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**Sven Hanschek  
Elias Canetti**

**Translated by Michael Ritterson**

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**“Perhaps I’m not an artist”  
Exile in England (1939–45)**

I am German in my arrogance,  
Jewish in my dogmatism,  
Spanish in my pride,  
Turkish in my laziness —  
where could I pick up a few more good traits?

— Elias Canetti, note of July 30, 1944 (ZB 8)

The Canettis had arrived in England at the beginning of 1939, entering the country several weeks apart. During the first months they remained separated. Veza Canetti lived with her brother, “Bucky” Calderón, “the shopkeeper” in Surrey, “a Chaplinesque character” who had opened a candy store there.<sup>1</sup> Veza probably began immediately composing her novel, *The Tortoises*. Through Dea Gombrich, who had been in London since 1938, and her brother Ernst, Elias Canetti was able to get a room temporarily in the home of Constant Davis Huntington, the publisher from Putnam’s. Canetti was given the room of Huntington’s daughter Alfreda (later Alfreda Urquart), who was in Paris for several weeks, but even after her return home he was able to stay on a while longer. Canetti did not remember which room she moved into — “a charming, idealistic girl of charitable nature; in her room she had a picture by Van Gogh.”<sup>2</sup> Not too much is known about the first years in exile. Hardly any documents exist which would make it possible to reconstruct that period in detail. Elias and Veza Canetti seem to have been somewhat disoriented. The familiar experience of so many exiles had its effect on them too, even though they were not typical emigrants — both spoke perfect English. But they had been driven out of Vienna, had no secure income, and their awareness of the coming war cannot have made their sense of life any less ominous. Canetti regarded himself as “a lost emigrant, happy to have been rescued.”<sup>3</sup> Both found themselves unable to switch the language in which they wrote. Canetti made no attempt to do so (he did not want Hitler dictating his choice of language along with everything else). His wife did write at least one story in both English and German.<sup>4</sup> Even after decades in London, Canetti did not feel sufficiently at home in English: “In reading and writing, I am alive only in German. It is not true that I know *several* languages; in the other languages I am no better than everyone else.”<sup>5</sup>

In March 1939 he returned to his work. Among the persons named in the first notebook he kept in England is a Grete “Fischl” — quite possibly the journalist Grete Fischer, a German from Prague who had been in exile in London since 1934. In the course of the summer, Canetti was able to stay for several weeks at 31 Hyde Park Gardens in the studio of Anna Mahler, who had been living in London since May of 1938.<sup>6</sup> Canetti listened to the orators in Hyde Park, wrote about metamorphosis, gradually shed his irritation with the new country, and during that entire year made notations on things that struck him about the English language, as long as he was still distanced enough to take note of them. “*Perfect*” was thenceforth “the English expression toward which I have the most profound aversion. Rather be dead than *perfect*. Rather *infect* or *defect*. Rather be a *petrifact*.”<sup>7</sup> After the first few years, the English language irritated him only when he was ill.<sup>8</sup>

Even before the end of the first year in exile he was ready to take stock of his situation, and the result was not particularly good, neither in regard to his work up to that point nor concerning his own personality: “My vanity is of a kind that feeds upon itself. My life has achieved no success whatever. Up to now, not a one of my ideas has carried the day against an inferior predecessor. Indeed not one of them, however potent, has been truly capable of expression. Thus, nothing has been accomplished, for there is nothing there. Yet this Nothing regards itself endlessly in a mirrored labyrinth of very durable construction.” Moreover, he expected that his “hysteria” would necessarily “become more intense over the years, that is, with the increasing number of metamorphoses.”<sup>9</sup> These were not encouraging assessments. He searched for a way out of this negative frame of mind and tried to keep working without interruption, observing, listening, and writing down. In 1939 he used the term “notebooks” for the first time and turned away from literary activity as work out of season. Instead, thinking became his “cardinal passion.” “Invention is no longer a varied pastime for me”; art was “disobliging — the world nowadays knows so much about itself, what artist could be supposed to imagine something more?”<sup>10</sup> Art and literature were no more than purveyors of piecework, small segments; his personal explanation for the end of fiction was: “I am no longer concerned with producing works, but rather knowledge. Perhaps I’m not an artist.”<sup>11</sup> He claimed to have lost eight years since writing *Auto-da-fé*, never regaining his epic temperament, a habit of writing as regular as day changing to night. His plays were “the product of very different temporal laws, even in their genesis, and hence do not count.”<sup>12</sup> Self-critical

attempts of this kind followed a similar pattern in the years that followed. Canetti ensured himself a unique status in comparison with colleagues. He did not want to be a writer by profession, not to make a living by it; he wanted simply to think and write for himself and in any case not to become a prolific writer like Stefan Zweig or Robert Neumann, whom he met during the first years in London: “Not as a career, no new book every year, no market demand, no profit, and no appeal!”<sup>13</sup> If Canetti reviled himself as a laggard — not surprising in light of the pace he kept when writing his first three works — he often experienced hopeful interludes, creative surges, in the time following. He was compelled to realize that this tedious style of production was the one better suited to him. “I now know what I had long forgotten: that I will accomplish something great and good if my life will only grant me the slowness without which I cannot breathe. I know from this day forward that it no longer depends on me, but on the circumstances; up to now I was my own misfortune.”<sup>14</sup>

