CHAPTER IV

WATCH ON THE RHINE: THEME OF ETHICAL RESPONSIBILITY
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"There are plays that whatever their worth, come along at the right time," says Hellman about Watch on the Rhine. This instinct for timing as well as for drama has served her well in the plays. But none of her works was more timely than Watch on the Rhine. It opened on April 1, 1941. The war in Europe haunted the minds of the Americans. Not only Poland and Czekhoslovakia but Holland, Norway, Belgium, and most of France had fallen to Hitler. Britain was undergoing the worst bombing of the war. Although many critics felt that Watch on the Rhine was Hellman's best play, in her discussions of her work it is usually dismissed as the best anti-Nazi play of the war years.

In this play, American and European characters are thrown together in order to show something about their differing values and customs. The play contrasts two ways of life - "ours" with its unawakened innocence and Europe's with its tragic necessities. The contrast not only between Europeans and Americans but between two European-American marriages reminds one of Henry James. This resemblance is not a coincidence, although Hellman says that only diaries of the time "could convince (her) now that Watch on the Rhine came out of Henry James."
Watch on the Rhine is in a sense, Hellman's tribute to Julia, Hellman's girlhood friend killed by the Nazis, and also to the men "willing to die for what they believed in," whom she had seen in the Spanish Civil War. The First Act opens with the setting in a mansion in suburban Washington. One group of characters - a black Butler, French house-keeper, wealthy Dowager, Fanny Farrelly and her bachelor son, David - are anxiously awaiting the arrival of another group of characters.

Anise: (Looking at the watch) It's now twenty seven minutes before nine. It will be impossible to continue telling you the time every three minutes from now until Miss Sara arrives. I think you are having a nervous breakdown. Compose yourself.

Fanny: It's been twenty years. Any mother would be nervous. If your daughter were coming home and you had not seen her, and a husband, and grand children.

The wealthy dowager Fanny Farrelly is the widow of a liberal judge and diplomat to whose memory she constantly refers and whose portrait hangs on the living room wall throughout the play. Fanny has been an arbitrary dictator over her son David, and she would have been one over her daughter Sara, if Sara had not...
declared her independence twenty years before by marrying a German, Kurt Muller.

Kurt is an anti-fascist who fought in Spain as well as in Germany. He is not Jewish. He is modelled on Julia, as Hellman acknowledges in *Pentimento*. Katherine Lederer says of Kurt Muller in *Lillian Hellman* that "perhaps Kurt Muller seems the lone protagonist not only because Hellman wrote the role with passion and admiration, but because he acts with decision and courage and is Hellman's most eloquent spokesman for human rights and liberty." Kurt's family arrives hungry and ill-clothed at the Farrelly mansion. Kurt carries the marks of torture by the fascists - scars and broken hands. Kurt tells Fanny that he was "an anti-fascist, and that does not pay well" (654). Kurt explains to Fanny how he became an anti-fascist.

Kurt: ... on that day I saw twenty-seven men murdered in a Nazi street-fight. I say, I can not just stand by now and watch. My time has come to move. (looks down, smiles) I say with Luther "Here I stand I can do nothing else. God help me. Amen".

Sara: It doesn't pay well to fight for what you believe in. But I wanted it, the way Kurt wanted it (shrugs).
They don’t like us in Europe:
I guess they never did. So Kurt
brought us home. You’ve always
said you wanted us. If you don’t,
I will understand. (655)

Kurt has managed to bring his wife and children
to visit her mother and brother. But he himself is on
a mission - he is carrying $23,000 in cash, collected
from "the pennies of the poor who do not like fascism"(670).
He will soon have to leave his family in Washington and
take the money back to Europe where it is needed to free
other anti-Nazi prisoners.

Staying with the Farrellys when the Mullers
arrive are a different group and breed of Europeans,
Romanian Count Tech de Brancovis and his wife Marthe.
Tech is a Nazi sympathizer and gambler - a professional
Romanian aristocrat. Marthe has lived in Europe most
of her life and dislikes Nazis. The couple is visiting
Fanny because Marthe's mother and she were friends.
Even while Tech stays at Farrelly's house as guest, at
the time of Sara's and Kurt's arrival, he becomes
inquisitive about Kurt and wants to know more about him.
The marriage of Tech and Marthe has disintegrated. They
are in debt and are living on credit. What little money
they have is lost in Tech's gambling with his Nazi friends
at the German Embassy in Washington. Marthe falls in love with David Farrelly, Fanny's thirty-nine year old son. She tries to find a way of leaving her husband. Kurt knows Teck's identity and his past, and Teck is suspicious of Kurt. Teck's curiosity becomes more evident towards the end of the first act. When Teck has picked up the brief case of Kurt and is trying the lock, Marthe questions him:

Teck: Wondering why the luggage is unlocked, and a shabby brief case is so carefully locked.

Marthe: You're curious about Herr Muller.

