

Sample translation
from *Hannah Arendt and Heinrich Blücher: Biography of a Couple* by Barbara von Bechtolsheim

CHAPTER 1

Prelude – “*Between two people, occasionally, oh-so rarely, a world comes into being.*”

“Dearest, I beg of you: Buy yourself the fur. Darling girl, I strongly urge you to buy this fur. Darling woman, buy a fur at once...” A few lines later, this advice to purchase a wintertime luxury item is given context: “One thing’s for sure: Once the weather turns cold, I can no longer permit you to travel, for it is a man’s right to warm himself against his wife—thus spoke, probably, Jehovah to Adam.”¹ It’s a shame that a quote like this was not published in their exchange of letters; too private, perhaps, or incommensurate with the intellectuality for which the couple is known. Their rousing correspondence is characterized by enthusiasm and sensuality—interwoven, always, with the intellectual threads it holds.

Here Heinrich Blücher gallantly courts the attractive, learned, and fascinating Hannah Arendt, and already recognizes in her the Grande Dame who not only likes to be heard, but also seen.

In the early days, he visits her in her cramped lodgings in Paris, the emigrant metropolis. Hannah Arendt has a special charisma: In photos from the early years, we see her elegantly-proportioned facial features, her black hair parted and tied back, a calm, concentrated, ever-pensive gaze. She makes a point of dressing in a ladylike way. As she has known since her youth, she looks Jewish, and this gives her a particular allure. She is never seen without her cigarette, which adds a touch of the bohemian to her academic solemnity. Ever since she was a young girl, she has gathered intellectuals around her and taken center stage in philosophical debates, and she makes full use of her feminine charms in order to capture particular conversation partners.

According to one anecdote, initially she also invites her Hebrew and Yiddish teacher Chanan Klenbort to dinner, so as not to be alone with “Monsieur.” But these precautionary measures are short-lived. Hannah and Heinrich find in one another an intellectual and sensual fascination that has been preserved for posterity in both their letters and her writing. Going by the name of Heinrich Larsen, his alias with the KPD, he strolls through the streets of Paris. He has no identification papers on him, and conceals his Communist past. He wears a suit and hat, carries a walking stick, smokes a pipe—and later cigars—and acts the dandy. He translates his real name into French: His postcards to Hannah display the sender as Henri Blucher. He lives up to his self-deprecatingly chosen job description of “puppet master.” The conspiracy and danger in his Communist activities appeal to him—and also give him a seductive quality. Hannah nicknames him “Monsieur.”

Paris in 1936 is exile and home for Jewish intellectuals following their escape from Germany, so long as they are tolerated there. They find lodgings in cheap hotels and stroll through the streets of the metropolis. As Hannah Arendt writes in her essay on Walter Benjamin², whom she calls Benji and with

whom she and Heinrich like to play chess, “Paris has, with unparalleled naturalness, offered itself to all homeless people as a second home ever since the middle of the last century. Neither the pronounced xenophobia of its inhabitants nor the sophisticated harassment by the local police has ever been able to change this.”³ The young lovers enjoy their new home, or rather, their way station, as “a generously built and planned open-air interior with the arch of the sky like a majestic ceiling above it.”⁴ Their living conditions are modest, impermanent, and so Paris has to offer a romantic space for strolling, philosophizing, and flirting. “In Paris the stranger feels at home since he can inhabit the city the way he lives in his own four walls. And just as one inhabits an apartment, and makes it comfortable, by living in it instead of just using it for sleeping, eating, and working, so one inhabits a city by strolling through it without aim or purpose, with one’s stay secured by the countless cafés which line the streets and past which the life of the city, the flow of pedestrians, moves along.”⁵ Looking back, she will compare the backdrop of their young relationship with their subsequent joint American exile: “The wasteland of an American suburb, or the residential districts of many towns, where all of street life takes place on the roadway and where one can walk on the sidewalks, by now reduced to footpaths, for miles on end without encountering another human being, is the very opposite of Paris.”⁶ This spring-like Paris is where they first meet, in a café on Rue Soufflot frequented by the philosopher Walter Benjamin. His apartment, at Rue Dombasle 10, Rive Gauche, not far from Hannah Arendt’s varying hotel rooms, becomes a gathering place for well-known emigrants, who establish an intellectual home here in their respective experiences of exile. Between the private and public spheres, a friendship circle forms, and the young couple are soon at its heart. Their discussion topics of choice are French politics, German philosophy, and literature. Hannah’s long-standing friend Hans Jonas, whom she met in 1924 during her student days in Marburg, will later pay tribute to her “genius for friendship” in his eulogy. These friends also include the aforementioned Chanan Klenbort; the psychoanalyst Fritz Fränkel, a fellow Berlin émigré whom we will encounter together with Heinrich; the lawyer Erich Cohn-Bendit, who has also emigrated to Paris to evade imprisonment; as well as, from Berlin’s Communist circles, the artist Carl Heidenreich, a friend of Heinrich’s, who was forced to flee on account of his art—now declared degenerate—and his Communist activities. In this space of encounter shaped by Judaism, Marxism, and philosophy, they practice the art of dialogue: that way of thinking which is so central and pioneering for Arendt and Blücher. Together, they strive to understand how it can be that all tradition seems to have come to an end.

