

Online Supplement IV  
to  
*The End and the Beginning*

© 2010 Lionel Gossman

Some rights are reserved. This supplement is made available under the Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial-No Derivative Works 2.0 UK: England & Wales License. This license allows for copying any part of the work for personal and non-commercial use, providing author attribution is clearly stated. Details of allowances and restrictions are available at:

<http://www.openbookpublishers.com>

OpenBook  
Publishers 

# IV

## Ideas of Class and Proletarian Consciousness in the Writing of Hermynia Zur Mühlen

by Patrik von zur Mühlen

(Translated by L. Gossman)

---

“She devoted her talent to the revolutionary class” and “she broke with her own caste.” With these two statements *Neues Deutschland*, the official organ of the Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands [Socialist Unity Party of Germany] characterized Hermynia Zur Mühlen. No article appearing in a communist country about her lacked this obligatory reference to her having broken with her aristocratic past in order to place herself entirely in the service of Party and Revolution.<sup>1</sup> In the first four decades of her life, the career of Countess Hermine Folliot de Crenneville-Poutet, born in Vienna in 1883, was indeed marked by a striking political change of direction. The daughter of a diplomat in the Austro-Hungarian dual monarchy, she had received an education appropriate to her class, seen a great deal of the world at an early age, learned many foreign languages, and acquired a broad culture. She made several attempts to enter a profession and thus free herself from her parents and her milieu but these ran up against invincible

---

<sup>1</sup> ‘Ihr Talent gab sie der revolutionären Klasse,’ *Neues Deutschland*, 12 December 1983; ‘Licht in der Nacht,’ *National-Zeitung* [German Democratic Republic], 10 September 1979.

social restrictions and were unsuccessful.<sup>2</sup>

Not until she married Victor von zur Mühlen, a Baltic landowner, did she get a chance – so she hoped – to distance herself, geographically at least, from parents and family and to follow an independent path. But her hopes proved illusory. She did escape from the narrow confines of the Austro-Hungarian aristocracy, but only to find herself in the oppressive world of the far more conservative and also far more provincial Baltic aristocracy, in which she felt a complete outsider. Her literary and cultural interests met with little understanding, and she offended people in countless everyday matters and most of all in her politics. As a result, she and her husband got on less and less well together. Expected to produce a large brood of children, she was condemned, after two miscarriages, to remain childless, and felt more and more useless and superfluous. She reached a point at which, as she wrote in her memoirs, “the Baltic provinces and life itself had had it with me. I was frequently ailing, could no longer ride or swim or take long walks, had to lie stretched out on a chaise longue for much of the day, and had more than enough time to do a lot of thinking.”<sup>3</sup> It is probably not too rash to speculate that she suffered at times from depression and that many of her bouts of illness had a psychosomatic origin. In the late summer of 1913, she was diagnosed with TB and the doctor ordered a stay at a sanatorium in Davos. With that, she left the Baltic lands for good. The geographical separation was deepened by the outbreak of the First World War, into which her husband was drawn as an officer in the Russian army. Communicating by mail was difficult, and the correspondence of husband and wife gradually fell off, which doubtless aggravated the already advanced cooling of their relationship. Some letters were exchanged at irregular intervals until 1917. But Hermynia had made up her mind that she would never return to the Baltic lands. The couple divorced in 1920.<sup>4</sup>

Meantime in Davos she had made the acquaintance of the writer, publicist, and translator Stephan Klein, who came from a German-Jewish-Slovak family in Bratislava and who shared both her knowledge of many languages and a common background in the old Austro-Hungarian monarchy. Soon after the end of the First World War she moved with him to

---

<sup>2</sup> See the account she gives in her memoir, Hermynia Zur Mühlen, *Ende und Anfang: Ein Lebensbuch* (Berlin, 1929, p. 245 ff.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 247.

<sup>4</sup> Patrik von zur Mühlen, ‘Hermynia Zur Mühlens Jahre im Baltikum und deren Verarbeitung in ihren Erinnerungen,’ ms. to appear (Vienna, 2010) in a volume edited by Susanne Blumesberger and Ernst Seibert.

