

LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

In Quarantine with Victor Klemperer

Margaret Scanlan

Indiana University South Bend

mscanlan@iusb.edu

The pandemic was real when they locked me out of the library. Retired for over a decade, I had weathered the early losses of status and connection and managed the disorientation that awaits a life structured since early childhood around school. Retirement turns into a permanent sabbatical; if you really yearn to read and write, no one makes you abandon books for golf or bridge. One has time to work up new interests and learn a new language; publishers and conference organizers set no age limits. When the routine of commuting to the emeritus office or library wearies, travel beckons: to Australia, Greece, Japan, Greenland.

Then came the freezing March day when the Hesburgh Library posted signs announcing that the Covid-19 emergency required restricting access to ‘members of the Notre Dame and St. Mary’s community.’ The reader on the new electronic lock did not acknowledge my visitor’s library card. Days later, my own campus across town locked down; online, Indiana University libraries disabled the ‘request books’ function that normally offers access to the system’s extensive collections. ‘It’s just like Victor Klemperer,’ I moaned to anyone who would listen.

The scene I had in mind occurs in his *I Will Bear Witness*, a diary the Jewish professor kept throughout the Nazi era, when he remained in Dresden after being dismissed from its Technical University in 1935 until the catastrophic firestorm of February 13, 1945 made escape possible. Klemperer was a well-published literary scholar who continued work on his literary history of eighteenth century France at home after being expelled from the university library’s reading room in October 1936. Then, in the wake of Kristallnacht, in December 1938, a minor library employee, ‘an old Stahlhelm veteran,’ was delegated to tell him Jews had been forbidden all access to the books. The old man wept so hard telling the news that Klemperer had to calm him down (Klemperer 1997: I, 439). Checkmated as a scholar, in his phrase, Klemperer turned to autobiography and a sociolinguistic study of Nazi rhetoric.

Using Holocaust metaphors triggers defenses; no, equivalency is not the issue, I do not take myself, comfortable and well-fed, for the double of a man enduring years of terror and near-starvation. My point is the opposite: when first reading about Klemperer's exclusion from the library, I found it all the more horrible because I could not conceive of anything like that ever happening to me. Old enough to recognize that death would only delay a decade or two longer, and having recently been introduced by colon surgery to the helplessness and humiliations of extreme age, I was hardly unassailably secure. I was confident, however, that so long as mobility and lucidity endured, the library promised a safe haven. I could always pack up a book bag and laptop and sweep through the security system. I would navigate the shelves and data bases expertly, find a comfortable niche for writing with a coffee cup and a scenic view at hand. The library was my second home, a place to be free of domestic messes, a place for reading and writing surrounded by testimonials to earlier generations who loved books and occasionally published their own.

Wrong, of course; the ease with which doors are locked electronically and computer access abridged should astonish no one. The restrictions public health authority imposed on all of us, though benignly intended and scientifically sound, bore troubling similarities to restrictions introduced by the Third Reich in its persecution of Jews. Conferences were cancelled and borders closed; restaurants, theaters, and museums shut their doors when libraries did. Like Klemperer, I meant to go on writing, and for a time my notes and access to online journals proved sufficient. The first visible problem was a copy editor's discovery of a missing citation in my article on Walter Kempowski. My English translation of *Alles umsonst* was locked up in a deserted building to which I surrendered my key on retirement. Access to the emeritus office requires only a code to the office doorpad, normally no barrier at a state university where buildings are usually open.

Had I summoned myself to battle, I might have found a sympathetic administrator to persuade the campus police to admit me. But having been waved off by a dismissive officer on the Fourth of July the previous year had left scars. I lacked the energy to begin the phone calls that might eventually confirm that the university, as the sign on the door clearly stated, did mean to ban anyone without a building key. The pathos of arguing for acceptance as a member of a faculty I had joined in 1976 inhibited action. Much easier to scroll through an unpaginated Kindle text looking for a passage that, tedious hours later, I could correlate with the German text I did have in hand.

This loss of nerve, and my paralysis about finding a new writing topic, was reminiscent of Klemperer's anxieties about his work during the Nazi era. His eighteenth century study would be his 'best book,' but now that it could not be published was 'useless Don Quixotery' (Klemperer 1997: I, 338). At other times he questioned its merit: 'nothing but self-deception and killing time' (I, 379). As Klemperer had, I also felt socially isolated, and realized how much I relied on conversations, travel, conferences, book exhibits, and libraries to stimulate fresh ideas. Possibly also I had started to internalize some of the public messages about the old that accompanied the pandemic, as constant anti-Semitic propaganda must have worn Klemperer down even as he realized its inanity. Yet I too remained doggedly convinced that work is the best forgetting; persistence may even be a sign that one still has hope (II, 345).¹ Klemperer

always read, even when he could not write, and I needed the discipline of an academic challenge to prove I could still meet it. What better challenge than reading all 1, 534 pages of Klemperer's diary *auf Deutsch?* Library access was no barrier; I had purchased the two-volume *Tagebücher (1933-1945)* years earlier when I signed up for German classes. Dictionary in hand, I started out.