For Hannah Arendt and Heinrich Blücher to so swiftly find common ground may be astonishing, because however much they agree on the need for intellectual debate and independence, their backgrounds are very different: the brilliant philosopher from a middle-class Jewish home, who has considerable life experience for her twenty-seven years and doesn’t like to see herself as a philosopher, and the thirty-four-year-old man of action, who wanted to become a German philosopher and is disillusioned by the missed opportunity for a revolution. But it is precisely here that the theorist and practitioner complement one another, in their desire to debate and actively participate in world events. Poetic thought unfolds within the dialogue that opens utterly new ground. They must have listened attentively to one another, just as they always responded to each other’s thoughts and reports in their letters. According to friends, they were able to find particular enjoyment in controversial discussions;

although they came from very different viewpoints, these verbal battles were probably part of their growing passion, and fueled it too.

Strolling through the streets of Paris, they are inspired by their endless conversations to create a productive intellectual workshop, in which a certain degree of everyday life establishes itself. There is also the happiness of ease, the consideration of their differing needs, time at the writing desk and time in the armchair. In the mornings, while Hannah indulges her customarily melancholic mood over copious quantities of coffee and a long, drawn-out breakfast before feeling ready to face the day, Heinrich occasionally tires of the somber atmosphere and returns to bed for a nap.

Hannah won't allow herself to be distracted from her political work and, shortly after they first meet, travels to the Jewish World Congress in Geneva in August 1936. Heinrich stays behind in rainy Paris and writes her yearning letters. We have her frequent trips to thank for the extensive correspondence in which their collaborative thinking blossoms. The letters from those early weeks also document their feelings toward one another. "Darling, I think I love you. In earnest. And I'm slowly, very slowly, recognizing that there shouldn't be any reasons against love. / If only I didn't have such damned good reasons..."⁷ she writes to him from Geneva, around two weeks into her stay. A few days later, she adds: "You knew in Paris already that I love you—just as I did. If I didn't say it, it was because I was afraid of the consequences. And today I can only say: Let's give it a try—for the sake of our love. Whether I can be, will be, your wife, I don't know. My doubts have not been swept away. Nor has the fact I am married..."⁸ Hannah is still married to her first husband, Günther Stern, though they have drifted apart, and he had emigrated to the USA in June 1936. For Hannah's trip to Geneva, Heinrich gave her a volume of Goethe poems, so they can both refer to the poet who understood matters of the heart. Clearly Heinrich had already noticed that Hannah, in her thinking and her decisions, likes to be led—astray, even—by literature. The style of their correspondence is spontaneous, witty, direct, and markedly oral, occasionally quoting Goethe or Herder, before returning to mutual friends and, of course, to contemporary events, the Jews, culture.