Frankfurt am Main and through her literary connections quickly established contact with the KPD, the German Communist Party, which she joined in 1919. That move marked a clear political break with her aristocratic past.<sup>5</sup>

Her withdrawal from her previous world was productive, from a literary point of view, in two respects. On the one hand, she translated leftist foreign-language literature into German for the Malik Verlag, which was closely associated with the KPD. In this domain, the work of the American writer Upton Sinclair, of whom she was for years the “authorized translator,” is particularly notable. On the other hand, she herself wrote political fairy tales and is regarded by literary scholars as the founder of a children’s literature on political themes.<sup>6</sup> In simply told stories such as *Was Peterchens Freunde erzählen* (1921) or *Ali, der Teppichweber* (1923) she sought to open the eyes of her young readers to the poverty and social misery in the world and to communicate a “leftwing outlook” to them. Naturally, for that audience, there was as yet no concrete suggestion that they join the KPD. In novels and short stories written for adult readers, however, she made her support of the KPD, the Soviet Union, and the world Communist movement in general, quite obvious. Nevertheless, this profession of support for the Party to which she felt politically bound did not, to all appearances, mean complete surrender of her own individual personality and intellectual independence. Her entire manner and style remained aristocratic and to many proletarian party comrades she must have seemed quite exotic. She always remained “the Countess,” despite the fact that, since her marriage in 1908, she no longer had a right to that title, or “the red Countess,” as she was frequently referred to in Communist circles. Thus Rosa Meyer-Leviné, the widow of the murdered (1919) leader of the Bavarian Soviet Republic, described her as a “cultivated, witty countess, full of charm and joie de vivre.”<sup>7</sup> And some years later, after the publication of her autobiographical memoir, the French writer Henri Guilbeaux emphasized her great intellectual independence – “She has nothing in common with communist officials, mechanically and bureaucratically working their eight-hour day,”

5 See the biography – as yet, the only one – by Manfred Altner, *Hermynia Zur Mühlen. Eine Biographie* (Berne, 1997). For shorter biographical accounts, see Lynda King, ‘From the Crown to the Hammer and Sickle: The Life and Works of Austrian Interwar Writer Hermynia zur Mühlen,’ in *Women in German Yearbook*, 4, *Feminist Studies and German Culture*, ed. Marianne Burkhard and Jeannette Clausen (Boston, 1988), pp. 125-54 (this point noted p. 126), and Lionel Gossman, ‘Liebe Genossin: Hermynia Zur Mühlen, a Writer of Courage and Conviction,’ <http://digital.library.upenn.edu/women/muhlen/gossman.html>

6 ‘Hermynia Zur Mühlen,’ in *Studien zur Geschichte der deutschen Kinder und Jugendliteratur*, 6/7 (Berlin [DDR], Kinderbuchverlag).

7 Quoted in Altner, p. 66.

he wrote of her – and testified with admiration to her “great independence of mind and spirit.”<sup>8</sup>

Nonetheless, she had made a political break that inevitably required a confrontation with her aristocratic origins and thereby also with the political role of the aristocracy. And this confrontation took place not only so that she could establish her legitimacy, though a born “class enemy,” with her party comrades, but out of deep conviction. Our aim here is to find out what this break involved and how consistently it was sustained by Hermynia Zur Mühlen. Several of her novels, short stories, and autobiographical writings contain telling observations that will help us to elucidate this matter. We propose to examine these in order to determine the position, conduct, mentality, and political and social connections of the aristocratic characters in her work.

Her fairy tales and stories for children will not be considered. Some of them are located in a traditional fairy-tale Orient and were therefore hardly suited to a thematic working out of her relation to her aristocratic origins – which were unlikely to be familiar to her young readers. Conversely, the action of some of her later historical novels unrolls in the early nineteenth century, so that the portrayal of Viennese society in them could hardly have left the aristocracy out of account. They are thus of limited interest for our inquiry. We will find more useful material in the novels *Die weiße Pest* [The White Plague], *Unsere Töchter die Nazinen* [Our Daughters the Nazi Girls] and *Als der Fremde kam* [Came the Stranger] as well as in the memoir *Ende und Anfang* and, to a lesser degree, the autobiographically informed novel *Das Riesenrad* [The Wheel of Life].