Veza and Elias Canetti were reunited in Teignmouth, a seaside resort in the southwest of England, near Torquay. They spent three weeks, from late July to mid-August 1939, vacationing with Georg Canetti and his friend Daniels, at Georg’s expense. Once again Canetti found himself relieved of all material worries. It “seems to depend on *one* thing alone to be an artist and free: the measure of disdain one has for money.”<sup>15</sup> Perhaps Veza Canetti also had the prospect of an advance — an English publisher had accepted *The Tortoises*. For her it was “a bad time” at the seaside,<sup>16</sup> for Georg and Elias had a violent quarrel. Elias had overlooked that there was only a bit of cheese on the table and, absently engrossed in the conversation, cut himself the remaining piece, leaving only the rind. “Georg, flying into a rage, seized the rind, held it in my face, and screamed: ‘This is you, this is how you are, you leave us your rind — you *are* this rind!’ [...] He called me the most horrible names. Everything that he held against me he reproached me with now: the letters I hadn’t written to our mother, the feuding with her even though she was ill, my selfishness, my indifference, my paranoid anxiety back in Vienna, [...] and of course also the help I was accepting from him, even the invitation to Devon — I, as his guest, was so shameless as to leave nothing but the *rind* of the cheese for him.”<sup>17</sup> They were reconciled, though painfully. Georg and an uncle of Canetti’s each gave them five pounds a month in the time that followed. That gave Elias and Veza just barely enough to pay their rent and food. Veza and Georg traveled back to London. Alone in Teignmouth, Canetti took heart again despite this quarrel. The sea, he claimed, gave him back his old sense of calm

and security, so he meant to “hold onto it, fearing that the sea could dry up, and of me only a shell would remain, drying up miserably on the ground.” The sea had freed him from the hypnosis of death; only the one “who has called upon the sea for help may defy death.”<sup>18</sup>

How well Canetti had fared, by comparison with the poet Theodor Kramer, was evident when the two met again. Kramer, recognized as one of the most important poets of his generation since his 1929 collection, *Die Gaunerzinke* (The Vagabond’s Sign), had not been able to emigrate to England until the last minute — late July 1939. He had left “for domestic employment” — his wife worked as a domestic servant and was able to have Kramer hired to work in the same household. This had been preceded by a long bureaucratic odyssey in the course of which Kramer had tried without success to get passage to Shanghai or South America, and he actually had taken courses of study in domestic service and in bookbinding. His first weeks in England were covered by modest stipends, his future uncertain, as it was for all refugees from the “Third Reich.”<sup>19</sup> For Canetti, the encounter with him was one of the “most depressing” of that time. He reports that Kramer gained and lost weight with uncanny rapidity. “I first met him as a swollen, drooling cook; last September on Währingerstrasse he rushed up to me looking like a ghost.” In London he was once again a “gluttonous, black chunk of fat.” He told Canetti about conditions in Vienna, although judging by the monologue that Canetti seems to have jotted down shortly after their meeting, Kramer spoke almost exclusively about himself, about the damaged parts of his body, and about food. There had still been enough to eat in Vienna, he reported, only butter was rationed. “But you could cook with oil. Bacon was available — on his travels he had always cooked with bacon fat. A German woman who waited on customers in Spitzauer’s butcher shop and actually wanted to study medicine, had been especially friendly to him, until one day when he was alone in the store with her, he’d said, ‘I’m a Jew.’ But that hadn’t mattered to her. She had even wanted to board the train when he was leaving, but that was out of the question, not at 10:50 in the morning. She’d given him a roast chicken as a gift for the journey, a pork knuckle in a big package.” Then Canetti asked him if perhaps the chicken had undergone a metamorphosis; he did not make a note of Kramer’s answer. The poet wanted to publish broadsides with a German poem on one side and the English translation on the other. He wanted to open a manuscript exchange agency. He had written a speech for the Austrian Centre and seven new poems, having done no work

at all during the eleven preceding months in Vienna. Kramer had gone on to revile the Jews of Vienna, whom he called “the worst riffraff.” The functionaries needed to be thrown out. “The only thing those people are afraid of is the SS.” He cursed the Polish Jews and the assimilated Jews in Vienna alike, and his final comment was: “Nazis are only impressed by defiance.” And he tells of two episodes where he strutted and bellowed, or claimed to be a Nazi himself.<sup>20</sup> Kramer’s egocentric image was passed on by his admirers, too, and from 1941 to 1943 he is said to have expressed a number of times the desire to write a volume of poems on “eating and drinking, sleeping and screwing.”<sup>21</sup> For Canetti the encounter remained an unpleasant memory to which he returned a number of times, at long intervals. “His home is made up of all the places in which he has eaten. His friends are all the people who have fed him. His goodwill extends to those persons who were present when he was eating. He despises the dead because they can no longer eat.”<sup>22</sup> And harshest of all: “His home is the toilet, and he finds it everywhere he goes.”<sup>23</sup>