The following summer, too, Hannah spends in Switzerland; Heinrich, meanwhile, counts the days of her absence and continues to court her, until she notices that she misses his letters on days when none arrive. She finally assures Heinrich, who is impatiently awaiting her and her mail: "And then, when I met you, at long last I was no longer afraid—...it still seems incomprehensible to me that I should have been able to find both my 'great love' and a connection to my own self. And it is only the discovery of one that has also brought the other. But now I finally know what happiness truly is."⁹ Somehow, this reason-led woman doesn't yet seem to believe she can trust him. His answers are oftentimes eloquent epistles—occasionally composed in flawless French—in which he explores his political-philosophical thoughts, and his repeated claims that he cannot write are hard to comprehend. Above all, he woos her tenderly, erotically, playfully: "My wonderful, beautiful, darling Hannah, my joy, my pride, garden of all my desire,"¹⁰ he begins, assuring her of his love and longing, which, he says, have also allowed him to come into himself as an individual. Even the hard facts cannot diminish their mutual declarations of love. Hannah's divorce from Günther Stern is finalized on August 26th, 1937, while Heinrich is still tied down, theoretically at least, but he keeps his private matters in the dark. When she eventually finds out about the

two marriages he has concealed from her—his brief marriage to Lieselotte Ostwald and the pragmatic union with Latvian-born Natascha Jeffroykin, enabling her to obtain German citizenship—she keeps her composure and notes them calmly. That he comes from a proletarian background is only of interest to her because he sees himself as an ambitious humanities scholar in contrast to his upbringing. In a letter from Arendt to Karl Jaspers, she phrases it like this: “My husband is called Heinrich Blücher—a written description is impossible. He worked here during the war, partly for the army, partly for universities, and partly as a broadcaster, on account of his knowledge of military science. Once the war came to an end, he left these more-or-less official roles and now works in economic research for private companies. He comes from a Berlin working-class family, studied history there under Delbrück, then became editor of a news agency and engaged in various political activities.”¹¹ Here too, then, the emphasis on the working-class milieu, to which Blücher—and, mediated through him, Hannah too—feels an ideational belonging. He is not a Jewish intellectual, and this suits Hannah Arendt in that she has no desire whatsoever to be “respectable,” or to make a career of her convictions. The relationship between these two very different partners is shaped by precisely their independence from their social and ethnic backgrounds. This distancing from their origins and belonging to an intellectual milieu is a common denominator—even if the couple will later themselves sneer at the New York intellectuals.

Evidently, they also have downtime. In 1937, the young couple stay on the island of Porquerolles, off the French Riviera. Via postcard, she trustingly informs Walter Benjamin about the paradisiacal spot, where she and Heinrich are like Adam and Eve. Self-deprecatingly, and with an element of understatement, she invites her friend to visit them on the island, including a precise description of the journey. She still signs off as Hannah Stern, but sees herself and Heinrich as the quintessential lovers in the midst of romantic pleasures.¹² Years later, she really will plant a new tree of knowledge with Heinrich, but this is something she cannot yet foresee.

Both soon have to turn their attention to making a living, and they approach this imaginatively. Following her emigration, Hannah Arendt becomes a registered member of the World Zionist Organization, and gives public presentations in support of their aims. Even before they became a couple, Heinrich must have seen one of these presentations and been very impressed by her.

After boldly claiming to have office experience, Hannah procures financially lucrative work as a private secretary in the House of Rothschild. Baroness Germaine de Rothschild is one of the successful Jewish social climbers, a group Hannah Arendt finds particularly disagreeable, but as a study of a variant of Judaism, and not least as a way of earning money, she accepts the environment accompanying the role.