Much is to be learned from the earliest of the novels to be examined here, *Die Weiße Pest*, which appeared under the pseudonym Traugott Lehmann, first in serialized form in Communist Party newspapers, and then, in 1926, as a book from the publishing firm VIVA. At the center of the book stands the “black Reichswehr” [national army], a secret society of former officers from the First World War, rightwing nationalists, and personalities from the völkisch movement. This black Reichswehr is behind killings of leftwing and liberal politicians, Jews, and critics in its own ranks. The strings are pulled by far right politicians and industrialists, the primary target of whose hatred is the KPD. However, some of the important players in these machinations come from the Prussian nobility. A key figure in this connection is Count Rewentleh. Though no particular individual can be

---

8 Henri Guilbeaux, Review of ‘Ende und Anfang’, in *Die Weltbühne*, 26/2 (1930), p. 68.

recognised in this character, the name was doubtless intended to evoke that of Rewentlow. Two Baltic barons who become involved in these activities and are charged with importing them into their own countries also show up – no doubt a dig at the author's former husband who was active in the years 1918-20 as commander of a militia set up to oppose the advance of the Bolsheviks into the Baltic lands.<sup>9</sup> The chief player in these machinations is a former First Lieutenant, Gustav von Sanden, who is responsible, with his men, for abductions, murders, and other criminal acts.

Still, if one's initial impression is that this hotbed of reaction is an unholy alliance of industrialists, great landowners, aristocrats, and former military officers, one soon discovers that the novel, which in many ways has the bluntness of a political poster, also contains some more nuanced traits. In one passage, Hermynia Zur Mühlen indicates that the aristocrats, whose very social and economic existence is under threat, no longer represent any real power. Though they see themselves as the spearhead of the Counter-Revolution, they are in fact no more than the puppets of capitalism, which wields the true power behind reactionary politics. The author has one of her characters, about whom we shall shortly have more to say, make the following comment regarding First Lieutenant von Sanden: "[He] was the only one who was driven by genuine fanaticism: he fought coldly, unyieldingly, and unrelentingly for the power of his class, but he was not smart enough to understand that that class could never again occupy the seat of power, that the tradesmen and the dealers, the industrialists and the merchants, the people to whom money was all that mattered, would have the final say."<sup>10</sup>

With that remark, this character gives expression to the Marxist view of history, according to which the feudal class ceased to be a real political force after the French Revolution of 1789, at the latest. Its subsequent role was one it had only on loan from the bourgeoisie, which used the aristocracy, in its own interests, as a decorative summit of the social order and which manipulated it correspondingly as its puppet – though that did not mean that the aristocrats themselves were not convinced they were articulating their own class interests. The conclusion to be drawn from this view of history, however, is that the main enemy in the class struggle is the bourgeoisie, whereas, as a long disempowered class, the aristocracy is no

---

<sup>9</sup> See Altner, p. 121 ff.

<sup>10</sup> Hermynia Zur Mühlen, *Die Weiße Pest* (Berlin, 1926). For the present essay, the author has used the 1988 edition of this work (Berlin [German Democratic Republic], 1988). See p. 81 of this edition.

longer a real opponent but rather presents the picture of a dying species.

From this however another possible conclusion can be drawn – one that was certainly not in the line of thought of Hermynia Zur Mühlen's Party friends and that they probably did not even consider: namely, if the aristocracy is not politically dangerous, then *eo ipso* all its members need not represent a class enemy; on the contrary, particular individual aristocrats may well stand for humanly respectable values and adopt political positions consonant with those values.<sup>11</sup>

