

Against the Eternal Yesterday

Essays Commemorating the Legacy of Lion Feuchtwanger

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ESSAYS COMMEMORATING THE LEGACY OF LION FEUCHTWANGER

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Lion Feuchtwanger and the Culture of Remembrance

"Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."

--George Santayana in *The Life of Reason*

By Adrian Feuchtwanger

When I was a teenager growing up in Britain in the 1970s, by which time Lion Feuchtwanger was no longer a name to be reckoned with in the English-speaking market, a fellow pupil at my expensive private school once asked me, "So...er...this Jew Sues...um...what part of speech is Sues, exactly?" My acquaintance with his work was commensurate, consisting of resentment at the sheer volume of books bearing his name that occupied valuable shelf space in my bedroom and a brief visit to great-aunt Marta in Los Angeles in 1979. It was only later, at Oxford and while producing a PhD thesis at the University of Southern California on Lion's political engagement, that I gained a fuller understanding of his importance.

One cannot underestimate the significance of works such as *Die Geschwister Oppermann* to Germany, as its efforts to grapple with its uniquely horrifying past enter a new phase made concrete by the new museums and memorials in Munich and Berlin. Within the context of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, the novel's particular virtue is the way it presents the Oppermann family as victims of their own political myopia while also highlighting their palpable affection for, and sense of oneness with, a society into which they and numerous earlier generations of their family had been born. In other words, viewing their circumstances with the benefit of hindsight we ask ourselves not so much "Why the reluctance to read the writing on the wall?" as "What lesson can be learned from their understandable hesitation to leave?"

The power of this message is not diminished by having been written so soon after Hitler's seizure of power, as Lion himself claims to have felt, but rather exemplifies what we value about his work today. *Die Geschwister Oppermann*, and indeed novels such as *Goya* in which politically engaged artists play a central role, inform us that staying alert to the winds of political and social change is an almost tactile task requiring remembrance of the past, an acute awareness of the present, and a sharp eye for the future. If the price of freedom is eternal vigilance, then works like *Die Geschwister Oppermann* can mitigate that cost by showing us how earlier generations and families, in different settings and different countries, have erred on the side of remaining too long in the status quo, steeped in an ultimately fatal yet entirely understandable fondness for their own native land. In Lion's case, this was the land of Heine, Hegel, and the Enlightenment.

Lion and Marta were several times in their lives guilty of false optimism, and it is precisely this biographical backdrop of decisions made *in extremis* that lends power to the novels. The

inhabitants of Germany, France, and the United States took turns to persecute Lion and Marta Feuchtwanger, hounding them, expropriating them, driving them out, interning them, spying on them, and leaving them stateless. Far from being citizens of the world, a concept that Lion investigated elsewhere in his work, they became its flotsam and jetsam; other members of the Feuchtwanger family suffered similar fates in varying degrees. This characteristically 20th-century story is something those fortunate enough to have been born in quieter times should inwardly digest.

The role of persecuted author was one that Lion initially resisted, but famously he rose to the challenge. Some of his resulting public utterances were better chosen than others, however. In particular, his assessment of the great social experiment of the time, Soviet Communism, was wide of the mark. In an article for *Germano-Slavica* written shortly after completing my PhD, when I was still young enough to harbor illusions, I ventured to explain why Lion, as an outsider, might have been sufficiently compelled by Communist Russia as the product of reason and planning, and by Stalin as the only personality capable of resisting the rise of Fascism, to have produced a book as one-sided as *Moskau 1937*. I have since rethought and upon sober reflection now tend to the view offered in works such as *Borderland* by Anna Reid, a journalist based in Kiev in the early 1990s. Reid is critical of Lion's failure to perform his journalistic duty, and there is obviously a sense in which she is right. The Stalin visit was not Lion's finest hour; however, as Jonathan Skolnik, who has written in depth on Lion's work, pointed out over dinner at the International Feuchtwanger Society conference in 2007, with *Moskau 1937* Lion served as it were as the antisemitic Stalin's "good Jew." One may conjecture that given the highly autocratic nature of Stalin's rule, this may have saved Russian Jewish lives. Additional insights into Lion's emotional state at the time—he was presumably to some extent influenced by his mistress of the moment, Eva Herrmann, who had ties with the Comintern—have given me further insight into the mind of my flesh-and-blood great uncle.

Lion's novels remain influential and inspirational today in different ways. Bestselling Munich-based novelist Tanja Kinkel, who wrote her doctoral thesis on female archetypes in Lion's late works, writes historical novels that share characteristics with those of Lion. She recently gave a telling demonstration of this with a stirring reading of her Brecht/Lion piece—a carefully gauged enactment of the travails of exile and its effects on the friendship between the two men. The reading took place in the appropriate setting of Villa Aurora, where she had been a writer-in-residence a few years earlier. For Hans-Jochen Vogel, Germany's justice minister in the seventies and leader of the opposition under Helmut Kohl, Lion's portrait of Bavaria in the 1920s in *Erfolg* clearly was the springboard for soul-searching during his recent activities with the Holocaust remembrance organisation, Gegen Vergessen, Für Demokratie. And for countless students in schools and universities in Germany, Russia, and occasionally the United States, the *Wartesaal* trilogy remains a lively source for investigating a period of German history that in previous decades, under earlier regimes, was for obvious reasons neglected.