



THE AMERICAN
ACADEMY IN BERLIN
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Ladies and Gentlemen! Please understand that if I were prone to nightmares, one would certainly be an invitation to follow Max Raabe on a public stage. I cannot imagine a more daunting circumstance in which to give any kind of talk of any length.

I have long been a fan of Max Raabe. Not only is his capacity to perform so utterly elegantly and that he is so innately and fabulously musical, but also that he has unearthed an entire repertoire that has vanished. For those of you who can't get to sleep and have a good Internet connection, I recommend all the Max Raabe material that is available on YouTube. Max Raabe, in my experience, has redeemed insomnia. Among the items most worth seeing is a documentary of Max Raabe on his first trip to Israel. It is a remarkable documentary, one in which elderly survivors are in tears as they hear music they have not heard in decades but they know by heart. Many—if not most—of the creators of the music that he sings, both the lyrics and the music, were Jews, and when the Nazis came to power this genre disappeared. He has reconstructed it with the Palast Orchester in a fantastic way. His is a great achievement not only as performance but as authentic musical archaeology, one that brings something forgotten back to life.

And if one was ever in search of a witness to the transatlantic partnership between Germany and the United States, it can be located in the music of the 1920s and early 1930s that Raabe performs. The style is unthinkable without the American influence. Consider Walter Jurmann (1903-1971), the Viennese-Jewish songwriter who appropriated American models and whose career took off in Berlin during the 1920s. After fleeing to America after 1933 he went on to compose for Hollywood (as you just heard)—including for the Marx Brothers. Max Raabe has provided us a multilayered example of the transatlantic symbiosis that sustains the American Academy. It was worth the entire trip to Berlin.



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In 1907 the German economist Werner Sombart wrote an article comparing Berlin and Vienna. He wrote it because during that period Berlin had become quite arrogant about itself and looked down on its rival Vienna. Sombart took aim at all the anti-Viennese Berliners. He described Berlin as essentially a soulless place that was completely mechanistic, where people were only interested in time, power, and money. The worst insult he could hurl at it was that it was rapidly becoming New York—the symbol of materialist modernity.

In contrast, Vienna was a place of culture and *Kultur*, and the jokes Berliners made about the Viennese and Austrian habits—their *Gemütlichkeit* and their *Schlampigkeit*, all of this familiar stuff, were simply evidence of the stupidity, the arrogance, the dangerous blindness, and material greed of Berliners. *Kultur* was the distinct essence of all good things German.

It is fascinating that when Sombart insulted New York as the historical destination point of Berlin's culture, what he didn't fully realize is the extent of the history of interaction between Germany and America. That experience constitutes the pre-history of the Academy. The Academy has a *Vorgeschichte*, if you will, because, as many of you know, in late nineteenth century America, Germany was the most important cultural influence on what became America. Our universities, originally somewhat imitative of the British, were completely transformed after the Civil War by an American embrace of the model of the German university. In New York City, in 1900, there were probably 150 German newspapers and periodicals; one could survive in the City of New York speaking German. If you went to the Metropolitan Opera you had no need to speak English. When Anton Seidl conducted, there he needed no English, and when Gustav Mahler came to take over the New York Philharmonic, in 1907, the year of Sombart's essay, there was likewise no necessity for him or for Alma to learn a word of English.

Apart from the German-speaking religious communities in the Midwest and the South that came into being after 1848, there were choral societies all over the country, as far as San Francisco—*Liedertafel* and *Männergesangsvereine*. They were all directly imitative of a German tradition, initially liberal and later virulently nationalistic—constituents of the *Deutsche Sängerbund* that first developed in the 1840s, here in German-speaking Europe.

This all came to a very abrupt end in 1917. Yet when we think of this city in the 1920s—the Berlin that one can see clearly and candidly through the Russian novels of Vladimir Nabokov, who lived here at that time—the influence of America and the migration of Americans to Berlin, continued not only in science and music but in painting, architecture, and popular culture. The transatlantic exchange and communication for which the Academy stands have indeed a very long history.



