

Ludwig Thoma in Dachau

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Ich hätte deutlicher sein sollen. Das war mein Fehler.
Aber am Ende kann ich nichts dafür wenn einige Schreier
die Sache aufbauschen!

Bürgermeister of 'Dornstein' in *Die Lokalbahn*, 1902.

History, considered as an account of the past which people share, is (like literature) constructed from images. The name of a town can be an historical metaphor, so can the name of a writer. My interest here is in exploring how the people living in one metaphor, Dachau, have sought to establish the historical reality of their community - what it was really like - less by careful presentation of what actually happened than by creating a counter-metaphor: Ludwig Thoma.

Thoma's work is only one constituent of the image evoked by his name; in its historically effective form it is a composite of literature, biography, anecdote and myth. Thoma's plays are performed in Dachau, and the stories, often on display in the bookshops, are read by people of all generations. Many more than know the writer through his work would know him by his appearance: the photographs of Thoma posing with his peasant pipe or with his hunting companions have been an important accessory to his writings. And anyone who does not know him by his work or by his spectacles, moustache, duelling scars and Bavarian costume will know him by name: in Dachau there is a Ludwig-Thoma-Haus, a Ludwig-Thoma-Straße, a Ludwig-Thoma-Schule and, for drinking at the Volksfest on the Ludwig-Thoma-Wiese, complete with portrait on the label, a Ludwig-Thoma-Bier. No official publicity produced by the town is without its reference to Thoma's years in Dachau. If they were important years for Thoma - and they were - intervening events have clearly made them very important to present-day Dachau.

Thoma came to Dachau in 1894, when he was 27, as a legal practitioner - the first in the old market town overlooking the Amper river, north of Munich - and left three years later, as a writer. It was the peacefulness of the place which attracted him. "Wie wir den Berg hinaufkamen und der Marktplatz mit

seinen Giebelhäusern recht feierabendlich vor mir lag, überkam mich eine starke Sehnsucht, in dieser Stille zu leben".¹

Through his legal practice he discovered that not everything was peaceful; this was a society with a multitude of conflicts, entrenched and petty, over property and politics and personal matters, and a degree of passion not always visible beneath the hard daily life in which everything was dominated by work. It was the farming people of the surrounding countryside, poor in the marshy *Moos* to the south, rich in the fertile rolling country north of the Amper, who engaged his powers of observation and his imagination with particular force. They provided the cast of characters for his first collection of stories, *Agricola*, published in 1897, and for most of his later plays, novels and satirical writings. So even if Thoma's literary career developed only after he left Dachau to work for the newly founded *Simplicissimus* in Munich, there is a substantial basis for the identification of Thoma with the Dachau district. The dialect, manner of speech, values and social attitudes of farming people in all the most popular plays belong unmistakably to Dachau, as does the satirical *Briefwexel* of the Zentrum Deputy in the Bavarian Landtag, Josef Filser. *Die Lokalbahn* is based on the controversy attending the construction of a branch line which Thoma knew at first hand;² the clericalism, peasant politics and family tragedies of *Andreas Vöst* are those of the Dachauer Hinterland. There, immune to the pretensions of the *Spießbürgertum* and the "Staatshämorrhoidarius" of the Kaiserreich, Thoma believed he had discovered that essential, human Bavaria which *Dichtung*, rather than mere *Heimatlidung*, could translate from everyday to universal concern.³

It is the particular and local elements of Thoma's human comedy which naturally have most appeal in Dachau. Thoma was a brilliant ethnographer, especially in matters of dialect, and people can recognize in his writings a Dachau culture which still persists in attitudes, shared meanings and turns of speech in the surrounding countryside. It is not surprising that Dachauers, even those who came there as *Flüchtlinge* and *Zugereiste* after the Second World War, should find a substantial part of their identity in his work. But a sense of identity is not all there is to understanding the history of one's own lifetime: it can actively inhibit a more searching enquiry which might cause dissonance in the self-image of an individual or a community.

In fact the Dachau Thoma celebrated was a very partial picture even of the late 19th century community. It could not help Dachauers understand the major social and political developments of the 20th century. Already in his day there were a handful of workers from the paper mill and the building industries who voted for the Social Democrats: they play no part in his writings. In 1905 the first local socialist candidate was put up; in 1906 Dachau experienced its first strike. After the upheaval of the war it was at Dachau that the decisive battle between Reds and Whites which ended the Bavarian Soviet Republic took place in 1919. With the closure of the munitions works built during the war

unemployment was worse than in many large cities; in the twenties Dachau claimed the title of the most economically depressed community in Germany. If politically the town was marginally socialist, the countryside remained overwhelmingly Catholic. Only in 1932 did the Nazis begin to make any ground at all. In the last elections of March 1933 they won less than a third of the votes. But in the country as a whole they acquired the power to put Hitler's solution for Germany's social and political conflicts into effect.

