communicated itself to me. I would wait for the return of the young woman, for her resounding question and above all for the peace-giving three slaps. Believe me, Haenschen, this old-fashioned means of solving problems via the behind of the little boy brought miracles to my soul, too: my nerves relaxed immediately, together with his, and I always fell asleep at about the same time he did. I have never found out from which geranium-adorned window, from which garret these sounds came to me. All the houses that I could see looked equally grey, sober and buttoned-up in the glaring light of the day, and they all seemed to say: 'We know nothing.' Only in the depth of the night, through the gentle breath of the summer air, were spun those mysterious relations between people who never knew or saw each other.

Oh, what beautiful memories I have of Alexanderplatz! Haenschen, do you know what Alexanderplatz is? My month and a half there left grey hair on my head and brought strains upon my nerves that I will never be able to relieve. And yet there is one small recollection of this place that rises like a flower in my memory. Night had already begun—it was the late fall, October, and there was no light in the cell—between five and six in the evening. The cell measuring eleven cubic meters, there remained nothing else for me to do than lie down on my plank-bed, squeezed between undescrivable furniture, and to declaim my Moerike half aloud into the hellish music of the constantly passing elevated trains which made the cell quiver and threw red shadows over the clattering windowpanes. After ten o'clock the diabolic concert of the elevated would calm down a little and soon afterwards one would hear from the street the following little episode. First a gloomy male voice which seemed to call and admonish, then in reply the singing of an eight-year old girl, who evidently sang a children's song while jumping and hopping around and who at the same time would also break into silvery laughter, clear as a bell. It might have been a tired and surly janitor calling his daughter home to bed. But the little rogue didn't want to go, she made the bearded grumbler of a father catch her, flitting through the street like a butterfly and teasing the man, who only pretended to be severe, with a funny children's rhyme. One could almost see the fluttering of the short skirt and the thin legs flying in dance steps. In the hopping rhythm of her song, in her pearly laughter there was so much careless, victorious love of life, that the whole dark and dank building of the Central Police was enveloped as by a silvery coat of mist. The air in my evil-smelling cell seemed suddenly to exhale the fragrance of falling dark-red roses. . . . This is how one can everywhere find a little happiness in the streets and how one is always reminded that life is beautiful and rich.

Haenschen, you have no idea how blue the sky was today! Or was it equally blue in Lissa? I usually go out for half an hour in the evening,

before the 'lock-up,' to water my little flowerbed with my own small can (I planted the pansies, forget-me-nots and phlox myself) and then to walk in the garden a little. This hour before nightfall has its own magic. The sun was still hot, but one likes to have its slanting rays burn one's neck and cheeks like a kiss. A gentle breeze fluttered the bushes like a whispered promise that the coolness of evening would soon come to replace the heat of day. On a sky of glittering trembling blueness there stood a few dazzlingly white clouds; a very pale half-moon swam between them in a ghostly way, as if in a dream. The swallows had already begun their usual flight, with their pointed wings cutting into shreds the blue silk of space, shooting hither and thither and turning over with shrill chirps in the dizzy heights. I stood there with my dripping watering can, my head turned upward, and I had a tremendous longing to dip into the wet glittering blueness up there, to bathe in it, to splash in it, to dissolve into foam and disappear. I thought of Moerike, you remember:

O river, my river in the ray of morning!
Receive now, receive
Once the longing body
And kiss breast and cheek!
The sky blue and pure as children,
Where the waves sing,
The sky in your soul,
O let me penetrate it!
I plunge with spirit and senses
Through the deepening blueness
And cannot attain it!
What is as deep, as deep as this?
Only love alone,
Which is never appeased and appeases never
With her changing light. . . .

R.

For God's sake, Haenschen, do not follow my bad example and become as talkative as me. It won't happen to me again, I promise!!!

THE SPRINGS OF HISTORY

Undated

My dear Martchen,

I was so happy after yesterday's visit. It was so beautiful, so cozy, and I hope it will be that way today and Sunday. For me it was a great psychic refreshment, and I will live on it for weeks. You, dear soul, have warmed me so well with your closeness. You will come back soon, won't you? I already look forward to your next visit. That is, if I shall still

be here. But you need not be concerned about me: I now follow the doctor's orders closely and am confident I will leave here in good health and vigor, so that you will yet find pleasure in seeing me fight and work. And there will be much fighting and working. I absolutely do not despair. Dearest, when the situation looks most desperate, history itself always provides the best counsel. Saying this I do not mean to advocate a comfortable fatalism! On the contrary. The human will must be stimulated to the utmost, and it is our task to struggle consciously with all our might. What I mean is that the *success* of such conscious influence upon the masses depends now, when everything *looks* so utterly hopeless, on elementary and deeply hidden springs of history. I know from historical experience, as from my personal experience in Russia, that just at the point when everything seems without hope, a complete turn presents itself, a turn which is then all the more violent. Never forget that we are bound to historical laws of development, and that these laws *never* fail, though sometimes they don't follow the exact, detailed blueprints we have laid out. Therefore, keep your head high and do not lose courage. I hug you with all my love.

R.