In the following months, Veza and Elias Canetti had a flat at 118 King Henry’s Road,<sup>24</sup> then at 19 South Hill Park Gardens, both in Hampstead, a London artists’ quarter since the days of Hogarth, Keats, Constable, Dickens, Thomas Hardy, and A. A. Milne, and even more so since the early twentieth century. Sigmund Freud lived the last two years of his life here a few streets away in Maresfield Gardens, and Oskar Kokoschka had been at 2a King Henry’s Road since late October 1938.<sup>25</sup> Canetti’s attention was fixed on political events, and he was expecting the outbreak of war. By the end of August it seemed to him “so close that you can no longer think about it,” a creeping world war that was perhaps already there even before it was declared. “But now it’s so close that you’re never sure it isn’t already here.” People had a renewed faith in the hereafter that “upheld them. The hereafter is the time which will follow the war, and the life which follows the war is like a life eternal.”<sup>26</sup>

After the September 1 invasion of Poland by German troops, the governments of France and England issued an ultimatum demanding withdrawal of German forces behind the borders of the Reich. When the demand was not met, they declared war on Germany on September 3, 1939. In his notebooks Canetti pulled out all the stops. He deplored the “manly virtues”: “Why aren’t they all cowardly, cowardly like women, milktoasts, old men, weaklings, invalids!”<sup>27</sup> Just twenty years after the last great war, he could not imagine that there were people on either side who could desire war. And

he reacted not just with pathos, horror, and moral pronouncements, but also with gallows humor: “Proposal for a lottery: Who will survive the war?”<sup>28</sup>

Initially not much changed. Veza Canetti completed her novel, *The Tortoises*, by November 1939 and then waited (in vain) for a definite acceptance by the publisher. Her novel (like all subsequent attempts) remained unpublished during her lifetime. Her husband began the research for *Crowds and Power* at the Warburg Library; unlike the more famous emigrant Karl Marx before him, he did not use the British Library.<sup>29</sup> The Canettis lived in meager circumstances, got together with old acquaintances from pre-emigration days, and made new acquaintances, including a few English ones. Veza Canetti’s gloomy frame of mind seemed to have taken hold of Elias now, too. Suicide began to figure in his trains of thought — sometimes in jest: “Countless times he was on the verge of stabbing himself to death, but the knife was never disinfected, and so he went heedlessly on living.”<sup>30</sup> Then again, in earnest: “Living is no longer a matter of serious importance to me. I often consider taking the easy way out without feeling terribly ashamed as I once did. Betrayal? But betrayal of what, I ask myself calmly, with reference to current events. Life no longer merits my getting excited about it, so to speak. It’s doing everything it can to bring about its own destruction, like some rabid animal. [...] I hate this defeatism; I know full well that every inch I concede to the idea of death only brings me years, perhaps a decade, closer to my own end.”<sup>31</sup> It became unbearable in London during the Battle of Britain. The German air raids over England began on July 10, 1940; starting in early September, it was no longer the RAF airfields but the cities in the south of England that were the primary targets of German bombing. The first raid brought 400 aircraft in two waves over the East End of London on September 7, followed by another 200 after nightfall. In November 1940 the Midlands city of Coventry was leveled by German air attacks. Doing research in the midst of the London blitz for a major anthropological work that would occupy him for years, Canetti made light of his own situation in an adaptation of a popular song: “Tiptoe through the bombshells!”<sup>32</sup> He regarded himself sarcastically as a king of paper in the land of deadly lightning bolts — with terrible consequences for his working materials: “He has threatening powers at hand and puts them down in writing. He is passion itself, he knows what lightning can do, and he commits it to paper. He lashes out and his pencil shreds the sturdiest paper. He lives in the belief that words are to be read.”<sup>33</sup> Peter Conradi wondered why Canetti never worked for the Intelligence Service or for one of the news services. As a

bright, polyglot intellectual — and one without a steady income besides — he would have been perfectly suited for such work.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, he would have had every reason to act in opposition to the National Socialist hatchet men who made it their business to annihilate the Jews of Europe. Since the beginning of the war, police forces in the occupied territories had been under the command of Himmler and his paramilitary organizations, the SS and SD. But now, quite aside from the question of whether he would have been recruited for this kind of work — even as a “friendly alien” — Canetti had other things to do.

