

Thomas Mann on the “Jewish Question” (1921)

Abstract

The essay “On the Jewish Question” was written in 1921 by the German writer Thomas Mann (1875-1955) at the request of Efraim Frisch, co-founder and editor of the literary magazine *Der Neue Merkur*. The magazine was primarily aimed at the intellectual educated middle classes and included numerous famous European thinkers and writers among its authors. After a discussion with his wife Katia, who spoke out against publication, Thomas Mann decided against publishing the text in *Neuer Merkur*, however. Consequently, the text was not published until after his death. It was first printed in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* on January 15, 1966. After the end of the First World War, there was an increase in antisemitic polemics and attacks in the Weimar Republic, and not only from radical groups. Thomas Mann’s attitude towards Judaism changed during his lifetime but was always characterized by a certain ambivalence. Based on his biographical experiences, Mann describes a largely positive and friendly relationship with Jews in his essay and emphasizes above all the openness and intelligence he encountered in his Jewish acquaintances. Yet common notions of foreignness and difference that were widespread at the time also surface in some passages.

Source

The following article was written by Thomas Mann in 1921 for the magazine *Der Neue Merkur* which was devoting a special issue to the problem of anti-Semitism: The editor, Ephraim Frisch, was not too happy with it since he felt it did not treat the topic as thoroughly as it might have. The author, too, was not altogether pleased with what he had written, and just before publication it was withdrawn by mutual agreement. Thomas Mann had no plans to publish it separately. It was to be included in a definitive edition of his collected works. But since false rumors have been circulating in recent years about this article, which a Mr. Klaus Schröter (writing in *Welt am Sonntag*) flatly described as anti-Semitic, the heirs decided to make it available to the public.

– Katia (Mrs. Thomas) Mann

Dear Mr. Frisch,

So much that is wise, penetrating and even definitive has already been said in your August issue about the matter you have asked me to discuss – though you must admit I would not have volunteered to do so – that I cannot help but think it is very daring of me to add my own opinions. A purely personal approach will be the surest means of protecting myself from disgrace, just as the personal is the refuge of those who are acutely aware of the unfathomable depths of the objective world. It is also the naturally given form of expression for a certain adventurous *naïveté* that I would rather like to allow myself to profess, the essence of which is to live among and with questions rather than to have printable answers at one’s fingertips. Among friends I am even capable of confessing that I have always been closer to asking, “How will I ever get through life?” than “What opinions do I have on this subject?” And thus the fact is that for a man like me the difficulty of “getting through life” is greatly eased by Judaism, and this to such a degree that if I adopted and displayed anti-Semitic ideas – which are “available everywhere,” as they say in advertisements – I would do something amounting to grotesque ingratitude, an ingratitude of colossal dimensions possibly befitting a Richard Wagner, but surely not me.

Thus the proper thing for me to do, as I am being asked about the Jewish problem, is not to let myself become confused by “grandiose viewpoints,” neither intellectual upheavals such as the eclipse of

liberalism nor responsible considerations of the politico-philosophical or biological-racist kind. Rather, I should stick to the facts of my life which betray a sympathy for Jews, as will always be true of all men who are not born to get through life in the usual way, if the truth be admitted.

I am thinking back – even my earliest memories of my Jewish fellow men are friendly. They were school friends. . . . I got along very well with them, and indeed instinctively preferred their company without noticing it. In the third grade of the *Gymnasium* a boy named Carlebach sat next to me for some time, a rabbi's son, an alert, not overly clean boy, whose large, intelligent, dark eyes gave me pleasure and whose hair I found more attractive than ours, we who did not wait until Biblical instruction was over before we came to class. Moreover, he was called Ephraim, a name redolent with the desert poetry of that very hour from which he was excluded by his peculiarity, or his own will. The name was more striking and more colorful to me than Hans or Jürgen. But what, in particular, I shall never forget about Ephraim was his unbelievable skill in giving me the answers when I was being asked a question, at the same time as he himself continued to read a book he hid behind the boy in front of him.