Two weeks after the elections, with Himmler installed as police chief in Munich, there was a small news item in the local papers:

Am Mittwoch wird in der Nähe von Dachau das erste Konzentrationslager eröffnet. Es hat ein Fassungsvermögen von 5000 Menschen. Hier werden die gesamten kommunistischen und - soweit notwendig - Reichsbanner und marxistischen Functionäre, die die Sicherheit des Staates gefährden zusammengezogen . . . Wir haben diese Maßnahme ohne jede Rücksicht auf kleinliche Bedenken getroffen in der Überzeugung, damit zur Beruhigung der nationalen Bevölkerung und in ihrem Sinn zu handeln.⁴

It is impossible to say how many people in Dachau approved of the use to which the abandoned munitions factory down in the *Moos* was put. Local communists and a former socialist mayor were arrested but some were imprisoned for only a few weeks and were careful not to tell too much about their experiences. No one in Dachau had anything to do with setting up the camp, which (people will still tell you) was actually in the neighbouring parish of Prittlbach until 1939. Local people were to avoid as much as they could the thousands of S.S. men who came to be garrisoned there. And right from the beginning they carried on as if nothing in their little world had changed.

Another, larger, news item in the local press made this clear. It was a report of the first annual general meeting of the Ludwig-Thoma-Gemeinde, held on 11 March 1933, in the midst of the Nazi seizure of power in Bavaria and in Dachau itself. The first year of the new society devoted to Thoma and his works had been an impressive success. Membership had grown from nine to one hundred and forty five. There had been monthly meetings, a visit to Thoma's house on the Tegernsee, a most popular season of plays. A monument to the writer had been dedicated and a plaque unveiled on the house of the master tailor Rauffer in which Thoma had lived. Alongside reports of arrests, occupation of newspaper offices, 'disarming' of the opposition, the people of Dachau could read that several of their leading citizens, including the mayor (who would soon be removed despite his quick change into Party uniform), had been re-elected for another year as office holders of the Ludwig-Thoma-Gemeinde.⁵ Co-existence, or integration, with the new order apparently posed few problems of organisation or conscience. The 1933 season of plays was another great success. In the 1934 celebrations marking the elevation of Dachau from market town to municipality, the *Heimatabend* of the Thoma-Gemeinde,

with Deputy Gauleiter Nippold as guest of honour, was one of the major events.⁶

Perhaps people in Dachau were right, when their community was under pressure, to continue celebrating the small world Thoma had helped create for them. But the larger world outside was bound to see things differently. For most people in the world, including people in the rest of Germany, 'Dachau' already had a very different meaning. It had become a synonym for the ruthless reckoning with the socialists and communists that Hitler had promised. The Nazis themselves publicised Dachau in this light. But neither Nazis nor socialists had played any part in Thoma's world: how the one group of 'Schreier' dealt with the other a few kilometers outside the town, in a place the rest of the world called Dachau, was not something people who identified themselves with the 'real' Dachau could engage with. And they still can't.

When Thoma, in the last year of his life, was having difficulties with his 'quasi-autobiographical' novel *Kaspar Lorinser*, he wrote to a friend: "Der Lorinser . . . hatte einen großen, organischen Fehler. Man kann eine Selbstbiographie nicht 'erfinden'; das wird unwahr und gequält; man kann nur Selbsterlebtes geben, Selbstgedachtes, und ich sehe den Weg jetzt vor mir, da ich dies verstanden habe . . ." ⁷

In an important sense, though, everybody does 'invent' their own autobiography, shaping their past in ways they are prepared to live with. This is what Thoma has helped people in Dachau to do. *Their* history, the account of their lives that they affirm to themselves, to each other and to outsiders, often, it seems, bears more relation to what they recognize in Thoma's fiction than to what others recognize as historical reality. This reality was never clearly recognizable to the majority of Dachauers during the Third Reich; now it is standard practice to leave the Third Reich out of Dachau's history altogether, or to pass over it in a few words. The popular histories are those evoking Thoma's *Altbayern*, nostalgic and sentimental celebrations of the little universe of Dachau as it existed before the larger world crashed in on it.⁸

Only one memoir of life in Dachau has not been popular. Written as a novel, and pointedly subtitled 'Gesellschaftskritischer Roman aus dem zwanzigsten Jahrhundert', it records the observations of a girl growing up in Dachau during the years in which people could not be unaware of the concentration camp outside the town even if they were little affected by its existence. The book is disliked not because it is inaccurate or especially damning but because it insists on linking Dachau to a history people feel to have been inflicted on them: in the presence of the memorial and museum on the site of the camp it is still inflicted on them. They don't appreciate suggestions that they showed compassion for the prisoners only late in the war and it doesn't help to find Thoma quoted against them:

I schlaf jetzt und misch mi net ei'

Scho weil ma de Leut gar it kennt.⁹

In Thoma's plays it is always the simple *Bauer* who has a better grasp of both human values and historical realities than the academic lawyer, pretentious politician or careerist official. The way his plays and stories would later be used by politicians and officials as well as ordinary people to escape from historical realities could hardly have occurred to him.