During these first years in London he frequently met with his student, Friedl Benedikt, who had followed him even in 1938. With Canetti’s approval she traveled, accompanied by a Finnish-Swedish guest from Himmelstrasse, to Paris and, three weeks later, on to London. There she lived on money from a wealthy aunt; her parents, who did not leave Vienna for Stockholm until 1939, were no longer allowed to take money out of Austria when the war broke out. In the weeks following September 1, Friedl Benedikt applied unsuccessfully for a job as an ambulance driver in the war. When that attempt failed, she labored at the typewriter with renewed seriousness and became a writer. During the war years she was more successful at it than her mentor. Two of her novels were published in 1944 under the distinguished imprint of Jonathan Cape. Her mentor had advanced to the role of lover, but he took his position as teacher seriously as well. Canetti stopped by her place daily and checked her writing exercises: Had she been keeping up her diary? Had she written a sufficient amount? If he found her at work, had she straightened up her room? It was only after these checks that he went to visit other friends, or to a coffee house if there was one.<sup>35</sup>

During this initial time in England the *ménage à trois* appears to have worked out well, too. In her only letter written during the war years, Veza Canetti wrote to her brother-in-law telling him to come for a visit and that she and Friedl would cook for him; there is also mention of a translation she intended to finish soon.<sup>36</sup> During this time, Canetti probably met at least as many people through Friedl as through his own Viennese connections. He collected and kept her writing exercises, which consisted of literary-critical essays — reading and writing commentaries on particular important works — and of keeping a literary journal describing the people in her surroundings. She had a room in a *bohémien* collective at 35 Downshire Hill, in a house belonging to her art devotee cousin Margaret Gardiner, where many residents and visitors came

and went.<sup>37</sup> Descriptions of her fellow residents take up much of the journal. Many of the persons mentioned in *Party in the Blitz* frequented this house, the communist physicist J. D. Bernal, for example, who later had a child with Gardiner.<sup>38</sup> Another was the inventive and hypochondriac Geoffrey Pike, who apparently really did work for the Intelligence Service.<sup>39</sup> The art collector Roland Penrose and his wife Lee Miller, who rose to fame as a war photographer, lived diagonally opposite; this is where Canetti attended the “party in the blitz” of the book title, the house filled to bursting with guests and no one minding that “you could hear bombs striking — a fearless and very lively gathering.”<sup>40</sup> Friedl also met the poet Stevie Smith through her cousin; Canetti incorrectly remembered her as “Henri” Smith and praised her as an “original, witty, absolutely unsentimental poet.” Friedl is reported to have given her a new white silk blouse just because Smith had admired it on her.<sup>41</sup> Stevie Smith introduced Friedl Benedikt to her publisher, Jonathan Cape, and his editor-in-chief, Daniel George; also to Kay Dick, the first female editor of an English newspaper, *John O’London’s Weekly*. Dick was the first to publish, in the magazine *Windmill*, a piece by “Anna Sebastian,” Friedl Benedikt’s pseudonym, even before a novel of hers came out.<sup>42</sup> In gratitude for these introductions, Friedl gave the protagonist in her first novel, *Let Thy Moon Arise* (1944), the name (Stephanie) and the physical appearance of Stevie Smith.<sup>43</sup>

Friedl knew Stephen Spender and Dylan Thomas, Kathleen Raine and Ben Nicholson, and she was frustrated by the critics Herbert Read and Cyril Connolly. Read, who wrote poetry and later made a name for himself primarily as a writer of art history, is described rather amicably by Canetti as quiet, conscientious, and skeptical.<sup>44</sup> Friedl Benedikt, to whom he had sent a rejection letter, declared that there was “no more repugnant combination than that of artist and businessman,” and that in his books on the fine arts he would no doubt be quick to condemn any hint of the commercial spirit. She found Cyril Connolly, the most famous and influential English critic of his time, even worse. She knew him only as a caricature of himself: “How he sat there, fat and greasy, and Margaret said to him, ‘Here is a young writer who has written an excellent novel and wouldn’t you like to publish parts of it?’” Connolly was editor of the magazine *Horizon*; “Des” was J. D. Bernal. “And Connolly didn’t answer, seemed even not to have heard. Margaret repeated her question, and he still didn’t hear. He was so detached, so preoccupied with much more important things. ‘The novel is really frightfully good. Is’nt [sic] it, Des?’ ‘Yes, I know it practically by

heart.’ But that damned Connolly refused to hear. And I, instead of saying, Who the hell do you think you are? You are running a magazine and you *ought* to read young people’s books! — instead of that I said, ‘Of course you must hear this sort of thing dozens of times.’ ‘Of course,’ said Connolly, bored beyond words, ‘Everybody thinks they are a genius!’”<sup>45</sup>