Rereading the book so slowly increased my appreciation of how the Nazis persisted to the end in narrowing the boundaries of Jewish space. At first, they encouraged emigration, a step Klemperer notoriously refused. Early on, his references to narrowing, to feelings of suffocation or strangulation, are metaphors for social isolation (Klemperer 1997: I, 40). Eva and Victor Klemperer were sociable people, their days and nights punctuated with visits exchanged among a broad circle of relatives, colleagues, former students, and old friends visiting from Munich or Leipzig. In 1933 and 1934 the circle narrows, as some people shun Jews and others express Nazi enthusiasms that led the Klemperers to break with them. By the mid-thirties, Klemperer was losing friends to distant places: Gusti and the Rosenfelds and Isakowitzes to England, Walter Jelski and the Kaufmans to Palestine, his niece Lilly to Uruguay, the Blumenfelds to Peru, Martin Sussman to Stockholm. Later his circle shrank further as suicides and deportations to camps increased, and still later, as hardship and hunger intensified, the tiny Jewish community grew smaller as minor illnesses mutated into incurable fevers. As Klemperer had feared, 'We sit here as in a besieged fortress where the Plague rages' (I, 211).

Klemperer was nothing if not the cultured European professor of one's imagination, and his decision in 1936 to counter his sense of entrapment by purchasing a car and taking lessons to pass his driver's exam was, as he put it, 'a victory over my nature,' a hard-won accomplishment (Klemperer 1997: I, 239). He must have been a terrible driver, possessed of as little automotive knowledge as his hero Montaigne, and therefore entirely at the mercy of local mechanics as his ancient car sputtered and stopped, scattering its parts across the roadside. As he drove Eva and their remaining friends through scenic landscapes, they joked about seasickness. The reader, knowing that an accident would bring police attention, shares their nervousness, but he and his passengers remain unscathed, even after slamming his brakes to avoid an oncoming motorcyclist sends the car into a farmer's field. A sympathetic doctor, undeterred by Klemperer's revelation that he is non-Aryan, treats his injuries and an automechanic tows his car back to the road. Contrary to the advice of both doctor and mechanic, Klemperer drives his badly dented car back home in the dark, one door secured only by twine, unseen by the police.

Such adventures and small victories ended in December 1938, when Jews were forbidden to drive. From November 12 1938 new restrictions arose almost daily: cinemas, operas, concerts, and museums were forbidden; in Berlin, certain districts were off-limits. One of the Klemperers' favorite restaurants acquires a new 'Jews unwelcome' sign; other familiar venues post 'Juden verboten' notices. In December 1939, the Klemperers learn that they will have to surrender their house in April and move into a communal 'Jew's house.' In July 1940, a new order forbids Jews to enter Dresden's Grand Garden and other parks; after August 1940, lending libraries are forbidden. In July 1941, Jews are banned from the steamboat on

the Elbe River; on September 15, they are forbidden to leave the city limits. In March 1942 they are forbidden to take the streetcars, buses, even covered wagons; by April they are barred from train stations and forbidden to stand in lines. On December 12, 1943 the Klemperers move to their third Jew's house, this one part of the Jewish Community headquarters, the place where Jews must go on official business, such as obtaining ration cards. Klemperer declares it the 'quintessence of Jew houses, wholly in the hands of the Gestapo' (Klemperer 1997: II, 458). This is the logical endpoint of the ideological geography the Nazis constructed for Jews.

Klemperer marvelled at the average German's complacency in the face of even the most spectacular persecutions of Jews. In December 1938 he noted that Kristallnacht had made 'less of an impression on people than the reduction in the Christmas chocolate ration' (Klemperer 1997: II, 545). During the war years friends had trouble imagining the restrictions in his life and the dangers many innocuous activities posed to Jews. What struck many of us in March of 2020 was how easily the elderly's increased susceptibility to dying from Covid-19 became a reason for minimizing the American response to it. It was pointless to shut down the whole economy for the benefit of people who weren't contributing to it anyway. The Lieutenant-Governor of Texas, Dan Patrick, took the argument to its logical conclusion on Fox News, when he testified to his willingness, as a person in his seventies, to die 'in exchange for keeping the America all American loves for [his] children and grandchildren' (qtd. in Bump 2020).

