

# Dorothea Schlegel, Letter to Friedrich Schlegel (August 21, 1808)

## Abstract

---

Dorothea Schlegel (born Brendel Mendelssohn, 1764-1839) was the daughter of the Jewish Enlightenment philosopher Moses Mendelssohn. After her first marriage ended in divorce, she changed her name to Dorothea and in 1797 began a relationship with the philosopher and writer Friedrich Schlegel. They moved to Jena, where they joined Friedrich's brother August Wilhelm and his wife Caroline to become part of the Jena circle of intellectuals who shaped German Romanticism. During this time, Dorothea translated French literary works, wrote literary reviews and a novel, *Florentin*. While living in Paris, Friedrich and Dorothea married in 1804 after she had converted to Protestantism. Four years later, now living in Cologne, they both converted to Catholicism and proselytized passionately for their new faith. Friedrich Schlegel subsequently obtained a position with the government in Vienna, where this letter was sent. Dorothea wrote this letter to her husband in August 1808 while she was traveling from Cologne to Dresden to visit her sons before reuniting with him in Vienna. Her letter provides insight into the vagaries of travel during this period when much of Germany was occupied by French troops.

## Source

---

Lobenstein, August 21, 1808.

What would you do, my Friedrich, if you saw your wife at this moment in a miserable town between the Bavarian and Saxon borders (in the Voigtland), in an inn, where she sits all day locked up in a large room all alone, the whole house full of Frenchmen, running up and down like devils, with bad food, miserable weather, and growing impatient ten times and then patient ten times in one moment – what would you do in the great imperial city, surrounded by friends and patrons, if you saw me from afar in this state? – But that's how it is! – I arrived in Bamberg late in the evening of the 16th and fell ill that very night, quite untimely and contrary to expectations; fortunately, however, not very severely, so that I did not have to stay in bed all day, but I had to rest for three days, especially as I was given every hope that I would find traveling companions. I spent all day with the Paulus', but I had to sleep and have breakfast in the inn, and impatient about this, I set off again on the third day, not yet recovered, all alone in a hired carriage, which would take me no further than Kronach, because there are bad roads there that no Bamberg carter knows about. I arrived there happily on the 19th and immediately hired another wagon to take me as far as Schleiz. On the way, however, we heard that we were heading towards the French army returning from Silesia. I had good courage and tried to persuade my coachman to take me there, but it was all in vain; he begged me with tearful eyes not to go any further. "If you order it," said the faithful fellow, "I will go on, for I am going all over the world with you and would lay down my life for you, but the horses belong to my master, and the French will certainly take them from me if we meet them." The whole region was in utter terror; they had suffered badly the first time the French marched through there. I tried in vain to prove to the people that they had probably been treated hostilely out of misunderstanding, for the region belongs to a Prince Reuss, and the French certainly thought they were hearing Prussian instead of Reussian. But all my persuasion was in vain, the people infected me, and in the end I thought it more advisable to stop here rather than arrive somewhere where the French already were, and perhaps not be able to find shelter there, or even meet them in the open field. The innkeepers immediately gave me their best room and were really glad to have someone to whom they could entrust it so that the officers could not demand it. I did not tell them of my fears that, if it should please them to

