

Melvin J. Lasky

Of Berlin's "Year Zero"



Geboren 1920. Autor und Herausgeber des *New York Leader*, bevor er der US-Army in Frankreich und Deutschland als "Kriegsberichterstatter" diente. 15 Jahre lang Verleger und Herausgeber der internationalen Zeitschrift *Der Monat* in Berlin sowie für drei Jahrzehnte Chef-Herausgeber der kulturpolitischen Zeitschrift *Encounter Magazine* in London. Sein wissenschaftlicher Band über *Utopia and Revolution* (University of Chicago Press & Macmillan, 1977) wurde auch in spanischer und deutscher Ausgabe veröffentlicht. Zu seinen übrigen Arbeiten gehören ein Reisebuch über Afrika; eine geschichtliche Abhandlung über die Revolution in Ungarn 1956; eine Sammlung seiner Aufsätze unter dem Titel *On the Barricades, & off*. Adresse: Encounter Magazine, 44, Great Windmill Street, London W1, United Kingdom.

All history is contemporary history.

I do not know whether this famous dictum of Benedetto Croce was already famous and proverbial when I first read it as a university student in New York in the 1930s. But it gave me a lot of intellectual trouble then, and no less so in the subsequent half-century when I was confronted with the historical problems of writing about past and present.

At the time it appeared to be simple enough. We had been listening to lectures about Caesar and Luther, about Rostovtzev and the decline of the Roman Empire and about Pirenne and the rise of the bourgeois towns. The grand themes had a school-boy drama about them, and the political excitement carried on to agitated discussions around small, square cafeteria tables where endless cups of coffee were the least of the stimulants. We were arguing about the past as if it were the present — all history was contemporary history. We recognized Mussolini in Ferrero's portrait of Caesar; and wasn't Rostovtzev thinking about old declining Russia when writing about ancient Rome? Our teachers — among them, the brilliant medievalist B. N. Nelson and the Graeco-Roman scholar M. I. Finley — warned us of the historiographical bias involved in identifying (and confounding) past action with present passion. But they too

were caught up in the agitations of the Marxianized decade, and it became difficult for young minds to grasp the pastness of the past and not only its apparent relevance to contemporary controversies and causes.

Did Croce, a subtle spirit as well as a prophetic voice, mean something else? Was he perhaps referring to a truth about historiography that, alas, is trapped in the limitations of one's own time and culture? Who could have wise insights into the record of human experience that would transcend the contemporaneity of one's conceptions, prejudices, up-to-date (and already obsolete) vocabulary? Croce, then, was far from being the doctrinaire of a universality of "lessons of the past" because each historian (and reader of history) stands *unmittelbar zu Clío*. He was only giving melancholy encouragement to each new generation to make an attempt to piece together, from the sense of wholeness of their own lives, the strands of memory and partial records that are all we know, and can know, of "*wie es eigentlich gewesen ist*".

In several of my books these two Crocean motifs appear in varying harmonies and dissonances. In *The Hungarian Revolution*, trying to recapture the dramatic events of October 1956, I am afraid that it tended to appear (to reverse the adage) that contemporary history is all of history. All of the essentials of life and society — of cause and effect, pattern and rupture, reason and passion, liberty and tyranny, hope and tragedy — was there ... if one could only catch "in their *thereness*" the words of yesterday and today. I did my best to record them. I thought I was at one with Croce, and surely with Livy who believed that he could write about men and events only what he himself had seen or heard.

With *Utopia and Revolution* written 20 years later, the key has shifted from major to minor (or, perhaps, the other way round). That which was "contemporary" was indeed irresistible and ineradicable; but one must strive mightily to avoid, control, or reduce to a minimum just those mentalities which make of a complex and variegated past a useful, simple, comfortable presence.

I came to Berlin to write a book about Berlin in the Year Zero, *das Jahr Null*, after the death of Hitler in the bunker and the Holocaust in the concentration camps. I was here in 1945, and am thus a contemporary and can write something of what I have seen and heard. Croce and Livy would be my guardians — if only I were not plagued by doubts, following on from the scepticism induced by having tried out the two extreme lenses of macroscope and microscope. The large picture can lead to lifeless abstraction; the small picture may lose itself in colourful but meaningless detail. I wanted, in my original conception, to draw a picture of a conquering army (of which I was a *G. I.* part), but where in all that would come all that which one had learned from Tolstoy and Clausewitz and

Vagts on the follies of war, peace, and militarism? To describe that singular day in April 1945 when U.S. Army units of the Third Division (I among them) went into the grisly barracks of Dachau — how could one put that together with the record of murderous *homo sapiens* that stains all of history?