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Ironically, the most important pre-history for the American Academy in Berlin is the rise to power of Nazism, and the emigration of a whole cadre of German intellectuals, scientists, and artists to America, some of whom returned after 1945. For those of us who grew up in the United States after the Second World War, the American university would be unrecognizable without figures such as Karl Löwith, Leo Strauss, and Werner Jaeger, the classicist; Hans Morgenthau in politics, at Columbia, Franz Neumann, and, of course, all the Frankfurt School members, including T.W. Adorno (who returned) and Max Horkheimer. And, of course, one cannot forget the obvious: the emigration of scientists, among whom Einstein was by far the most prominent. In the visual arts, Hans Hoffman, Josef Albers, and Max Beckmann come to mind, (as well as Lyonel Feininger, American born of a German musician, who moved to Germany only to return after the Nazis came to power) and in my own field, in music, young talents including Lukas Foss and Andre Previn, and Kurt Weill and Hanns Eisler, for whom the Music Academy right here is named, who was actually forced out of the United States together with Bertolt Brecht in the late 1940s. And there was of course Arnold Schoenberg, whose uncontrollable arrogance was a parody of an unquestioned sense of German superiority in matters of high culture that came along with the post-1933 emigration.

As a Jewish child émigré myself who was not from German stock, I grew up with the well-known joke about the encounter of two dachshunds in Central Park. They meet and sniff one another, and both figure out that they are German-speaking. One asks the other where he's from. Vienna, he says, and the first one replies, "I'm from Berlin." The Berliner asks, "How do you like it here?" They both end up complaining about the *Wurst*, the apartments, and the fact that Central Park isn't quite the *Tiergarten* or the *Volksgarten*. After this bemoaning, the Viennese concedes that it is, after all, not too bad, considering the alternative. The Berliner agrees but adds: "Yes, all that isn't really important, but what really bothers me is that in Berlin I was a St. Bernard." We grew up in the shadow of this tremendous cultural German emigration—particularly of writers, (consider Heinrich and Thomas Mann and Carl Zuckmayer)—and the radical transformation of the American university.

The end of the war revealed the extent of Germany's cultural loss. What is interesting is that German intellectuals after 1945 tried to figure out why the German universities and German cultural institutions, from museums to opera houses and orchestras (particularly in Berlin), and indeed the German intellectual and artistic community, in many different ways, both heinous and utterly thoughtless, collaborated with the Nazi regime. The result was a sense that perhaps there needed to be an effort to reform the German university. Jürgen Habermas, in the later 1940s, argued that what the German university ought to do is imitate the American, and institute something that we would recognize as the liberal



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arts or the college experience in the United States, and try to reform the way in which the professors were appointed and courses of study organized. Inspired by the American philosophical tradition of pragmatism, he suggested that the hierarchical, authoritarian system, the kind of education of extreme obedience that Walther Rathenau described experiencing as a young man, in a critique of the German educational system that he wrote before World War I, be abandoned. If one could find a way, Habermas argued, to reform the German school system and university so they would be more like the American (on the assumption that the American common school and university, in its hybrid form of English and German, were somehow contributors to the sustaining of democracy), there might be a chance for democracy in post-war West Germany. Although this did not come to pass, in the midst of the Cold War, clearly in West Germany, the transatlantic dialogue continued, partly motivated by the extreme fear and danger represented by the Cold War and by the Soviet Union.

To turn now to Germany after the fall of the Berlin Wall: what is astonishing, as I stand here in the garden of this house, is that the most important post-unification effort to renew and sustain the transatlantic dialogue, the American Academy, is the creature of a very unusual nostalgia, a sentimental echo of the nostalgia we heard so wonderfully evoked by Max Raabe, and that is the nostalgia of the German-Jewish émigrés of the 1930s and 1940s. The Arnhold family, the Kellen family, Richard Holbrooke himself, Henry Kissinger, Gary Smith's parents, like so many American émigrés of German Jewish origin, unlike their fellow Jewish-European refugees, retained a tremendously deep affection for the place from which they were expelled. Despite everything, they remained attached to the image of Germany. No equivalent of the American Academy in Berlin, funded by survivors and descendants of Polish Jewry, is imaginable in Poland, and nothing like it is remotely thinkable for Russia or Ukraine, at least certainly not sponsored by the Jewish emigration from those places.