---

occupy this room, they would find some way of depriving me of my dominion over it, and I moved in with my suitcase. The people treat me as well as they can, but it is a poor, miserable place in the middle of a wild, wooded mountain range. The road from Kronach to here is quite dreadful, it couldn't possibly be worse in Poland. A constant thick fog lies over it, falling down in a fine misty rain. It's striking how cold the region is compared to the Rhineland. There, all the grain has long since been brought in, here it hasn't even all been cut yet and people heat their houses in the evening and don't think it's unusual. So I've been trapped here since yesterday afternoon and it could easily take a few more days. The marching goes on without interruption, even all night. They are only allowed to rest for an hour at most; they go upstairs in a hurry, most of them are transported on wagons. Tomorrow night, however, 5 to 6000 men will probably spend the night here properly, and then I hope to be able to continue; I will have to allow half a day or something like that so as not to fall into the hands of some marauders. Think of my impatience! On top of that, I am still not completely healthy and I feel very weak, which is greatly increased by the bad life. What a difference between this country (not even Bavaria) and the Rhine! You glorious country, how one must love you! Here you find heavy feather blankets, pork, badly baked sour bread, no wine to think of – in short, a bad life and no church, no bells, nothing to gladden the heart! Just think, not even a stagecoach leaves from here, and if I didn't have pens and fine paper with me, I wouldn't even have the comfort of being able to write to you! As soon as it is possible, I will take the innkeeper's horses and wagon, try to get another horse and a postilion for safety, and have myself taken to Schleiz; there I will get on the stagecoach to Gera and then look for a way to travel further. But I will not send you this letter until I can say that I have passed through this area safely.

You have done Koblenz an injustice, or rather it is a pity that you did not get to know it. It is a lovely place, with amiable people of a good old type, with a little more ease and life than Cologne. They sing Goethe's songs and read the best new things with love; they are sociable and friendly and live cheerfully. The women are mostly very pretty, even beautiful; the wine and bread quite excellent; a lovely sour mineral water is the common drink; the air pure and mild due to the many rivers that meet there and the protective mountains; one breathes with unusual ease; I have had 30 pulse beats there in a period in which I otherwise hardly count 20 on me; less luxury, but more good taste in clothes and household utensils than in Cologne; and the landscape, the landscape! What hills, what valleys and fields and meadows, old castles and villages and waters; what variety and what harmony! And Laach Abbey and its lake, the divine one, which is the most beautiful thing my eyes have ever seen. I won't write to you about that, I'll tell you about it one day when we're all cheerful and together! Koblenz is just as dear to me as Dresden; and now there is also the ancient, the Rhenish, Catholic, free original life!

From Koblenz onwards, my journey was associated more with unpleasant than pleasant sensations, and I don't want to describe it in detail, I will tell you some time. I long for Dresden with indescribable nostalgia. My children have certainly been waiting for me for a long time and I also hope to find letters from you there. I wish I could never part from you for so long again! – I did not meet Hardenburg in Unterzell. I don't particularly like Würzburg, but I like Bamberg even less, although the area around Bamberg is much prettier than around Würzburg. I could have left Paulus' the same day I arrived. I feel so sorry for her, she is as if she had died! She has a clever boy and a beautiful girl, but she is not happy and probably never will be. I have met high-ranking people at her house, namely Bavarian excellences and the like, and heard conversations and principles and opinions that made the hair on my head stand on end. Wretched people! I met Hegel there; he lives in Bamberg and writes the local newspaper. – You fool, how can you ask me for literary news? You are at the source, read the learned papers as we do in Cologne and make an effort to figure out the actual opinion; otherwise we know nothing. Of course, there is general talk that Brentano's work will appear before this winter. But how does this fit in with circumstances? The copies are all being sent back from north to south: In Bamberg they claimed to know for certain that the king would leave Munich for Bamberg or Nuremberg with his whole family, and they wanted to deduce other events from this, but everything is uncertain and mysterious!

[...]

---

Source of original German text: Dorothea v. Schlegel geb. Mendelssohn und deren Söhne Johannes und Philipp Veit, *Briefwechsel*, im Auftrage der Familie Veit herausgegeben von Dr. J.M. Raich, 1. Band, Mainz, 1881, pp. 282-286. Available online:  
[https://archive.org/details/bub\\_gb\\_2EYBAAAQAAJ/page/282/mode/2up](https://archive.org/details/bub_gb_2EYBAAAQAAJ/page/282/mode/2up)

Translation: GHI staff

Recommended Citation: Dorothea Schlegel, Letter to Friedrich Schlegel (August 21, 1808), published in: German History in Documents and Images,  
<<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/the-holy-roman-empire-1648-1815/ghdi:document-5401>> [July 13, 2025].