When she meets Heinrich, Hannah is General Secretary of the Parisian office of *Youth Aliyah*, a Jewish organization, founded in Berlin in 1933, which brings children from across Europe to safety in Palestine and prepares them for the immigration process. Previously, she had similarly lent her support to *Agriculture et Artisanat*, for young, future Palestine emigrants. For *Youth Aliyah*, in 1935, she accompanies a group of young people via Marseilles and from there by boat to Palestine. Her impressions from the kibbutzim she visits intensify her wariness of Zionism, and yet, in her three months there, she feels at home. Through her engagement with the two Jewish organizations, she obtains a work and residency permit in France. She is stripped of her German citizenship in 1937. Heinrich has no papers whatsoever,

and, as a stateless foreigner, earns some money illegally by giving lessons in history, philosophy, and art history. He also uses the time to familiarize himself with French history. Dr. Fränkel has a small task for him when one of his neurotic patients proves incurable through the traditional psychoanalytical approach. The woman is failing to respond to medication and hypnosis, and doesn't want to leave her bed. Heinrich has a spark of genius. He brings kerosine and a few cleaning cloths with him, sets them on fire, and the dart of flame drives her out of bed. Nowadays, a measure like this would perhaps be classified as Provocative Therapy. In any case, Heinrich has learned that simple things can bring about decisive change.

Paris, at this time, is not the most romantic of settings for a carefree love affair. There is high unemployment in the metropolis as a result of the world economic crisis, which in turn leads to intense xenophobia. In 1936, the Socialist Front Populaire comes to power, with Léon Blum as prime minister, the country's first Jewish premier. In 1942, as leader of the resistance, he is handed over to the German occupiers, survives internment in the Buchenwald concentration camp, and is re-elected as prime minister in 1946.

In France, as in Germany, extreme right-wing groups are gaining influence at an alarming rate; they will play a prominent role under the Vichy regime. Not even major international events can disguise this, like the Summer Games in the newly-built Olympic Stadium in Berlin's Westend, for example, staged for the glory of Hitler's regime. The outraged efforts of German-Jewish emigrants to prevent this display of power, most notably through protests in the German-language *Pariser Tageblatt*, are unsuccessful. Presumably, this is also a subject of debate in the Arendt-Blücher-Benjamin circle.

Meanwhile, preparations are in full swing for the Parisian World Expo, which opens in May 1937 and will go on to attract thirty-four million visitors. Hitler and Stalin use the event for propaganda purposes, with architect Albert Speer's German pavilion standing opposite the equally gigantic Soviet pavilion; two defiant constructions representing the power struggle between the ideologies. There is also a visible premonition of the catastrophe to come: With his iconic painting *Guernica*, Pablo Picasso appeals to the highest values of humanity and civilization. Walter Benjamin sees as early as 1936 that humanity's self-alienation has reached the point where it experiences its own destruction as aesthetic pleasure. "Fascism tends toward an aestheticization of politics. Communism responds by politicizing art."¹³ He points here to the parallels which Arendt and Blücher are beginning to address, and which will occupy them intensively in the years to come: The origins and elements of totalitarian regimes, as well as the structural comparability of international Fascism and the Communist International.

Heinrich endeavors, at the side of his intellectual girlfriend, to prioritize theoretical work over his political thirst for action, but always keeps the practice in his sights. His thoughts move from anti-Semitism to revolutionary Marxism, to the "Battle against Fascism and Imperialism across the world, alongside the workers, farmers, and suppressed peoples."¹⁴ Hannah reminds him it is all "somewhat more complicated"¹⁵—referring, here, to Judaism, but doubtlessly also to all the remarks in his letter. They are both now increasingly preoccupied by the question of what can be done in times of the total breakdown of traditional orders.

Amid this turmoil, Hannah Arendt returns to her “real best friend,” the Jewish Salonnière Rahel Varnhagen von Ense, about whom she has written a biography—albeit in an autobiographical style. She will later begin a chapter of *The Human Condition* with a quote from the Danish author Karen Blixen: “All sorrows can be borne if you put them into a story or tell a story about them.”¹⁶ The time has come to tell stories again, to make the sorrows tolerable, and so she turns her attention back to the life story of her predecessor Rahel. She composed eleven chapters before going into exile; Walter Benjamin reads the unfinished manuscript and urges Hannah to complete it. She finishes the text in the summer of 1938, now influenced by her own experience with the Zionist organization and escalating anti-Semitism—and, therefore, all the more attuned to the irony of the assimilation of the Jews and all the failed attempts to belong. As she notes in the foreword to the 1958 edition—now living in the USA, where she, similarly to Rahel, will let life rain on her, as Varnhagen phrases it in her diary¹⁷—her aim was to “retell Rahel’s life story as she herself would have told it.”¹⁸ This emphasizes how Arendt, in her writing and understanding, is always inspired by literature; that for her, literary work represents a form of thinking, and always will.