Gershom (or rather Gerhard) Scholem used to claim that there was no “symbiosis” between Germans and Jews in the years between the 1780s and 1933. I am not quite sure he was right. Why did these German Jews who were forced out actually return in the 1990s with the idea of putting an institution into place that would sustain, after the end of the Cold War and German unification, the transatlantic dialogue and exchange of ideas and of people between their new welcoming *Heimat* America and the old one, Germany? The answer goes back to Sombart's critique of Berlin's conceits and his privileging of culture as a major aspect of what Berlin needed but lacked.

The German Jewish émigrés held fast to the belief that *Bildung* and cultural attainment, including an aesthetic sensibility, were instruments of civilizing people and the world. This ideal was an extension of a late nineteenth-century and very widespread belief that Germany was a kind of pinnacle of true humanistic civilization, placed in the middle



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between the raw barbarism of the Russian to the East, the effete superficiality of the French, and the crass materialism of the American to the West.

The dachshund and St. Bernard exchange implicitly reveals this conceit. For example, all of us who studied music with émigrés constantly heard about how terrific it all had been in the old country, and we, as Americans, were considered simply unwashed and *kulturlos*, and hopelessly resistant to true cultivation. Even my parents—*Ostjuden* who never lived in Germany—looked at America with a kind of horror at America’s vulgarity, as if such vulgarity had not existed here in Germany. Germany before 1914 put itself forward politically and culturally as a kind of a broker between East and West as a cultural ideal. Friedrich Naumann’s concept of *Mitteleuropa*, which was a serious idea for many a great social scientist and keen mind, was rooted in Germany’s pride in its cultural and scholarly preeminence. It revealed the glib conviction that Germany and particularly Berlin would become the cultural capital of the world, perched between these two extremes, America and Russia. Sombart’s critique of Berlin was fueled by his frustration at Berlin’s failure to grasp its proper destiny.

Ironically, after unification Germany has indeed reemerged as usually powerful and the essential instrument of Europe, economically, politically, and culturally. Placed between America and Russia, Berlin is and will doubtlessly remain for decades to come the cultural capital of Europe, a cosmopolitan destination point for artists, young people, students, and the place of dominant cultural institutions. But in this political context, one might ask, to what end?

The American Academy was built through German-Jewish philanthropy and enthusiasm on the premise that the answer lies in some connection between culture and civility, between art and culture and the way we conduct our lives in the public space of everyday life. The irony of this belief is that it has survived not only among the victims of the failure of that connection, but despite the complete disproving of the link between culture and civility. It was during the Nazi era that culture and its attributes among its devotees—*Geschmack*, *Bildung*—offered no barriers to barbarism and no barriers to hate and to the unthinkable. Indeed, the elites of culture and scholarship collaborated. So, why did the survivors of this colossal failure return to the premise that culture mattered in politics?

I think the American Academy was created explicitly to give the role of culture and the arts in politics a second chance. The work that Gary Smith has done with the Academy initially may appear on the surface be about politics, (including the hobnobbing, if I may say so, with foreign ministers and ambassadors and other power-brokers), but it is not; that is really not what the Academy has been about. The fellowships at the Academy represent the core belief that through the arts, education, scholarship, literature, and



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research, through what we call the humanities, the development of the *Geisteswissenschaften*, the development of sensibilities and thought processes that are speculative and are imaginative, that somehow there will emerge a connection between the flourishing of those activities and the way we conduct our political and personal lives. At its core the Academy under Gary's tenure stands for the proposition that there is a link between democracy and freedom and learning, a link between learning and art-making and the defense of freedom, especially in the contemporary world and particularly in the public space that has changed very dramatically with modern technology.