Louise Aronson, a professor of medicine at the University of California, San Francisco, noted the same month that NBC News had recently declared on its website that 'Younger adults are also getting the coronavirus.' As she noted, the announcement suggested that as long as the virus was 'a scourge only among the old,' it hardly mattered. Asking 'why are we OK with old people dying?', she noted how widespread the outdated view that the elderly are already dying remains, although today the risk of death in the next year is only 2 percent for a seventy-year old man and 4 percent for an eighty-year old woman. Further, she argued, accepting 'the second-class citizenship of an entire category of human being' sets 'a precedent for treating others with the same disregard' (Aronson 2020). This particular argument was heard less as the public learned more about death and disabilities in the young. As Aronson might have predicted, Donald Trump, no stranger to self-contradiction, turned the logic upside down by claiming that children should return to school because the virus poses so few risks: 'extremely close to 100 percent of fatalities are adults. Children often have only mild symptoms, and medical complications are incredibly rare Those that do face complications often have underlying medical conditions' (whitehouse.gov 2020).

Americans of the 'hey, hey, LBJ' generation always took to the streets when outraged at their presidents, and we carried the tradition into old age in December 2019, when the new slogan was 'Impeach and convict.' Although Donald Trump had not caused the lockdown, the politically active elderly raged at their inability to join the Black Lives Matter demonstrations of 2020. Not to be able to join in felt like a deprivation of one's civic rights, amplifying the frustration of having no other outlet for one's social energies than donating

money; the quarantined cannot work in soup kitchens, tutor children, or even assist at the polls safely.

The Jews of Dresden were deprived not only of travel but of anything that might keep them in touch with the world outside: radios, telephones, typewriters, magazine subscriptions; correspondence with Allied countries was cut off when war was declared; as of 15 January 1944 all foreign correspondence required a special card, issued by the police, for which Jews were ineligible (Klemperer 1997: II, 476). Of course, when Goebbels' voice blared over the radiowaves, Jews were often in earshot, perhaps at their slave labor jobs in factories; and contraband news was passed from hand to hand. With amazing precision the community discussed the concentration camps, debating whether Theresienstadt was humanely run in the early years, then learning that its inmates were often sent on to Auschwitz, about which they never had any illusions. As Allied troops entered France, Klemperer and his friends tracked them almost day by day, just as they had understood the defeat at Stalingrad before it was announced.

Contemporary Americans, on the other hand, have nearly unlimited sources of information from television and the Internet; for the middle-classes, Amazon remained after libraries shuttered. Nonetheless, Americans can recognize something familiar as Klemperer and his friends speculate about the motives of the leaders who control their fate. Especially after Stalingrad, when it was obvious that Germany no longer had the resources to conduct war, they repeatedly argue that the war must end soon, that it could not go on like this. Yet hard evidence, such as the German loss of access to oilfields, the massive destruction of German cities, or the Allies' overwhelming manpower, was no more persuasive to Hitler than scientific data about Covid-19 is to Donald Trump. The person with the most power was operating in an ideological domain about which others could only hypothesize. On New Year's Day 1945, Klemperer reads Goebbels' description of the Führer's sound health and piercing gaze, offered as proof that stories of his debilitation are all lies, rumors started by the enemy (Klemperer 1997: II, 635). The resemblance to Donald Trump's tweeted denial of having been treated for 'mini strokes' is striking. As many of us would in Trump's case, Klemperer first takes Goebbels' defense as confirming Hitler's disintegration, and is unsettled when friends mention hearing him speak on the radio just the day before. Is it possible this leader really is immune to the laws of nature and common sense?

What does reading Klemperer in quarantine contribute to my understanding of our pandemic? From the beginning, I had a harshly moralized sense of my own difficulties as insignificant in comparison with the fate of the Covid-19 dead, or of the meatpackers and nursing home aides or the unemployed waiting in lines of traffic for donated food boxes. One wonders why the sense that others are worse off was ever thought to cheer. Certainly reading Klemperer underscores the sense that confinement, no matter its cause, is experienced as the imposition of some totalitarian power. I should sympathize with the crowds who, citing their Constitutional rights, flock to beaches and bars. Even so, as Slavoj Žižek argues, those who equate necessary public health decisions with 'the usual paradigm of surveillance and control' need a 'more nuanced vocabulary' (Žižek 2020: 76). We need that more nuanced vocabulary,

too, when we ponder how the democratic crisis of Trump's America confronts the non-negotiable demands of the coronavirus.

Klemperer himself compared his survival after the Dresden bombing to a fairy tale. But reading him suggests that his fidelity to an ideal of humane letters, as well as to his beloved Eva, kept him alive to experience that sudden change of fortune. He read and wrote to help him survive, and the habits of a lifetime did not desert him, seeking sociability even when it meant walking to the Jewish cemetery, after it became almost the only gathering site left to Jews. We survive with similar fidelities, routines, and adaptations, helped by new technology. It turns out that one can tutor on FaceTime, as well as read to the grandchildren, that relationships developed in Zoom communities can also sustain.

Notes

¹ 'Arbeiten ist das beste Vergessen' (Klemperer 1997: II, 345). See also (II, 348): 'Und doch kann ich das Schreiben nicht lassen. . . . Und trotz aller Depression . . . kann ich die Hoffnung nicht aufgeben.'

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