Another time during my childhood I was quite close to a boy by the name of Feher, Hungarian by birth, a racial type pronounced to the point of ugliness, with a flat nose and the premature shadow of a mustache. His father owned a small tailor shop near the waterfront; and as my parents' house was only a little above that neighborhood, Franz Feher and I often walked home together. With his slurring foreign speech, which may have been more interesting to me than our waterfront German, he would tell me about Hungarian circus troupes – not like Schumann's which recently had played at Reuter's inn – but very small wandering troupes, whose members, beasts and humans, could form a pyramid to salute the public at the end of the performance. I can assure you the story was amusing. Also, Feher was himself willing to take on certain errands and business transactions I could not have carried out myself, For only thirty pfennigs that I handed him, he purchased, in a small seamen's shop, a genuine, if modest, single-bladed pocketknife – the first I ever owned . But the most attractive fact about the Feher was that they actually put on plays at home. Parents, children and their friends – probably "Israelites" too –were busy rehearsing *Der Freischütz*, which they intended to perform as a play. And as I had seen the opera, I was burning with the desire to take part in this extraordinary entertainment as one of the marksmen – for one thing, because the important roles had already been assigned, but also because I pined to stand with a rifle the way the choristers of the Municipal Theatre did, butt-end grounded and the hand of the outstretched arm grasping the upper part of the barrel. True, these extras were to appear in their everyday suits, for old Feher could only make costumes for the leading characters. But I could put up with that so long as I got a gun I could pose with. I no longer know, or else I never found out, whether the performance took place at all. At any rate I had no part in it. Probably, despite the passionate longing, the shyness of the little upper-class boy and social prejudice prevented me from going to the house of the Jewish tailor down by the waterfront.

Then later, in the fourth grade of the *Gymnasium*, I could often be seen in the schoolyard with another boy – the son of a kosher butcher and the jolliest fellow on earth, without the slightest hint of the melancholy traces history has stamped on that people, which were obvious enough in Carlebach and Feher, and which had probably unconsciously attracted me – the jolliest fellow, I tell you, engaging, genial and without deceit. He was slender, in fact thin; so that only his lips were full – and there were the small lines of someone prone to smile radiating from the outer corners of his almond-shaped eyes. He has remained alive in my memory because he was my first example of a Jew who enjoys himself – a type I was to meet often. In fact, I tend to believe that nowadays good humor is more frequent as a basic trait among Jews than it is among pure Europeans. This is a matter of racial freshness and of an enviable capacity for enjoying life which may well compensate these people for some continuing external disadvantages. The slightly senescent math teacher consistently addressed my good-humored friend as "the student Lissauer," even though that was not his name. It was Gosslar – and I shall not forget the radiantly forbearing smile with which Gosslar let the weakness of the aged Christian pass and did not

object to being caned “Lissauer” twice a week. “If the student Lissauer has the result,” screeched the old man, “he should let us know.” And Gosslar, with incredible swiftness – really inconceivable to my own weak understanding – had the result ready. He was a first-rate arithmetician, the quickest and most reliable I ever knew. His mental disposition, which fitted the general clarity and mirth of his make-up, did not by any means exclude an appreciation for lesser activities, even as dreamy and irregular a one as the versifying I indulged in. For the awkward pomposity of the ballads that I stealthily submitted to him in well-founded confidence – one of them, opening with the words “Deep down in the dark dungeon of Rome,” dealt with Paetus and Arria – Gosslar showed an intelligent and unbiased, if slightly ironical sympathy such as I could not expect anywhere among my fellow captives at the Klinkerhof, let alone from the men in charge of that school.

And that is generally the way it was from then on. Can I help it? Touching on Goethe’s relations to Jewry, Riemer said: “The educated among them were on the whole more civil and more persevering in their admiration than many of his own religion. Generally speaking, Jews show more obliging attentiveness and pleasing sympathy than people of German stock do; and their quick comprehension, penetration and their particular wit make them a more sensitive public than, alas, is to be found among the pure-blooded Germans who are sometimes a bit slow and have difficulty comprehending.” I am very sorry, but this is precisely my own experience. And what artist, or writer, of some importance does not share it? I do not forget that there is a lot to be said on the other side. Over the years grave conflicts between me and Jews have occurred, and probably had to occur. Bad blood was bred on both sides. The most malicious portraits of me originated with Jews, and the cleverest, most venomous negation of my existence reached me from those quarters. But was it not also a Jew who called the day of Goethe’s death the nativity of German freedom? Yet what Riemer wrote has remained true, proving itself in large and small issues and in my own case as well. Jews “discovered” me. Jews published my work and gave it publicity. Jews produced my impossible play. *Buddenbrooks* was, after all, badly received at first but it was a Jew, the poor S. Lublinski, who prophesied in a leftist-liberal paper: “This book will grow with time and be read for generations.” And whenever I go out into the world visiting cities, I am almost without exception – not only in Vienna and Berlin – received by Jews, put up by them, fed and spoiled.