There was another neighbor on Downshire Hill. In the house at number 47, “the lovely old Rossetti House,” lived Fred Uhlman.<sup>46</sup> Canetti’s portrait of him in *Party in the Blitz* is not without ridicule; the two men were rather at odds with each other, as Uhlman’s diary notations from the postwar years tell. Still, the chapter in Canetti’s book is mellowed with age compared with the spitefulness of the time it recounts: “A man poses as a painter; to win the daughter of a wealthy family; she believes it so completely that suddenly he is compelled to paint. He marries her fortune and by judicious distribution of money he buys himself a name as a painter. He is much celebrated. He sells his pictures cheap so as to be thought poor. Thus, in the end, he’s struggling as before; rich and a famous painter — everything at once.”<sup>47</sup> Uhlman himself told the story of his life and his marriage into the English upper class in *The Making of an Englishman* (1960, 1992). He had taken in John Heartfield, who lived through the war years in his house. And Uhlman actually did paint for decades, with growing commercial success though without ever becoming a great painter. His more important fellow artists had difficulties with him because he was more highly regarded in England than they. But on the other hand, Uhlman made great efforts to place their works with art dealers. Over the years he also acquired a significant collection of African sculptures; and in late career he produced a best-selling novella, *Reunion* (1971), which was also made into a film.<sup>48</sup>

Uhlman was politically active as well. Together with Oskar Kokoschka he founded the Free German League of Culture in 1939, “to unite the thousands of German refugees in England in an effective anti-Nazi organization.” His plan did not work out, however. Although many prominent individuals joined — Uhlman named Stefan Zweig, Berthold Viertel, and Max Herrmann-Neisse — he claimed that the organization had been infiltrated by communists and crypto-communists and had quickly acquired a reputation to match, “with Kokoschka and me as straw men.” In fact, many of the members did return to communist East Germany after the war.<sup>49</sup> Canetti also remembered the organization, and Uhlman as “the soul of this *Kulturbund*, its secretary or perhaps its president,” and Kokoschka, “who was always

getting involved in public affairs; he could be used as a kind of honorary president.”<sup>50</sup> Neither Uhlman nor Canetti ever mentioned that Uhlman quickly withdrew from the leadership because of the large number of communists.<sup>51</sup> Some of the writers switched to Club 43, whose aim it was to preserve German culture and which held panel discussions for this purpose.<sup>52</sup>

Did Canetti take part in political or literary émigré organizations? He appears not to have been in the League, nor is he mentioned in a recent study on the Austrian Centre.<sup>53</sup> He probably paid occasional visits to Club 43;<sup>54</sup> and he accepted election, along with Veza Canetti, Anna Mahler, Theodor Kramer, Arthur Koestler, and Hilde Spiel, to the Austrian P.E.N. in exile, whose president for many years was Robert Neumann.<sup>55</sup> Canetti’s “aversion to writing as an organized trade” can be seen in his avoidance of these professional bodies.<sup>56</sup> Even worse, in his view, were their meetings. Here his limitless anthropological interests seem to have abandoned him: “I have never experienced anything more repugnant than a gathering of writers where each one could say whatever happened to run through his mind. Among writers there can be personal friendships, but no organization of any kind. Sharks do not create political systems.”<sup>57</sup>

The young Erich Fried, whom Canetti must have known casually since about 1939<sup>58</sup> — Fried was eighteen and had been in London since August 1938 — had very different views on political issues. He worked on a refugee committee and was active in socialist-oriented organizations. At one conference of the group Young Austria in 1942, he read a paper on the question of Austrian national literature in which he attempted to trace the literary tradition. In the record of his presentation is the notation: “Canetti (rather a dead end).”<sup>59</sup> The remark taken out of its context is somewhat unclear. Fried’s biographer sees it as a reproach of individualism.<sup>60</sup> The Canettis did not meet Erich Fried very often — and Veza Canetti more than Elias — until after the war.