With this we come to the other character we have alluded to in the novel, one who incorporates this ambivalent and at least potentially progressive position and thus runs counter to the otherwise rather stereotypical actors in the plot: the mysterious Hungarian Baroness Ilona von Szentiványi. This character has come to Berlin solely in order to seek the whereabouts of her lover, who, the reader quickly surmises, has been the victim of a rightwing conspiracy. The initial description of this Hungarian woman corresponds to the common, then current conception of a wealthy aristocrat. She lives for weeks on end in an elegant hotel, has her meals served, with champagne, in her room, and only occasionally ventures out into the well-to-do sections of Berlin. At first quite apolitical, she gradually acquires an ever clearer view of the subversive activities of the Right and, as a result, experiences an intense inner conflict of interests. In the end, she joins forces with the Communist attorney Dr. Birnbaum, who is working to expose the conspirators. In the rather convoluted plot of the novel this topic receives no further development, but the portrait of the Baroness is striking: a thin aristocrat, with dark eyes and dark hair, from one of the states of the former Habsburg dual monarchy, who detaches herself from her conservative world, which she has never examined critically, and allies herself with the forces of Revolution. All that was applicable to Hermynia Zur Mühlen herself, and the character of Ilona von Szentiványi was obviously a self-portrait. Hermynia Zur Mühlen thereby sketched out in coded form her own shift from the aristocracy to the proletarian movement. At the same time, she also indicated that the aristocracy is not truly a part of the forces of reaction but has been rendered impotent by the power of capital and forced by that same power into partnership with it.

In *Ende und Anfang* [The End and the Beginning], a volume of her memoirs published three years later, in 1929, Hermynia Zur Mühlen again

---

11 Cf. Eva-Maria Siegel, 'Zeitgeschichte, Alltag, Kolportage, oder Über den 'Bourgeois in des Menschen Seele': Zum Exilwerk Hermynia Zur Mühlens,' in *Exilforschung: Ein Internationales Jahrbuch*, 11 (1993), pp. 106-26.

comes to terms with the world of her origins, not now in the form of a novel, but through the portrayal of her own childhood, youth, and early adult years.<sup>12</sup> In what she describes here, however, there are no sinister characters of the kind we find in her novel *Die weiße Pest*, not at least where her Austrian homeland is concerned. What she reveals is the strangeness, the obsolescence, and the disconnection from reality of her milieu, the comical bizarrerie, as viewed from a later perspective, of a vanished world. What comes in for sharp criticism is the injustice that goes with the arrogance of her class. She gives as examples the obsolete conditions required in order to be a canoness of the order of the Kreuzstern: that one's parents hold the rank of count at least, and that one's genealogy, going back several generations, be "faultless." Or the excessively refined esthetic tastes of her mother who went to extreme lengths to ensure that the flower arrangements in the house matched the colours of the tablecloths and the furniture. And, not least, the social constraints that prevented her from fulfilling her desire to enter the teaching profession.

But she also cites several representatives of this milieu whom she greatly appreciates, on account of their education, culture, and urbanity – her father, an uncle and several other individuals among them. These individuals, as she describes them, belong to an outworn era, but they no longer constitute figures of the enemy for her. Hermynia Zur Mühlen's portraits of aristocrats from the old Habsburg monarchy are characterized rather by kindly mockery and sly self-irony. She directs sharp criticism only at the aristocracy of the Baltic provinces, into which she married in 1908 through her husband Victor von zur Mühlen and in which she felt uncomfortable until her separation from him in 1913. But even here, she avoids excessively sweeping judgments and evokes individuals in her husband's family, such as her father-in-law's brother, Max von zur Mühlen ("Uncle Max"), for whom she has the greatest respect.<sup>13</sup> It was this freedom from cheap clichés that led her reviewers – the aforementioned Henri Guilbeaux, for instance – to remark on her independence of spirit.<sup>14</sup>

Hermynia Zur Mühlen took up the theme of the behavior of different social classes and ranks again in her novel *Unsere Töchter die Nazinen* [Our Daughters the Nazi Girls], written in 1933. This novel first appeared in preprint form in the Saarbrücken Social Democratic newspaper *Deutsche*

---

12 References are to the first edition, Hermynia Zur Mühlen, *Ende und Anfang: Ein Lebensbuch* (Berlin: S. Fischer Verlag, 1929).