Hannah experiences more starkly than Rahel Varnhagen that society never recognizes assimilated Jews—quite the contrary, even in French exile. Hannah’s mother no longer feels safe in Germany after the Night of Broken Glass of November 9, 1938, so Hannah and Heinrich encourage her to come and live with them. Martha Beerwald studied in Paris as a young woman, speaks fluent French, and it could all be very simple, but the new domestic situation proves challenging. The young couple find an apartment on Rue de la Convention, also in the 15th arrondissement, so that there is room for “Mutt.” But Martha’s first impression of Heinrich is negative; she finds his manner uncouth and rebukes his laziness. He, in turn, shows little fondness for his future mother-in-law; finding her predominantly bourgeois and therefore uninteresting. The seeds for tensions and differences are sown.

Paris, in hindsight, is nothing more than a way station, and this becomes increasingly clear in the face of the looming world disaster. When Hannah Arendt and Heinrich Blücher meet in their first phase of exile, they have both turned their backs on their land of origin and stand stateless before an uncertain future. From then on, these two political beings become all the more determined, in dialogue with each other, to understand world events and act accordingly. The chapters that follow will show how they make use of the freedom to be free. How they, amidst this thrown-into-the-world-ness and all the uprootedness, nonetheless take clear standpoints in dialogue with and about the world—and make the private public. How do they, in their togetherness, master the different phases of their political, cultural, and emotional migration? How do they consistently achieve a connecting dialogue, despite distances and challenges, which also connects them to the world? And how can it be that we feel, see, and hear this togetherness even today in art and cultural discourse? First, let’s go back to the beginning.

References

¹ Heinrich Blücher to Hannah Arendt, Paris, November 24th, 1936, HA Papers. All quotations from the Hannah Arendt Papers are available on the Library of Congress website.

² Hannah Arendt edited the English translation of Walter Benjamin's *Illuminations* (1968) and wrote the introduction. In that same year, her essay "Walter Benjamin" appeared in English in the *New Yorker*, and the German-language version in *Merkur* magazine. The text was published in book form in 1971 in the volume *Walter Benjamin – Bertolt Brecht. Zwei Essays*, honoring the "unique friendship" between these two great minds. In 1989, the text was published in the German edition of Hannah Arendt's collection of essays *Men in Dark Times - Menschen in finsternen Zeiten*.

³ Hannah Arendt, "Walter Benjamin", in: *Men in Dark Times*, pp. 153-206, p. 174.

⁴ Ibid., p. 173.

⁵ Ibid., p. 174.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Hannah Arendt to Heinrich Blücher, Geneva, August 19th, 1936, AB-Letters, p. 47.

⁸ Hannah Arendt to Heinrich Blücher, Geneva, August 24th, 1936, AB-Letters, p. 59.

⁹ Hannah Arendt to Heinrich Blücher, Geneva, September 18th, 1937, AB-Letters, p. 83.

¹⁰ Heinrich Blücher to Hannah Arendt, Paris, September 19th, 1937, AB-Letters, p. 84.

¹¹ Hannah Arendt to Karl Jaspers, January 29th, 1946, Arendt-Jaspers Letters, p. 65.

¹² Hannah Arendt to Walter Benjamin, Île de Porquerolles, *Text+Kritik*, p. 58.

¹³ Walter Benjamin, *Ausgewählte Werke*, V. 2, p. 245.

¹⁴ Heinrich Blücher to Hannah Arendt, Paris, August 21st, 1936, AB-Letters, p. 54.

¹⁵ Hannah Arendt to Heinrich Blücher, Geneva, August 24th, 1936, AB-Letters, p. 58.

¹⁶ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 175.

¹⁷ Hannah Arendt, *Rahel*, journal note Rahel Varnhagen, March 11th, 1810, p. 281.

¹⁸ Hannah Arendt, *Rahel*, p.10.