The Internet is, after all a large, undifferentiated sewer of self-expression, in which it is impossible to distinguish what's true from what's false. In it all sort of items look alike. And we, the users ever more addicted to it, rather than having a dialogue with others, end up, with the help of Google's algorithms and Amazon's manipulation, just confirming what we already believe, and visiting sites with which we are already comfortable. So the massive technological expansion of freedom, communication and self-expression has actually led to a kind of incrustation of conformity. The more we have access to more information and data, can say anything we want, and blog to our hearts' content, the more we become predictable, ordinary, and imitative.

And it is not enough to have inner freedom, just as inner emigration was helpless during the Third Reich. To assert that one is immune to the constant assault from the web of technology (I won't buy a product because I've seen a blip ad while trying to navigate my way from Dahlem back to Berlin using Google, because of the belief that I can resist it) is unconvincing. Since inner freedom is not enough, the Academy has become devoted, in my view, to the proposition that precisely in the modern, technological world the face-to-face encounters, the work of artists, and the expression of ideas by individuals in real time and real space will actually emerge as the last vital bastion of dissent.

We may talk a lot about freedom, but very few of us use it. We say we like dissent but we really don't like to hear somebody say something we don't already believe. I have not met or seen a politician whose mind was changed by evidence. In our country we talk a lot about democracy and we have candidates debate one another in a mockery of what is a debate. I would vote—no matter what her political position might be—for any candidate who in a debate, faced with a set of arguments and evidence, said, "You know, now that I have listened, I concede that I might be wrong."

Inspired by the highly sentimental and idealized hopes of Americans of German-Jewish origin, the American Academy has become a kind of crucible, a meeting place, where people can figure out how to resist what's happening in the world beyond the forms of inner emigration that flourished under Stalin and Hitler. That technique of inner



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emigration, using the imaginative capacities of poets, particularly musicians, kept some measure of freedom intact, and survived under the radar screen of censors and tyrants. But after 1989 we know that this is not enough. The purposes of dissent, dialogue, scholarship, finding that things which have been held to be true may not be true, whether in history or in the natural sciences, but for this Academy particularly in areas of philosophy and politics, require and demand an intrusive public presence. Thought and expression are vital in ways that cannot be only interior; they must be exterior and in the public discourse. This Academy is devoted, in an idealistic and nostalgic way, spurred on by a generation that saw the death of the dream that *Kultur* and *Bildung* would lead to a civilized world, to restart that process.

The German-Jewish philosopher Hannah Arendt, herself an émigré to America, challenged the conventional distinction between the word (speech) and the idea of action. She argued, idealistically, that speech is and must be a form of action. What this Academy is dedicated to—in a generous and eclectic definition of speech, including making of visual art, of music, performance, and, of course, literature and scholarship in the fields that Fellows come to work in—is the proposition that speech is indeed a form of action and should be politically engaged.

The tremendous irony and beauty of the music you heard from Max Raabe, with its tremendous twists on the classical tradition, and its inner jokes, is that it is part of a long tradition of using music and comic theater as modes of dissent and social and self-criticism. Its challenge to the conceits about romance and sexuality, and its undermining of the clichés of self-important individuality and notions about what is morally right and wrong, help show the way forward. The goal of the Academy can only be approached in a transatlantic way within the patterns of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, of an exchange back and forth, not forced by emigration or by tyranny, but exchange encouraged voluntarily. Two societies, German and American, that are democratic, and pluralistic, might actually come to believe that Berlin, particularly because of its history and its immensely bright future, can become a place in which the connection between culture and freedom, and culture and justice, can be reshaped in a way that does not render all that we do in the arts and humanities irrelevant and merely private.

That is the future of the American Academy, in my view. It is also the legacy that Gary Smith so ably has left us with. I want to thank Gary, all the Trustees of the American Academy, all its benefactors, and its Fellows for making this place possible, and for redeeming the cherished hopes of those who fled from this very place, not willingly but who nonetheless have now come back, some only in spirit, to finally, we hope, make possible a dream brutally destroyed in 1933.

Thank you.