

Correspondence March 2, 1977 between Jürgen Moser and Nina Moser

I recently came across this letter my father wrote in response to a letter I wrote him when I was 19, living in NYC with questions about WWII, his and his family's role and choices at that time in Nazi Germany.

I grew up in a comfortable suburb of NYC far removed from the reality of the war that so deeply impacted my parents' generation. When my roommate, who happened to be Jewish, asked me about the whys and wherefores of my German background I did not have adequate answers. I wrote my father asking him to explain more and give me the answers to questions, for example, "Why didn't you just leave?"

Some of us are fortunate to grow up in a time of peace and prosperity and can enjoy the benefits of not knowing - thus we may have difficulty understanding how life can be for those not so lucky: those in wartime under a dictatorship or just a very different life circumstance than we live in.

He tries to cross that divide with this letter.

Nina

March 2, [19]77

Dear Nina,

I was glad to get your letter – and of course, I also want you to write to Omy who is desperate to get a letter from anyone. As a matter of fact, ask her about the war stories, and you will get much more out of her than out of me. We are quite busy here: I give 3 lectures this week and 2 next week. We play music with various people and have an active social life (much more than at home). Mommy goes to the laboratory and often visits Jessie. All this is quite enjoyable even though a bit too much. So when should I find time to tell you about my recollection of the war? It would be so much better to talk about it, because then I would know what you would be interested in. One day or at least one week could fill a letter, so where should I start? Do you know that besides my mother's memoirs, I have a bunch of letters from Friedel written in the war time. Also, my mother has been collecting all letters from me. I am sure that is more information than you want—but Omy's memoirs are really quite good, interesting and not too long. You will say they are in German, but I am sure you would manage quite well.

One thing I can tell you. When I was [a] teenager, I was totally disinterested in politics like you – probably mainly because everything in politics was Nazi propaganda to which boys of over [age] eleven were quite a bit exposed. Jews were branded as parasites – there were quite a number of them left in Königsberg when the war started. My parents played chamber music with an American ambassador but they were forbidden to meet with him [because he was a foreigner] – which, of course meant that they

watched with whom you socialized. So, in that atmosphere it was pointless to think about politics for lack of information. (There were no foreign newspapers) and, in my case, lack of interest. Every day you heard about the greatness of the German troops and the progress of the German cause in the war. Several times a week one heard “Sondermeldungen” (special news [broadcasts]) of this or that Russian town, and these news [broadcasts] were started with some trumpet theme, usually from [Franz] Liszt’s Prelude, which I have trouble to listen to since that time!

Maybe you got a glimpse of the picture. So when I was 15 one heard that we would be needed for the war, as “Luftwaffenhelfer”, for anti-aircraft guns, to protect the town from bombing raids. This was not a question of a decision for me or anybody else, but inescapably, something to be lived through. I was not looking forward to this prospect at all, because it meant also leaving home, being exposed to all the drill, physically and politically. We were drafted as the whole class—of about thirty although there were about 2 who had physical handicaps. In the beginning it turned out more adventurous and less painful than I had expected. Some 20 km [12 miles] outside of the town we were trained how to use the huge guns and radar instruments and for 3 hours a day we even had school. We felt tremendously superior to the teachers, us being exposed to the real world and being above the stuff they taught in school. But I started already then – especially when the pressure was great – to hide in mathematics. I found problems which kept me occupied, evenings I was cleaning toilets or in the drill.

All this started in Jan 1944 but things deteriorated rapidly and in August we had 2 major air raids (British) which demolished the town and killed many people. Our time had come to shoot down planes – and there was an incredible shooting all night – but I have no idea whether we succeeded in shooting down a single plane. From our battery we could see the whole town in flames and we were eager to find out whether our parents and relatives were alive. It was quite a shock to see a town so totally destroyed that you could not find your way. But this was only the beginning. By Christmas the town was surrounded by [the] Russian Army. They were about 30 km – 40 km from the town and shot into the town. It became more and more frightening. How in the world would we ever get out? At the same time the Nazi propaganda trumpeted of the final (German) victory – which was absurd. I will not describe all this – it would take too long. I just want to explain to you that there was no political dilemma for me in this: the problem was how to survive and how to get out, how to escape to stay alive. The pressure was extreme: the Russians were pictured as hordes of animals and, in fact, they were quite brutal. To run away from them was not possible either, and, in fact, Germans who were separated from their units were hung as deserters. You saw soldiers hanging in the trees! This pressure was not on for a day or two but lasted more or less for ½ year and longer. In January 1945 Friedel got killed. Later on the battery to which I belonged was crushed by Russian tank attack – while I was away! All but 3 or 4 of my classmates were killed then.

But to have survived that did not mean much since things got tougher, more and more inescapable. I told you about some of the episodes. The winter was quite severe, some -15°, -20° C [5° - 4° Fahrenheit], when people tried to escape over the lakes in East Prussia.

You see the question should one could one fight for the German cause, or for Hitler was not what entered my mind. It was not only the question how to survive, but to stay sane. (One of the boys in a

parallel class turned crazy, when he was made to kill some people.) You know the expression “turn on”. We practiced the opposite, the “switch off” which I learned thoroughly. When things go too terrible, the cold unbearable, or the danger too frightening, that you felt you could not stand it, you switched off. You detached yourself, you did not let it reach you and could achieve that you did not feel the cold anymore or the fear. You switched on “dead”. Something which psychologists consider very bad, which for us was almost the only way to survive.

So many people talking in the easy chair about the war, what people should have done, just do not know what it is like. Actually there are books about that, but who can stand to read it. Maybe you recall [Erich Maria] Remarque’s “All Quiet on the Western Front” which describes these things of the First World War and the second was only worse.

What did we think of Hitler? You know what the official line was, and people joking about the party were thrown into jail or concentration camp. But, of course people expressed their own views to trusted friends or in the family (which led sometimes to tragic denunciations). But I was lucky in that my father was always very outspoken anti-Nazi—and in that there was no conflict—also not with Friedel who had such difficult times at home. So we felt strongly against the Nazis in our family (but many relatives, e.g. Wera Alsen, Edith Gramatzki, were Nazis), on the other hand my father was not and would never have been in the underground. For such risks he was not made. But I am always grateful to him for having been clear to us in this issue.

One could go on and on. One thing I often noticed: Things which were too terrible I simply forgot – repressed – as I noticed when talking to friends (like Klippe with the fashion shows in NY) and it takes an extra effort to bring them to the surface. Maybe sometimes when we talk together. –

Do write to Omy! I am glad you enjoy your apartment. And get enough sleep so that you don’t get so many colds. Love, your daddy.

Transcribed May 2023 by Klaus T. Moser-Maync

Typed by Kim Moser