13 See note 4.

14 See note 8; Altner, pp. 124f. 126.

*Freiheit* when the Saar was still under the administration of the League of Nations. Shortly thereafter it was published as a book in Austria only to be banned two years later following diplomatic representations by the German Embassy.<sup>15</sup>

There are three principal characters in the novel: a working-class woman, who is a Social Democrat, a middle-class woman, the wife of a doctor, and the old Countess Agnes von Saldern. All three describe, each from her own perspective, the developments in a small town on Lake Constance following the National Socialist Party's seizure of power in 1933. Whereas the working-class woman uncompromisingly opposes the National Socialist regime, the middle-class woman immediately accommodates to the new conditions and senses opportunities for advancing the career of her husband, chiefly by intriguing against the Jewish Dr. Bär, whom the local people have preferred to her husband. The Countess loathes the Nazis on ethical grounds but forces herself to engage politically against them, which brings her into alliance with the Social Democratic working-class woman. All three women have daughters who also have to decide how they will respond to the political situation. The working-class woman's daughter goes over to the Nazis, the daughter of the middle-class woman likewise, and finally the Countess's daughter also, except that, in a spontaneous expression of her sense of justice, she stands up to the SA men when they are carrying out an act of violence, and is shot.

Here too the aristocracy is not denounced as a force at the core of reactionary politics but disposed of as no longer, in political terms, a dangerous class. That weakness enables it to release itself from class interests that are outdated because they can no longer be successfully pursued and to embrace the genuine human values communicated to it through upbringing and education. For that reason, the Countess is especially outraged when aristocrats ingratiate themselves with the new regime for material or personal advantage and so betray the ideals of their own upbringing. Her reflections in the following passage make this particularly clear:

There were National Socialists even among people I knew, members of my own class. They didn't join out of conviction, not even out of stupidity, but because they hoped by doing so to protect their possessions. They seemed to me, and still seem to me today, more vile and despicable than

---

15 Quotations are from the new edition of Hermynia Zur Mühlen, *Unsere Töchter die Nazinen*, ed. Jörg Thunecke (Vienna: Promedia, 2000). On the book's history, see Thunecke's Afterword, pp 143-57.

the criminals and murderers in the SA [...] I thought of the bad times of serfdom: how many people had to suffer so that one class could have the opportunity of acquiring genuine culture and what a debt this class owes therefore to humanity. And how is it repaying that debt now? [...] What I wished for my own class was the guillotine. But those members of my class who have gone over [to the Nazis], those betrayers of humanity, who were completely aware of what they were doing, did not even know how to die with dignity.<sup>16</sup>

At the time she wrote *Unsere Töchter die Nazinen*, Hermynia Zur Mühlen had already left the German Communist Party. The exact date of her resignation is not known but it is usually supposed to have occurred some time around 1932-1933. Ugly quarrels with the Communist-associated Malik publishing house, for which she had made numerous translations in the 1920s, and plots to get rid of her as one of the house's regular writers may have provided a personal motive for her withdrawal from the Party; the political motive was provided by the rise of Stalinism in the Soviet Union and the Stalinisation of Communist parties throughout the world. But she broke with the Party quietly and did not publicise her move. And the change in her political affiliation in no way signified any lessening of her passionate opposition to National Socialism. This was still for her, after her break with the Party, as before it, the chief enemy of humanity and of her own commitment to social justice. In 1938 she told Prince Hubertus zu Löwenstein that she had gone over from the Communists to the Leftwing Catholics. "I now believe only in the individual human being, no matter what class he belongs to, but it will be a while before we muddle through to that point."<sup>17</sup> Her break with the German Communist Party was in any case not total, for the Soviet Union is presented in the novel as a positive power, from which help in the struggle against the Nazi regime was expected.<sup>18</sup>

By now it is becoming clearer and clearer that the class-consciousness of the proletariat and the class-consciousness of the aristocracy are no longer diametrically opposed. Instead, the author presents two radically opposed options between which the aristocracy has to choose: a reactionary class outlook that allows it to cosy up to the Nazis for opportunistic reasons, and an outlook characterised by a humanistic – and for her that always meant anti-fascist – conviction, which can be defined as the shared set of values,

---

16 Ibid., p. 45 f.

17 Quoted in Altner, p. 153.

18 Zur Mühlen, *Unsere Töchter*, p. 111.

transcending class, of all progressive men and women.<sup>19</sup> An aristocratic background is thus in no way, for her, a necessary impediment to adopting a politically progressive position.

