Exile and Exile Literature. Walter A. Berendsohn’s struggle to return to Hamburg University

SOURCE DESCRIPTION
The P. Walter Jacob Archive, part of the Walter A. Berendsohn Research Center for German Exile Literature, houses a part of Berendsohn's estate which includes his extensive correspondence. This handwritten draft of a two-page letter Berendsohn wrote or sent on September 1st, 1965 in Bromma, Sweden, stems from the archive. It is unclear whether the note “sent” refers to the date or was made for filing purposes. The letter is addressed to his colleague Karl Ludwig Schneider, a professor at Hamburg University’s literature department, who did not reply until two months later since he was in the United States at the time. The draft letter written on the back of a newsletter by the Jakob Hegner publishing company contains several emphases, insertions, and deletions. As was his habit, Berendsohn not only noted that this was a draft but he also added the geographical specification “West Germany”, as he did in all his letters addressed to the Federal Republic of Germany. In his letter to Schneider, Berendsohn explained his plans for returning to Hamburg University as a visiting lecturer teaching exile literature in the summer semester of 1966.

Berendsohn’s path into exile
Walter A. Berendsohn, considered the doyen of exile literature studies, was himself an exile. Born to Jewish parents in Hamburg on September 10, 1884, he had been appointed associate professor of German literature at the University of Hamburg in 1926. In July 1933, following the Nazi takeover and his dismissal on the basis of the antisemitic “Law for the Restoration of the Professional Civil Service” [1], Berendsohn went into exile in Denmark, where he unsuccessfully sought academic employment. It was during this period that he began work on his book “Die humanistische Front” [“The Humanist Front”], which was the first volume to systematically survey literature written by “refugees from the Third Reich.” Although finished in 1939, it was not published until 1946. Following the German occupation of Denmark, Berendsohn, considered stateless since 1936, first went into hiding and eventually escaped to Sweden in a skiff in September 1943. In Stockholm, where he initially worked as an archivist until he was offered a teaching position at the university’s German department in 1952, he managed to complete the second volume of “Die humanistische Front,” which was not published until 1976.

The “double expulsion”
After the war, Berendsohn sought to return to Hamburg University or at least have his pension claims acknowledged. However, he met with strong resistance by leading members of the literature department.
Hans Pyritz in particular agitated against Berendsohn, who had devoted himself to exile literature, by questioning his academic achievements, for example. Another argument brought to bear against Berendsohn was that he lacked a Ph. D. [Philosophiae Doctor], his degree having been revoked by the Nazis. Thus the Hamburg academics had actually strategically used a Nazi crime to make their point. Berendsohn’s “two expulsions”[2] show the continuity of a hostile German mindset at Hamburg’s humanities department regardless of political changes. Overall, there were only a few individual cases in which serious offers of reinstatement had been extended by the university to academics who had been marginalized and ousted.

Beginnings of the research subfield of exile literature

Since the mid-1960s, Berendsohn had intensified his efforts to establish exile literature as a subject of academic study. They were significantly boosted by an international symposium initiated largely by him in Stockholm in 1969. In his speech[3] at the symposium, Berendsohn formulated the current status and future tasks of exile literature studies. His demand to initially prioritize the collection and archiving of writings and documents was adapted in subsequent years and significantly shaped this early phase in the study of exile literature. In Berendsohn’s words, this was “basic research.”

“Literature by refugees”

Methodically, the ideas Berendsohn outlines in his letter to Schneider represent a continuation of his previous work. “Literature by Refugees from the Third Reich” suggested in its very title that this literature did not end in 1945. The distinction between exile and emigration otherwise implied was considered outdated by Berendsohn, who believed he could overcome it by using the term “refugee.” He studied literary works dealing with the theme of exile based on their international reception, assuming a mutual influence between different cultures. This explicitly included Jewish tradition. His thinking, influenced by the concept of world literature, rejected nationalist definitions of literature.

In his selection of works and authors to be studied, Berendsohn, as he explained to Schneider, aimed at including various genres such as “prose, drama, and poetry,” thus covering the whole spectrum of literary production. While all the authors included had received international recognition for their work, Berendsohn placed particular emphasis on Nelly Sachs and her oeuvre. He promoted her drama “Eli, ein Mysterium vom Leiden Israels” [“Eli: A Mystery Play of the Suffering of Israel”][4] and organized a subscription scheme for a small issue of 500 signed copies of the play in order to support the destitute “poetess of the Jewish fate”[5] and her mother. He also played a major part in her being awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1966.

The late breakthrough of research on exile literature

This letter to Karl Ludwig Schneider was part of Berendsohn’s effort to create a greater academic interest in exile literature. Despite the humiliating rejection he had suffered in the postwar period by members of Hamburg University’s literary studies department, Berendsohn again appeals to a Hamburg colleague with this letter. This time, however, his correspondent was a former member of the resistance against the Nazis. Schneider had been a member of Die Weiße Rose [The White Rose] in Hamburg and had narrowly escaped
Andreas Marquet

execution. Several months earlier, Schneider had discussed possible ways to incorporate exile literature more strongly into the university curriculum with Berendsohn. In the end, Berendsohn’s attempts to become a visiting professor in Hamburg failed. Instead he was offered to give two lectures at the university in the summer of 1966, which he refused. His ideas for a class curriculum were finally realized when Berendsohn taught a class at Stockholm University titled “German Literature by Refugees from the Third Reich. Introduction, Problems, Challenges”[6] in the winter semester of 1966/67. The study of exile literature was eventually established at Hamburg University in 1970 by Hans Wolffheim, who founded the Hamburg Center for the Study of German Exile Literature [7]. In 2001, 17 years after Berendsohn’s death, the center was officially renamed “The Walter A. Berendsohn Center for German Exile Literature”. Still, this honor was only bestowed decades after this exiled scholar had failed to gain support for either his reinstatement or his research from the university. And yet it was he who through his tenacity and initiative as its doyen paved the way for the study of exile literature in Germany.

Select Bibliography


Selected English Titles


Notes

[1] Gesetz zur Wiederherstellung des Berufsbeamtentums
About the Author

Andreas Marquet, Dr. phil., born 1981, is research assistant at the Archive of Social Democracy of the Friedrich-Ebert-Foundation. Before he was archivist at the Walter-A.-Berendsohn-Research-Centre for German Exile Literature at the Institute for German Studies at University Hamburg. His focus of research: displaced persons in Southwestern Germany after 1945, labour movement in Palatinate (Pfalz), political leftists in exile.

Recommended Citation and License Statement


This text is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution - Non commercial - No Derivatives 4.0 International License. As long as the work is unedited and you give appropriate credit according to the Recommended Citation, you may reuse and redistribute the material in any medium or format for non-commercial purposes.