

Lion Feuchtwanger, “Thou Shalt Dwell in Houses Thou Hast Not Buildded” (March 20, 1935)

Abstract

The successful German-Jewish writer Lion Feuchtwanger (1884–1958) was on a lecture tour of the United States when Hitler came to power in January 1933. Given the situation, Feuchtwanger decided not to return to Germany; instead, he and his wife went into exile in France. In his absence, his assets were seized, and his house was looted by SA-men. Shortly thereafter, his books were banned and publicly burned. His German citizenship was renounced that same year. In March 1935, he published the following “open letter” in the exile newspaper *Pariser Tageblatt*. The letter is addressed to the unknown occupant of his house in Berlin. Using his own fate as an example, he describes the economic, political, and physical abuse suffered by German Jews. The identity of “Mr. X” remains unknown, and it is unlikely that he ever read the article. Feuchtwanger’s hope to return to his house after Hitler’s defeat did not come true. After he and his wife were interned in France in 1940, they managed to escape to the United States, where they spent the rest of their lives in Pacific Palisades, CA, in the house that later became the artists’ residence Villa Aurora.

Source

To the occupant of my house on Mahlstrasse in Berlin:

I do not know your name or how you came into possession of my house. I only know that two years ago the police of the Third Reich seized all my property, personal and real, and handed it over to the stock company formed by the Reich for the confiscation of the properties of political adversaries (chairman of the board: Minister Goering). I learned this through a letter from the mortgagees. They explained to me that under the laws of the Third Reich, confiscations of property belonging to political opponents concern themselves only with credit balances. Although my house and my bank deposits, which had also been confiscated, greatly exceeded in value the amount of the mortgage, I would be obliged to continue the payment of interests on the mortgage, as well as my German taxes, from whatever money I might earn abroad. Be that as it may, one thing is certain: you, Mr. X, are occupying my house and I, in the opinion of the German judges, must pay the costs.

How do you like my house, Mr. X? Do you find it pleasant to live in? Did the silver-grey carpeting in the upper rooms suffer while the SA-men were looting? My concierge sought safety in these upper rooms, as, I being in America at the time, the gentlemen had decided to take it out on him. The carpet is very delicate, and red is a strong color, hard to clean out. The rubber tiling in the stairway was also not primarily designed with the boots of SA-men in mind. Should it have suffered too badly, I recommend you contact the Baake company; the flooring is the same as on the staircases of the “Europa” and the “Bremen,”^[1] and this is the company which delivered it.

Have you any notion why I had the semi-enclosed roof terrace built? Mrs. Feuchtwanger and I used it for our morning exercise. Would you mind seeing to it that the pipes of the shower don’t freeze?

I wonder to what use you have put the two rooms which formerly contained my library. I have been told, Mr. X, that books are not very popular in the Reich in which you live, and whoever shows interest in them is likely to get into difficulties. I, for instance, read your “Führer’s” book and guilelessly remarked that his 140,000 words were 140,000 offenses against the spirit of the German language. The result of this remark

is that you are now living in my house. Sometimes I wonder to what uses bookcases can be put in the Third Reich. In case you should decide to have them ripped out, be careful not to damage the wall. And did they rip out the round bench which was built into the library's window loggia? One thing is for certain, Mr. X, there is a lot to rebuild and repair in the house. May I suggest you contact the architect Slobotka for this purpose? I doubt whether this gentleman is allowed to practice in Berlin, though, since there aren't many architects who know how to build in the city, yet there are many party members who want to build. Please, your connections permitting, do not hire a party member but rather a professional. It would be a pity about the house.

I would like to know what is going on with the buzz saw in the Grunewald forestry. Its noise has sometimes spoiled my enjoyment of the house, and it was only with great effort that I managed to achieve the removal of this nuisance. These days of course, noise will hardly be considered a disturbance in Berlin. However, it would be nice of you if you didn't simply give up my hard-won victory.

And what have you done with my terrarium which stood at one of the windows of my study? Did they actually kill my turtles and my lizards because their owner was of an "alien race"? And were the flower beds and the rock garden much damaged when the SA-men, shooting as they ran, pursued my sorely beaten concierge across the garden while he fled into the woods?

Doesn't it sometimes seem odd to you that you should be living in my house? Your "Führer" is not generally considered a friend of Jewish literature. Isn't it, therefore, astounding that he should have such a strong predilection for the Old Testament? I myself have heard him quote with much fervor, "An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth" (by which he may have meant "A confiscation of property for literary criticism"). And now, through you, he has fulfilled a prophecy of the Old Testament—the saying, "Thou shalt dwell in houses thou hast not builded."

Don't let my house get into a mess, Mr. X. Building and furnishing it has taken Mrs. Feuchtwanger and myself a lot of effort. Running and maintaining it won't take a lot of effort. Please take care of it a little. I'm also saying this in your own interest. Your "Führer" has promised that his rule will last a thousand years: thus I'm assuming that you will soon be in the position of negotiating with me concerning the house's return.

With many good wishes for our house,

Lion Feuchtwanger

P.S. By the way, do you agree that my statement that your "Führer" writes bad German is disproved by the fact that you are sitting in my house?

NOTES

[1] The "Europe" and the "Bremen" were luxury ocean liners.

Source of English translation: *A Treasury of the World's Great Letters*, edited by M. Lincoln Schuster. London and Toronto, 1941, pp. 455–57. Additional translation by Insa Kummer.

Source of original German text: Lion Feuchtwanger, "Du sollst in Häusern wohnen, die du nicht gebaut hast" (March 20, 1935), from *Pariser Tageblatt*, reprinted in "Wer schweigt wird schuldig!" © Aufbau Verlag GmbH & Co. KG, Berlin 1999, 2012.

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