Can I change all that? Moreover, must not “obliging attentiveness and pleasing sympathy” mean something more than a mere nerve tonic? Is there not some essential value in that attitude? Does it not somehow offer a real guarantee of my worth? The truth is – and this cannot be denied – something which pleases the pure-blooded German but is scorned by the Jews cannot seriously be considered as art. This, however, does not mean that the Jews further and support exclusively, or even preferably, what is akin to them. Alfred Kerr will never love and praise Carl Sternheim the way he loves and honors Gerhart Hauptmann (the national pedestal he stands on today was erected by Jews). Nothing then, could be more foolish than to insist on the erroneous belief, propounded by the racist Professor Bartels, that whatever pleases Jews must be Jewish. It actually would seem that only German works that also are to the taste of the Jews qualify as superior German works. Conversely, Europe’s various native-born bourgeoisies have only too often been pleased by the distasteful Jewish characteristics they found in Meyerbeer, Offenbach, Blumenthal.

I mentioned Adolf Bartels . . . As far as I can see, this savant had discarded the theory that my brother and I are Jews. He nevertheless declares in his most recent literary dictionary that, even though during the war I professed my Germanness in *Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen* (Reflections of an Unpolitical Man), he still cannot bring himself to believe in my authentic German character. I know why he can’t and I will get used to it. But if even an avowal of one’s genuine German feelings that is intelligent cannot propitiate a racist professor, whereas the most stubborn opposition to liberal democratic ideas does not alienate the Jews provided only that it is intelligent, it should be clear that I cannot be expected to have anti-Semitic opinions.

I am referring to the difficulty of taking a stand somewhere between being a German and being a

European intellectual – a position I consciously had to accept as my fate during the war. At that point my adventurousness justified itself. An adventurer is one who can accept any fate just as long as it really is one, and that is what I have done. My relations to Jews have been adventurous and open-minded all along: I regarded them as something picturesque fit to make the world more colorful. If that by itself sounds irresponsibly aesthetic, let me add that I also saw an ethical symbol in that, one of the symbols of the exceptional and of the higher demands of life. I, as a poet, have often sought such symbols. Somewhere in my work, a physician by the “irritating” name of Sammet [which means “velvet”] has this to say: “No principle of equality, if I may be allowed this comment, will ever prevent the existence, in the community, of exceptional and special men who are set apart, in a noble or an infamous sense, from the general middle-class norm. The individual will do well not to question the nature of his exceptional position; rather, he should recognize the significance of that position and the special obligation it imposes. Compared to the normal and hence complacent majority, one is at an advantage, not at a disadvantage, if one has an additional inducement for exceptional achievements.” This is Romanticism, I admit. But the conception of the Jew as a romantic-aristocratic entity, not unlike that of the German, appealed to me early; and no Jews have pleased me less than those dissimulators and artful repressors who discern anti-Semitism in the mere failure to totally disregard and deny the existence of so striking a phenomenon as Judaism.

Following that trend of thought, I once wrote a whole story about Jews – the novella of a pair of twins, their wild despair and confusion of feelings in their luxury, loneliness and hatred . . . *Wälsungenblut!* There occurs in it an account, full of insinuations, of a performance of Wagner’s *Die Walküre*; and when reference is made to “the much-hated God-chosen face devoid of respect” proliferating in the womb of the rescued woman from which also came a pair of twins who, deceiving the plodding husband, “join their grief and sorrow in licentious rapture” – that likewise makes for confusion, on the part of the reader, that is, who no longer knows what race I am talking about. Thomas Theodor Heine illustrated the book collaboration that must have been noted as significant in Weimar. But, good God, what combinations have not occurred in my life!