Canetti was not entirely inactive. In 1942 he signed the “Declaration of Austrian Associations in Great Britain,” the goal of which was “a free, democratic, economically secure Austria with the right to determine its own future.” The declaration’s political import is not clear. A number of philosophically very diverse organizations supported the appeal, social democrats and communists as well as the Austrian Centre, the Austrian Democratic Union, the Austrian League, the Austria Office, the Austrian Voluntary Workers, the Austrian Youth Association, the Council

of Austrians, *Kommendes Österreich*, and Young Austria. One of the few organizations that did not join in was the Association of Austrian Christian Socialists in Great Britain, a Christian-conservative grouping. In the resolution, Austrians in exile subscribed to a set of common objectives:

- “1. To achieve a declaration of non-recognition by the British government of the violent annexation of Austria.
2. To work to secure the right of self-determination for the Austrian people in the spirit of the Atlantic Charter.
3. To mobilize Austrians living in Great Britain in their own military combat force, in civilian defense service, and in the war industry, for the victory of the Allies; and accordingly, to effect a modification of the ‘enemy alien’ status of Austrians residing in this country; and by means of propaganda to encourage and strengthen the Austrian resistance front opposing Nazism at home.”<sup>61</sup> This third point was a response to the internment policy of Churchill’s government, which transported large numbers of émigrés to distant islands. Fred Uhlman was one of those interned; Theodor Kramer received a “B” and had only occasionally to check in with the police, but he was not permitted to leave his place of residence.

In addition to the names of associations, the declaration also bore the signatures of more or less prominent individuals. Canetti evidently held such status among the émigrés in 1942 that his name appeared with those of the musicologists Otto Erich Deutsch and Hans Gàl, the sculptor Georg Ehrlich, Walter Hollitscher, Oskar Kokoschka, Anna Mahler, Robert Neumann, and the violinist Arnold Rosé. It is striking how many in the list of signatories had to do with music. Robert Neumann was delegated by the Free Austrian Movement to read the declaration, addressed to Churchill, at a mass public demonstration.<sup>62</sup>

Canetti also lent his support to a more clearly political initiative organized by the left wing of the Austrian Centre. There, at 126 Westbourne Terrace, an “Austrian June 22nd Committee,” together with the Joint Committee for Soviet Aid, organized “Austrian-Soviet Friendship Week” under the patronage of the Soviet ambassador.<sup>63</sup> Maria Köstler, a former Socialist MP, chaired the committee, on which Anna Mahler and Oskar Kokoschka also sat. Among the forty “sponsors” the names of Deutsch and Canetti reappear, as well as Canetti’s Viennese friend Walter Hollitscher.<sup>64</sup> In 1943 Canetti lamented the disbanding of the Communist International: “Thus National Socialism, at the moment of its collapse, has won out — superficially, but plain for all

to see. It is as if the Pope in St. Peter's were to declare, solemnly and unexpectedly: God does not exist. We were mistaken. The era of God is past." Or, he wondered, would the Comintern live on as a repressive institution, "an international union for combating Trotzkyism"?<sup>65</sup>

Around New Year of 1941 the Canettis moved to Amersham, where they remained for the rest of the war and another two years following. The adjacent towns of Amersham and Chesham Bois, a little less than an hour from the center of London, are like an idyllic park in the Chilterns, with the houses of well-to-do families scattered through the woods — "a kind of idyll" even then.<sup>66</sup> They had their longest time together in "Durriss," Stubbs Wood in Chesham Bois, two rooms in the house of an old vicar and his wife. But there were continually double addresses during this time, an office for Elias, a separate flat for Veza. Durriss is probably the only house whose appearance has hardly changed since then; other houses have given way to new construction. Grimsdells Corner is an intersection where at most a tree at the side of the road might have witnessed the Canettis when they were living there. The couple saw each other daily, but they took separate paths. Elias especially had to admit that he "had never written much of anything" since the day he was "prodded and dragged to the wedding [...] Veza is my charm, an evil charm, a curse."<sup>67</sup> Even her worshipping her husband was of no avail: "She humiliates herself constantly so that you're constantly raising her up and when, after twenty years, this game becomes tiresome, she's offended."<sup>68</sup>

That Veza and Elias Canetti could bear to live neither with nor without each other has only marginally to do with his polygamy. True, there are repeated notes about the "raging horsemen of fornication,"<sup>69</sup> he thought of himself as an "oriental," a man made up of "the sum of his wives,"<sup>70</sup> and he wondered if his intensified passions were tied to the course of the war: "His desire for women grows with each town destroyed. Ah, he cannot repopulate them. What does he expect one man alone to do?"<sup>71</sup> But in the long view his sex life was not remotely so legendary as the media have been quick to suggest in recent years. His wife was always shown by third parties the respect one would give to "the first wife in a classical Chinese household,"<sup>72</sup> but ever since their marriage they maintained only a brother-sister relationship. During this time, Friedl Benedikt saw Canetti mainly when he came to Hampstead, then in 1945 she kept her distance.