This picture of things is particularly clear in her novel *Als der Fremde kam* (1948; *Came the Stranger*, 1946), which is set in Slovakia in the years 1937-1938 and in which aristocrats again play a major role. The figure of the enemy here is the "Prussian" Herr von Brachleben, who, like First Lieutenant von Sanden in *Die weiße Pest*, drives through the villages in a black automobile and by spreading nationalistic and anti-Semitic propaganda stirs up hatred among the various ethnic groups – Slovaks, Hungarians, Germans, Czechs and Jews – who until then lived peacefully alongside each other in Slovakia. Along with von Brachleben, the representatives of the National Socialist regime include the German relatives of the Countess, the Barons Bredar, who have let themselves be carried away by the Nazi frenzy. The real force opposing this development is not the main character of the novel, Countess Clarisse Herdegen, a landowner in a Czech village close to the Austrian border, who in many respects recalls Countess Agnes in *Unsere Töchter die Nazinen*, but Marianka Hrubin, the deeply Catholic Slovak day-worker on the Countess's estate, who comes to be a role-model for her mistress.

Whereas the Countess is presented as hesitant and indecisive, her cousin Baroness Margit Jeszenák, who lives with her brother, the local priest, appears as the opposite. She not only recognizes the danger that the evil spirit of nationalism and anti-Semitism represents for the unity of Czechoslovakia, she acts. Like the figure of Baroness von Szentiványi in *Die weiße Pest*, she is a literary projection of the author, Hermynia Zur Mühlen, both in her political convictions and in her physical appearance.

Leaving aside Zur Mühlen's historical novels (such as *Ewiges Schattenspiel* [We Poor Shadows], which, as a portrayal of Viennese society in the early nineteenth century, could hardly not have included the aristocracy) and her autobiographical writings, we find that the novels she located in her own time are populated by Countesses and Baronesses to a degree that is scarcely warranted by the actual social presence of the aristocracy in post-World War I society. Hermynia Zur Mühlen never freed herself and never wanted to free herself from the social influences that marked her in her childhood and youth. And that is the case not only for externals like culture, lifestyle, manners, behavior, and ideas about good upbringing. The comment quoted at the beginning of this article – "she broke with her

---

19 Siegel, p. 114.

caste" – is also false with respect to politics. To be sure, she never defended or wanted to restore the old hierarchical social order. Her sense of justice and her rejection of mad ideas about race and of anti-Semitism were so intense that in *Unsere Töchter die Nazinen* she called for the guillotine to deal with "members of her class." But she never claimed that a background in the aristocracy was the root of all the evils of her time. In several of her characters she shows that an inherited lifestyle and traditional upbringing can provide as much immunity as the class consciousness of the workers or the deep Catholic faith of the Slovak peasantry. "Unarmed, no that isn't so," she has Countess Agnes say, as she reflects on her supposed impotence in the face of National Socialism. "[...] A life in which no harm was ever done to another human being, the memory of a long line of honorable ancestors, pride and hauteur, are these not arms?"<sup>20</sup>

One is struck by certain details. The negative representatives of the aristocracy, who are presented in *Die weiße Pest* as forerunners of National Socialism, or in *Als der Fremde kam* as its agents, are overwhelmingly male and "Prussian" or "Reichsdeutsche" [citizens of the post-1871 German Empire – L. G.] and, in her autobiographical memoir, "Baltic Germans." The positive representatives, in contrast, are overwhelmingly women and preferably figures from the lands of the former Habsburg Empire or at the very least – as in the case of Countess Agnes in *Unsere Töchter die Nazinen* – from Southern Germany. The autobiographical memoir *Ende und Anfang* is marked by the same balancing of good and bad. Thus, for instance, the Baltic aristocracy is berated for its arrogance, whereas the Austrian aristocracy, as the author sees it, presented itself with a knowing wink and did not take itself quite seriously.<sup>21</sup> There is not much to be gained by evaluating this depiction of the aristocracy in terms of its reality content or by tracing it back to the deep feelings of resentment that the experiences of an Austrian woman in the North might possibly have aroused in her.