Another time the Jewish motif even led me to writing verse. “As for the first time in Venice, in dreamlike contentment and bliss, ‘so once again, ten years later, my heart ran high with passion . . . Fairy-tale East! Dreamed-of Orient! Then, my beloved ward, when in my youthfulness, ready for ecstasy, I let my eyes rest upon your sweet form, then destiny gathered you up and its voice called . . . “

I sent you the poem once before. It is admittedly bad, but beautiful nevertheless, besides being cynical in its daring and irresponsible denial of all “grandiose viewpoints,” the racist one, for instance. But what could one expect? A son of the most mongrel nation, I am myself a mixture, one quarter Latin. The Medieval German burgher (it re-awoke recently as, in the course of a celebration, I saw again the turrets of my “Totentanz” home town) is crossed with less worthy modern democratic strains and with the instincts of a psychologizing, cosmopolitan novelist. What difference does it make that a golden-domed dream vaulting the fairy-tale East and the Orient is now harbored in my children’s blood. May they tread the road of progress as experimental, if imperfect, specimens of that “Eurasian-Negroid race of the future” that literati dream of . . .

That road is not exactly my own, as I tried to make clear in six hundred-odd pages. Yet I would be less than candid if I failed to avail myself of the opportunity to declare that the cultural reaction we find ourselves in – and of which the swastika nonsense is but a coarse, popular manifestation – hardly approaches my needs. That is the kind of reaction our war saboteurs, trusting the Entente, were afraid of ill the event of a German victory; but even after the most triumphal victory, brutality could not possibly have flourished more than it did after our defeat. And if that had to come under all circumstances, we might as well have been victorious right away. No one suffered more than I did from the moral debacle of 1918, the gruesomely extreme self-doubts of the Germans, and the general capitulation to the mendacious ideology of Western bourgeois rhetoric. My heart goes out to the young who refuse to

recognize either “Rome” or “Moscow” as their truth and reality and search for what is German somewhere between East and West. But if it is true that students at the University of Munich prevented the guest lectures of a great scholar (dubbed “the new Newton” by the liberal English) because that man is a Jew and because, at home in the regions of the highest and purest abstractions, he advocated the pacifist conciliation of all nations – it is the most dreadful disgrace, and I, to quote Claudius, would “not wish to bear the guilt for it.”

A nation that suffers injustice should try internally to be on especially good terms with justice. But there is not a trace of justice in Jew-baiting accusations and drives. Who, both during and after the war, reaped more profits and hoarded more than our sturdy peasants? The abominations of ruthless greed, exploitation and rampant moneymaking – were these and are these privileges of a foreign people? Shame on all who say so! Who would like to date the origin of the world’s misery or tell us where the *cul-de-sac* started at whose dark end we now are whining and groping? The religious cleavage of Europe, revolution, democracy, nationalism, internationalism, militarism, the steam engine, industrialization, progress, capitalism, Socialism, materialism, imperialism – the Jews were only companions, fellow culprits, fellow victims . . . True, they were often leaders, thanks to their intellectual gifts – thanks, above all, however, to the circumstance that led them to consider the new as good, for something new – revolution – had brought them liberty. The Germans should be familiar with the ancient and profound story of the scapegoat. If one carries the sin of the world, it shows little pride to insist on sending someone else into yet another desert.

In Goethe’s words, the Jews as a nation have “never been worth much” as shown by the endless troubles their prophets had with them. Their typical character has its unpleasant side, indeed its dangers – what national character does not? Each European nation has in its own way been the undoing of Europe. But one thing that does distinguish the Jew from the German more than his nose is his inborn love of the intellect. Surely that love did not infrequently make Jews leaders on humanity’s road of sin. The outsiders, the painfully far-reaching, the artists, the poets and the writers, will always be the friends of the Jews and indebted to them for that love. Strakhov, Dostoevski’s biographer, wrote: “For he loved literature, and this love was the main reason he did not immediately join the Slavophiles. He was well aware of the hostility with which they, in accordance with their principles, had met contemporary literature from the beginning.” Must conservatism always be in the hands of cave men, of brutal enemies of the spirit? One oft-times feels that this is not necessary: I am very drawn to a conservative German tradition . . . I will always be bound to the Jews by their love of the intellect, their habitual affinity for all that is delicate, fine, bold and free.

Again I have stood up for *Rede und Antwort*. May I sit down?

Respectfully yours,
Thomas Mann

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