A new arrival on the scene was the woman who had persuaded the Canettis to move to the country, away from the bombings: Marie-Louise von Motesiczky. There are indications of a friendly connection in which Veza Canetti was also involved at first. There are several photographs of her sitting in the artist's studio, and she wrote Motesiczky a note telling her she had dedicated her novel, *The Response*, to her. "For the quiet charm emanating from her gave me the idea for a character, and her delicacy tamed my wildness and defined the characters and the music in my book."<sup>73</sup> Probably Motesiczky had met Canetti in 1940 at one of the many cocktail parties without anything coming of it at first.<sup>74</sup> Evidence suggests that the relationship did not develop into a love affair until about 1941 in Amersham.<sup>75</sup> Marie-Louise von Motesiczky was born in Vienna in 1906. Her father, a gifted cellist, died when she was three. Her mother came from a wealthy, cultivated family; her grandmother, Anna von Lieben, was one of Sigmund Freud's first patients. As a young woman her mother had also associated with prominent people whom Canetti disliked even more than Freud. In a bundle of duplicated "memoirs" for her daughter, she told the story of her meetings with Hugo von Hofmannsthal. Her older brother was a friend of his, and around 1895, at the age of eleven or twelve, she had fallen in love with him and then, at long intervals over a span of thirty years, had met with him a number of times. Freud also came and went in her house, as a doctor treating her mother for a neurological disorder. And among the guests at her brother's Hungarian estate were Ludwig Ganghofer and "Cannon-Škoda," the industrialist Emil Ritter von Škoda.<sup>76</sup>

Marie-Louise Motesiczky attended several art academies before Max Beckmann invited her to the Städel Academy in Frankfurt in 1927. She remained friends with him after completing her training. In 1938 she emigrated with her mother, first to the Netherlands, where she had her first exhibition in 1939, then to England, where they settled in Amersham. Marie-Louise's brother Karl had remained in Austria and had hidden Jewish friends at the family's estate in Hinterbrühl; he was denounced and put to death in Auschwitz around 1943. Marie-Louise appears to have been somewhat reticent in the matter of exhibiting her work, but she did have a one-woman show in London in 1944.<sup>77</sup> Kokoschka, whom Canetti knew from Prague and who had been his neighbor in Hampstead for a short time, had already been a friend of the Motesiczkys back in Vienna. He too made occasional visits to Amersham. For the Canettis, the well-to-do Motesiczky family represented the quintessential old

Vienna, the lost Vienna with all its traditions. He is also said to have taken great pleasure in Viennese cuisine.

For he was homesick for Vienna. He had collected news of the city since his departure. In his mind he rode the old streetcar lines in order to remember the individual stations. And he felt “envy of anyone who lived longer in Vienna than I.”<sup>78</sup> He wondered why it was the streetcars that he missed most of all. Perhaps because they were the arteries of the city, or rather because of his own compulsive rides on them, “still disinterested, [...] pure, and not at all mindful of you.”<sup>79</sup> Marie-Louise’s brother was dead, and he didn’t know if his own brothers in Paris were still alive. The loss of Vienna also had definite implications for the written word. He could no longer collect vocal disguises. The old Imperial multiplicity of languages was passé. The émigrés’ errors of speech did not interest him; they “had only one thing in mind” anyway: fitting into English everyday life. One’s “own language” was becoming “more and more literary,” Canetti noted. “It is nourished mainly by books.”<sup>80</sup> He looked somewhat desperately in the city for comparisons with things he knew. When Amadea Gombrich married John Forsdyke, the director of the British Museum, and thereby became Lady Dea Forsdyke, Canetti observed that her husband had “the physique, the face, and the complete manner” of his Viennese chemistry professor, Adolf Franke, even though any connection between the two men was practically impossible — here an Englishman “through and through,” and there an Austrian.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Canetti 2003, 16.

<sup>2</sup> Canetti 2003, 15.

<sup>3</sup> Canetti 2003, 14.

<sup>4</sup> Schedel 2002 (a), 165. The title of the story is *Air Raid*, German version in *Der Fund* (Veza Canetti 2001, 11–17).

<sup>5</sup> October 24, 1964, ZB 22a.

<sup>6</sup> Pross, 137.

<sup>7</sup> Notebooks, begun December 4, 1939, ZB 5a.

<sup>8</sup> June 30, 1942, ZB 6.

<sup>9</sup> Notebook of November 1939, ZB 5a.

<sup>10</sup> July 10, 1942, ZB 2.

<sup>11</sup> Notebooks, begun December 4, 1939, ZB 5a.

<sup>12</sup> August 17, 1939, ZB 5a.

<sup>13</sup> August 14, 1939, ZB 5a.

<sup>14</sup> August 2, 1942, ZB 6.

<sup>15</sup> Late July 1939, ZB 33.

<sup>16</sup> From Schedel 2002 (b), 101.

<sup>17</sup> October 5, 1971, ZB 24.

<sup>18</sup> August 14, 1939, ZB 5a.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Chvojka/Kaiser, 49–54.

<sup>20</sup> August 15, 1939, ZB 5a.

<sup>21</sup> Chvojka/Kaiser, 62–63.

<sup>22</sup> October 18, 1943, ZB 7.