All I can say here is that I brought with me to the Kolleg on the Wallotstraße, dozens of boxes with hundreds of volumes without which, in osmotic closeness, I did not believe I could begin to do proper research and truthful writing. Most of them — in fact all of them, untouched, from Arendt to Toynbee, from *War and Peace* to *The Life of Reason*, from Donne to Nietzsche — stared down at me, and I up at them, during my year's efforts to come to grips with my theme.

For the problems one faces in writing "all history" are so *contemporary* that all the old formulations (which one has come to be accustomed to) seem obsolete. In an age of electronically lurid journalism how can one escape the superficiality of momentary images? In an intellectual era of gigantic conceptions, embracing myriad cultures across the explored globe and infinite segments of time in distant space, can a snap-shot of a year or two in a Central-European half-city merit sufficient attention or command enough intellectual interest?

What the above remarks amount to is a confession that the book I came here to write is not the book that I have been writing. Suspicious as I am of all ideologies and their self-serving functions, I am not sure that the change in preconception and disposition that was here involved has basically to do with the methodological issues I have been trying to suggest. It could very well be that I scrapped my original table-of-contents, and disregarded all those slips of paper inserted as reading-markers into the books I carried along with me, at the moment I arrived — walking down the populated streets and avenues which had been in utter ruins when I first came to know them in their desolation. There is a Proustian moment in "the remembrance of things past", and the sight of a ugly walled barrier in the Tiergarten or of a jagged piece of charred rubble (still called the "*Anhalter Bahnhof*") can propel an historian into an evocative mood more decisive than any cool historiographical considerations.

Not that rocks and ruins haven't been known to play uncontrollable moments in "the inspirations of historians" (and Toynbee is especially good on Gibbon in his final volume of that name). But the local *milieu* — where I was supposed to be a withdrawn scholar, cloistered in an academic shelter — can be overwhelming (as Zille, the artist of the Berlin *mill-Oh*, well knew).

I remembered things which I had forgotten and which, in any case, I thought not to be pertinent to a history or a memoir. I was reminded by

old friends, encountered accidentally on walks in the Zehlendorf woods, of documents, materials, letters, diaries that were (with the diligent assistance of the Kolleg's librarians) to turn up in local document centres. One such letter, involving an exchange between me and the late, great Mayor Ernst Reuter, serves as the centre-piece of a new, and unplanned-for, chapter. One such collection of materials puts into the centre-stage lime-light a powerful and notorious figure of the day — but, for all that, little-known — who, in the standard histories of post-War Germany, hardly ever gets mentioned. One such diary, traced from Berlin to Bonn and to a Washington D. C. archive, provided a focal point for yet another chapter which I, coming from London with a firm project secure in my brief-case, could not remotely imagine was part of history, neither of "the times" nor of my own life. I leave Berlin, again for London, with hundreds of pages of a manuscript, a thousand bits of paper with vaguely relevant notes, and a sense of fulfillment somewhat tempered by a certain puzzlement.

All of this leads me to my final Crocean remark: can all of objective history be personal history? What I have always found disastrous in reading historical memoirs and autobiographies is the sense that the ego-obsessed chronicler assumes that in all circumstances he was in the centre of things. In a sense, more solipsistic than historical, he was. But more often than not — if we except the Napoleons and the Churchills and the like — it is world history as seen by *der kleine Moritz*. Men make history at the periphery, and great forces rage at the centre. How to reconcile the complementary rôles of individuals, sometimes full of adventitious intensity, with impersonal major events which would disrupt all our lives even if no one was there to write about them? I had to be careful — to be, in a sense, on my best behaviourism — to avoid the impression in writing intimately about event-making characters: a Commanding General, a Governing Mayor, a Commissar: that I played a rôle on the stage (rather than in the wings), that what little I happened to say, and do, belonged to the real cues of the drama.

And yet, and yet... *If* all history is contemporary history, then one contemporary is surely entitled to research his own life and reach conclusions, large and small, on the accidental events which influenced, coloured, and (in rare, almost improbable cases) caused what happened — significant happenings — in what we are pleased to call the history of our times.

How does one measure the largeness and smallness of such conclusions? What means accident and causation? Why are some happenings history, and others not? These are tardy methodological — in the Wallotstraße vocabulary, epistemological — questions. My life with *episteme I* will leave for another time.