

Betty Scholem to her Son Gershom on the Situation in Germany (February-March 1933)

Abstract

After Hitler was appointed chancellor, Jews in many German towns became the target of random violence carried out by members of the SA and the NSDAP. In this letter to her youngest son Gershom, who had emigrated to Palestine in 1923, Betty Scholem, whose two eldest sons were running the family printing business by this time, describes her view of the situation for Jewish Germans. Among other things, her letter touches on the conflict between Gershom and his father because of his turn to Zionism and his decision to emigrate to Palestine. Like many of her fellow Jews, Betty Scholem did not initially realize the full extent of the existential threat posed by National Socialism. In 1939, however, she too was forced to leave Germany. She followed her two eldest sons to Australia, where they had emigrated a year earlier.

Source

Berlin, February 20, 1933

Dear children,

[...]

With us here, political changes appear first of all as a shock to business. This is, unfortunately, an old experience of ours. Business came to a standstill after Hitler became chancellor. Some people even canceled contracts retroactively, and Annchen Sussmann bought, of all things, a sack of flour! Phiechen asked whether it wouldn't be wise to put something by. "Of course," replied Erich. "A clever thing to do would be to get yourself fifty loaves of bread." Each change in the cabinet almost automatically raises the specter of strikes and food shortages. Hitler blabbers incessantly on the radio, without saying anything positive. Though the ban on newspapers that only prattle is very positive indeed. There has also been a mass dismissal of republican-minded civil servants, from top to bottom: district magistrates, high police officials – they're all being given the boot. Since all of these people will be entitled to full pensions, our civil service budget will only balloon again. Newspapers are not allowed to complain, even mildly. An Ullstein publication, a supplement of the *Berliner Zeitung*, was banned because it carried an article in its economic section claiming that the prevailing conditions here have thrown the stock market off! And the highly respected Catholic paper *Germania* also got closed down, even though it was closely allied with Herr von Papen. It goes without saying that the same fate befell the Communist papers. Soon we won't have any other newspapers but the Nazi ones. Hitler does things with violence. For the time being, the Jews have nothing to fear. There are few Jews in the civil administration and the civil service, and special laws won't be enacted so quickly. [...]

I went to see a marvelous production of *Faust II*, magnificent and sublime. It lasted from 7:00 to 11:45 P.M., and I sat through it without the least effort. I treated myself to a good seat: second balcony, first row.

We're buried in snow, and with a bit of imagination I can envision the clouds surging up over the white rooftops to be mountains. It's beautiful, even if the cold is awful. Why don't I live in Santa Margherita, by the blue sea?!

Warmest kisses, Mum

Berlin, March 19, 1933

My dear child,

[...] You wrote that you want precise information! I must refer you to the newspapers. Caution is the order of the day, and no one is allowed to pass rumors around. But this isn't necessary, since the facts speak for themselves. Lawyers and teachers have it the worst: they can be completely barred from their professions. Jewish doctors have already been shut out of the hospitals, and the national medical insurance is probably next in line. Still, the government won't directly interfere with their private practices. [...]

I myself am really quite calm. I'm not the only one in the world I have to think of, however, and my concern for my children and grandchildren has nothing to do with paranoia or an overactive imagination, which are not something I incline toward. It's a real stroke of luck that you're out of harm's way! Now, suddenly, I want to see everyone in Palestine!! When I only think of the outcry heard among German Jews when Zionism began! Your father and Grandfather Hermann L. and the entire Central Verein beat themselves on the breast and said with absolute conviction, "We are Germans!" And now we're being told that we are *not* Germans after all! [...]

The streets are utterly quiet, at least in the sections of the city I frequent. But the Tauentzien, with its elegant shops, is full of the usual hustle and bustle. The number of people holding swastika boxes and collecting money has increased, though I've never seen anyone make a donation. I go there often because I like to meet with my gossip group at the Wittenbergplatz. I then complain about events as we sit on the silver terrace of the K.d.W. I know quite well, of course, that we still have it good as long as we can sit undisturbed and blabber at the K.d.W.

[...]

Warmest kisses, Mum

Source: Gershom Scholem, *A Life in Letters, 1914–1982*. Edited and translated by Anthony David Skinner. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002, pp. 218–19, 222–23.

Source of original German text: Betty Scholem and Gershom Scholem, *Mutter und Sohn im Briefwechsel: 1917–1946*. Edited by Itta Shedletzky with Thomas Sparr. Munich: Verlag C.H. Beck, 1989, pp. 276–77, 284–86.

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