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- <sup>23</sup> December 31, 1945, ZB 8.
- <sup>24</sup> Pross, 139.
- <sup>25</sup> Wade.
- <sup>26</sup> August 20, 1939, ZB 5a.
- <sup>27</sup> September 1939, ZB 33; again on December 4, 1939, ZB 5a.
- <sup>28</sup> Notebooks, begun August 14, 1939, ZB 5a.
- <sup>29</sup> Canetti 2003, 15.
- <sup>30</sup> After December 4, 1939, ZB 5a.
- <sup>31</sup> After December 4, 1939, ZB 5a.
- <sup>32</sup> After December 4, 1939, ZB 5a.
- <sup>33</sup> After December 4, 1939, ZB 5a.
- <sup>34</sup> Interview with Peter Conradi, July 15, 2003.
- <sup>35</sup> All information concerning Friedl Benedikt from interview with Susanna Ovadia, December 5, 2003.
- <sup>36</sup> Veza to Georg Canetti, May 18, 1940, BG. The reference could be to Graham Greene's novel, *The Power and the Glory* (1940), which she was supposed to translate in the space of eight weeks. Her German version of it did not appear until 1948; in 1946 she was still working on the revision of the text (Veza to Georg Canetti, July 6, 1946, BG).
- <sup>37</sup> Canetti 2003, 138.
- <sup>38</sup> Canetti 2003, 139–42.
- <sup>39</sup> Canetti 2003, 143–46.
- <sup>40</sup> Canetti 2003, 159.
- <sup>41</sup> Canetti 2003, 163–65.
- <sup>42</sup> Veza Canetti also mentions “Kay” in her letter to Georg Canetti of May 18, 1940, BG, though she could also have been referring to Kay Hursthouse.
- <sup>43</sup> Spalding, 172.
- <sup>44</sup> Canetti 2003, 64–68.
- <sup>45</sup> Friedl Benedikt, Journal, June 8, 1942, ZB 217.
- <sup>46</sup> Canetti 2003, 147.
- <sup>47</sup> June 16, 1945, ZB 8. Cf. Canetti 2003, 147–53.
- <sup>48</sup> German translation: *Der wiedergefundene Freund* (1985). Cf. Plodeck on Uhlman.
- <sup>49</sup> Uhlman, 268–72.
- <sup>50</sup> Canetti 2003, 148.
- <sup>51</sup> Berghahn, 151.
- <sup>52</sup> Berghahn, 153–54.
- <sup>53</sup> Bearman, et al.
- <sup>54</sup> Interview with Renée Goddard, July 16, 2003.
- <sup>55</sup> Spiel 1991, 190.
- <sup>56</sup> February 18, 1942, ZB 6.
- <sup>57</sup> June 14, 1942, ZB 6.
- <sup>58</sup> Kaukoreit/Thunecke, 131, 141.
- <sup>59</sup> Kaukoreit, 466.
- <sup>60</sup> Kaukoreit, 113.
- <sup>61</sup> Declaration in the Document Archives of the Austrian Resistance (Vienna), 1942, File No. 2991.
- <sup>62</sup> In Porchester Hall on January 24, 1942. The declaration was also printed up as a flyer, with a photograph of the speaker, Neumann, on the reverse.
- <sup>63</sup> The Friendship Week took place June 20–28, 1942.
- <sup>64</sup> Document Archives of the Austrian Resistance (Vienna), File No. 4338.
- <sup>65</sup> May 23, 1943, ZB 7.
- <sup>66</sup> Canetti 2003, 33.
- <sup>67</sup> December 28, 1939, ZB 5a.
- <sup>68</sup> January 13, 1943, ZB 7.
- <sup>69</sup> June 13, 1942, ZB 6.
- <sup>70</sup> October 21, 1941, ZB 22.
- <sup>71</sup> August 29, 1943, ZB 7.
- <sup>72</sup> Conradi, 441.
- <sup>73</sup> Note (n.d.) by Veza Canetti in the Motesiczky estate, quoted from Schlenker, 108.
- <sup>74</sup> E-mail from Jill Lloyd, July 21, 2004.
- <sup>75</sup> Canetti calls her “a woman I’ve loved for seven years” (December 28, 1948, ZB 10).

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<sup>76</sup> Henriette von Motesiczky, *Erinnerungen: Geschrieben für meine Tochter Marielouise und meine Cousine Fanny*, October 1966; typescript in ZB 214.

<sup>77</sup> Information on Motesiczky from a chronology of the Motesiczky Charitable Trust, e-mail from Ines Schlenker, August 13, 2004.

<sup>78</sup> Around autumn 1940, ZB 5a.

<sup>79</sup> April 10, 1945, ZB 8.

<sup>80</sup> June 23, 1942, ZB 6.

<sup>81</sup> August 25, 1942, ZB 6.