Yet Thoma has probably not been misappropriated by Dachau. Himself a social conservative, he might not complain that he is now thoroughly integrated into the complex of social, cultural and political conservatism which has survived as the ruling ideology in Bavaria despite the disaster it produced in its radical Nazi distortion. Whether he would have become the reactionary influence Feuchtwanger bitinglly caricatured in *Erfolg* is impossible to guess; he died in 1921. Probably he would have withdrawn altogether from the post-war turmoil. A few months before his death he wrote to a friend that he was fed up with politics - 'die ganze Politisiererei' - and already in 1918 he had said, "Gehts Ihnen wie mir? Man verschließt sich mit seiner Liebe doch immer mehr ins liebe Altbayrische".¹⁰

What appealed to Thoma when he began writing was the universal quality of a small world, 'das kleine Leben' of a Dachau village.

Hier das sauber geweißte Schulhaus, drüben das stattliche Wirtsanwesen mit dem großen Hofe und dem lustig aufgeputzten Maibaum darin, weiter nach vorne auf einer Erhöhung die Kirche und der stille Friedhof. Das ist die Welt. Wünsche und Hoffnungen, Freud und Leid sind in den engen Raum gebannt. Da spielen sie als Kinder und wachsen heran, da kämpfen sie mit der Sorge und werden alt. Und wenn sie den Weg von der Schule zum Friedhof zurückgelegt haben, ist ihnen soviel geschehen wie denen, welche draußen in der Welt hassen und lieben.¹¹

In every actual small world, Thoma knew, there is a whole universe of symbols and meanings which helps people make sense of what happens in their lives. Symbolic universes, as they have been called, are social products, to be effective they must bear some relationship to actual conditions of life. 'Sheltering canopies' over both the institutional order and individual biography, they also provide the delimitation of social - and historical - reality. They set the limits of what is perceived as relevant.¹² For reasons of both psychological and social coherence, people will go to great lengths to keep their symbolic universe and their sense of historical reality consistent. Particularly in times of insecurity and dislocation, when the established order of things comes under threat, the manipulation of symbols to produce an illusion of consistency can smooth the most radical of upheavals.

This is something the Nazis, among others, very well understood. In dealing with the legacy of the Nazis, symbolized to the world in the very name of their town, the people in Dachau responsible for making Ludwig Thoma a

symbol have understood it too. But manipulating symbols of the past and coming to grips with it - *Bewältigung der Vergangenheit* - are very different things indeed.

Notes

- 1 Ludwig Thoma, *Gesammelte Werke*, Munich 1968, vol. 1, p. 155.
 - 2 Hans-Günter Richardi und Gerhard Winkler, *Ludwig Thoma und die Dachauer Lokalbahn. Geschichte und Jubiläum einer bayerischen Nebenstrecke*, Dachau 1974.
 - 3 On this see particularly James P. Sandrock, *Ludwig Thoma, Aspects of his Art*, (Göppinger Arbeiten zur Germanistik Nr. 83), Göppingen 1975.
 - 4 *Münchener Neueste Nachrichten*, 21 March 1933.
 - 5 *Dachauer Zeitung*, 14 March 1933. The list of office holders reads like a cast list of one of Thoma's plays: Apotheker Höfler, Regierungsrat Pfadtisch, Schulrat Dengler, Bürgermeister Seufert, Oberstleutnant Prühauser, Kunstmaler Kallert, Regierungsassessor Bauer, Grahammer, Inspektor Kohl, Redakteur Larcher.
 - 6 *Dachauer Zeitung*, 11 April 1934.
 - 7 Letter to Josef Hofmiller, 19 April 1921. *Ludwig Thoma, Ein Leben in Briefen*, ed. Anton Keller, Munich 1963, p. 452.
 - 8 One of the most recent publications is a collection of photographs 'aus vergangener Zeit'. Only six of the 160 pages are devoted to Thoma. It is interesting, though, that the last representation of Dachau 'wie es war' selected for inclusion is a publicity picture for the Ludwig Thoma Society's November 1932 production of Thoma's most popular play, *Erster Klasse*.
Klaus Kiermeier, *Wie's war im Dachauer Land*, Dachau 1979.
- The current wave of nostalgia is, of course, not unique to Dachau and there are elements of social history in it which might yet provoke a questioning of the sentimentalised past. Nor is Dachau the only place in which later generations have sentimentalised a writer who was a social critic. Thoma's exact contemporary Henry Lawson has suffered this fate in Australia, as has Dickens in England. And if Dunedin, safe from European vicissitudes on the far side of the world, had had a different history people might look differently at the statue of Robbie Burns presiding over the centre of the city, at Burns Hall, at the Robert Burns Hotel . . .
- 9 Rosel Kirchhoff, *Am Lagertor*, Munich 1972, p. 55. The quotation is from Thoma's *Heilige Nacht*.
 - 10 Letters to Maudi von Liebermann, 24 June 1921, and to Josef Hofmiller,

7 September 1918. Keller, op. cit., pp. 458, 340.

- 11 Quoted in Fritz Heinle, *Ludwig Thoma in Selbstzeugnissen und Bilddokumenten*, Hamburg 1963, pp. 53-54.
- 12 Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*, Harmondsworth 1971, esp. pp. 110-122.