In *Als der Fremde kam* the susceptibility of the bourgeoisie, as a class, to National Socialism, a theme highlighted in both the other novels, likewise retreats into the background. What makes people susceptible to National Socialism is now presented much more as individual narrow-mindedness, moral weakness, and personal opportunism. It is no longer the bourgeoisie that is seen as pulling the strings in every sinister machination, but a different power. Thus, for instance, Countess Clarisse Herdegen reflects

---

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, m p. 38.

<sup>21</sup> Hermynia Zur Mühlen, *Ende und Anfang*, p. 175

that the promising period of peace after the First World War is now (in 1939) long past, and that many lands again feel threatened “by the eternal enemy of humanity, Germany.”<sup>22</sup> The author, who composed this novel in exile in England during the Second World War and published it in 1946, seems here to have swallowed the slogans of the British Permanent Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs, Robert Vansittart, who held that Germans are genetically predisposed to evil. She now considers anyone who holds and is committed to a deep conviction – be it Communism, Christianity, or Humanism – to be immune to the seductions of fascism. There is nothing in the last novel that corresponds to the capacity of the Hungarian Baroness in *Die weiße Pest* to learn political wisdom and thus be drawn into close collaboration with the Communist Jewish attorney, or to Countess Agnes’s insight into political developments, which leads her in *Unsere Töchter die Nazinen* to engage shoulder to shoulder with Communist workers in the struggle against National Socialism. The only Communist in the novel, the Slovak village post office clerk, in the end befriends the aristocratic Catholic priest, but an alliance against fascist machinations is formed rather between Countess Clarisse and Marianka Hrubin, the simple Slovak woman who works the Countess’s land. Both are presented as strongly Catholic.

What this reveals is that in another area also Hermynia Zur Mühlen never really broke with her past. It is not known whether she completely abandoned Christianity and the Catholic Church in the early years of her membership of the KPD or whether she simply gave them a provisional “time out,” so as to be able to walk side by side with her political comrades. Whatever the case may be, her return to Catholicism – a Catholicism, moreover, of the Left – seems to have taken place as smoothly and noiselessly as her withdrawal from Communism.

Equally noiseless was her more and more intense reminiscing in her advanced years about the aristocratic milieu she came from and accepted, but wanted to think of as free of reactionary ideas, worn obscurantist notions of class, and opportunistic accommodations to every variety of fascist party and ideology. Tradition, in this cleaned up view of it, was to her something colourful, but not to be taken too seriously. As she has a character remark in the novel *Das Riesenrad* [The Wheel of Life], “Tradition is the most ridiculous, idiotic, yet beautiful thing there is. There is a good old tradition that treasures everything beautiful and despises money.” Its opposite is then presented. “There is another tradition that lets one imagine

---

22 Hermynia Zur Mühlen, *Als der Fremde kam*, p. 103.

one is better than other people because one's family was ennobled centuries ago."<sup>23</sup>

Summing up, we can fairly say that Hermynia Zur Mühlen neither could nor would break completely with her aristocratic past. Her break with it was limited to concrete political situations. Only an accommodating stance of aristocrats towards the machinations of the radical Right or to the party, ideology and rule of the National Socialists elicited fiercely critical words from her. In contrast, any representative of the aristocracy who resisted political temptation and upheld culture and tradition in opposition to the evil spirit of National Socialism won her full sympathy and respect.

On the jacket and title page of her novel *Came the Stranger*, the English version of *Als der Fremde kam*, which appeared in 1946, two years before the German text, Hermynia Zur Mühlen chose to describe herself as Countess Hermynia Zur Mühlen – a title to which, since her first marriage in 1908, she in fact no longer had a right. That decision may have reflected her belief, in the extremely straightened material circumstances in which she was then living, that this would give her book greater appeal to the British reading public. But it may well also express something more, namely a mental journey back to the lost world of her childhood, the world of the old Habsburg monarchy. It was a journey that others besides her – such as Joseph Roth and Stephan Zweig – had also made. Without justifying the political and social structures of the past, she never ceased to be drawn to the charm and radiance of a world by which she herself had been so deeply marked. But her break with those political and social structures was definitive and she never went back on it.

---

<sup>23</sup> Quoted in Altner, p. 185.