Teck: Yes. And I do not know why. Some thing far away - I am curious about a daughter of the Farrellys who marries a German who has bullet scars on his face and broken bones in his hands. (657)

At the end of the first act, Marthe warns Teck against harming Kurt. She tells him she will leave him if he makes trouble. The Count discovers the money and figures out Kurt's identity. When the news breaks that three prominent anti-fascists have been caught, imprisoned and tortured by the Nazis, Teck discovers that they are close friends of Kurt and that he is a missing fourth on the Nazis list. Teck tries to blackmail
him by threatening to reveal his identity to the Germans.

Teck: (turns, crosses up to get newspaper from the Secretary) It is in the afternoon paper, Herr Muller ... the Zurich papers today reprinted a despatch from the Berliner Tageblatt - on the capture of Colonel Max Freidank. Freidank is said to be the Chief of the Anti-Nazi Underground Movement.

Sara: (Crying it out) Max -

Kurt: Be still, Sara.

Teck: They told me of it at the Embassy last night. They also told me that with him they had taken a man who called himself Ebber and a man who called himself Triste. They could not find a man called Gotter. I shall be a lonely man without Marthe. I am also very poor one. I should like to have ten thousand dollars before I go. (669)

The Count in Watch on the Rhine is an opportunist, thief, and petty power seeker. He would like to be a Hubbard but cannot be, partly because he lacks the brains and partly because he has the glimmerings of a conscience and the ability to recognise good when he
sees it and differentiate it from evil. Sophie in *The Autumn Garden* commits blackmail only to avoid being patronized. Unlike the Count and the Hubbards she is in no sense evil at all. Yet blackmail is apparently essential to *Watch on the Rhine*. It is true that the Count might have been a real Nazi who planned to report to the embassy simply out of a sense of duty, without attempting blackmail, but Kurt had a much less ostensible choice.

At the end of the second act, Teck asks Marthe to leave with him. But she refuses, saying,

Marthe: You won't believe it, because you can't believe anything that hasn't got tricks to it, but David hasn't much to do with this. I told you I would leave some day, and I remember where I said it - and why I said it. (667)

Kurt tells Fanny and David that Teck has discovered the $23,000 he is carrying, "gathered from the pennies of the poor who do not like Facism" (670). When Fanny asks whether it was not careless of him to leave twenty three thousand dollars lying around to be seen, Kurt answers,

No, it was not careless of me. It is in a locked briefcase. I have thus carried
money for many years. There seemed no safer place than Sara's home. It was careless of you to have in your house a man who opens baggage and blackmails.(670)

David and Fanny take the first step towards joining Kurt's side when they offer to pay Teck themselves. But they still don't understand completely. David tells Kurt he will be safe and asks him whether his passport is alright. When Kurt says it is not quite so, Fanny asks why it is not so. Kurt says,

Because people like me are not given visas with such case. And I was in a hurry to bring my wife and my children to safety. Madame Fanny, you must come to understand it is no longer the world you once knew. (671)

Still failing to understand, David tells Kurt, "It doesn't matter. You're a political refugee. We don't... turn back people like you" (671). Sara says, "you don't understand David" (671), and explains that Kurt has to go back to Germany.

In Act III Teck reads from a German embassy list of wanted men a description of Kurt's underground activities. When Fanny says she is sickened by Teck, Kurt makes a key speech:
Kurt: Fanny and David are Americans and they do not understand our world— as yet. (Turns to David and Fanny) All Fascists are not of one mind one... There are those who give the orders, those who carry out the orders, those who watch the orders being carried out. Then there are those who are half in, half hoping to come in... (675)

When Fanny and David leave the room to get the money, Teck says,

The New World has left the room... we are Europeans, born to trouble and understanding it... They are young. The world has gone well for most of them. For us—we are, like peasants watching the big frost. Work, trouble, ruin—But no need to call curses at the frost. There it is, it will be again, always—for us. (677)

When Fanny leaves the room to get the money, Kurt attacks Teck and knocks him unconscious. With gun in hand, Kurt carries Teck out to the garden, where he shoots him. After Kurt kills Teck, he says,

I have a great hate for the violent: They are the sick of the world. May be I am sick now, too. (680)

Sara knows what is happening and knows that it is inevitable. She calls the airline and reserves a seat
for Kurt under another name on the next plane to Texas where he will cross over to Mexico and then to Europe. When Kurt returns from the garden, they explain to Fanny and David, who come to understand that Kurt has done what he had to do. The killing of Teck was an act of war.

A gentleman, a man of peace driven to murder to protect the cause he is fighting for, he says to his children as he prepares to leave them, in a touching farewell scene,

The world is out of shape, we said, when there are hungry men. And until it gets in shape, men will always steal and lie and - (a little more slowly) kill. But for whatever reason it is done, and who ever does it - you understand me - it is all bad. I want you to remember that. Whoever does it, it is bad. (681)

Fanny and David make their decision when Kurt tells them they can either phone the police or wait for two days to give him a head start, making themselves, in effect, accessories to murder. Fanny, agreeing to help him, makes another key speech. A critic once complained that we know what Hellman is against, but we don't know what she is for. Fanny tells us:
I was thinking about Joshua. I was thinking that a few months before he died, we were sitting out there, (she points to the terrace), "Fanny," he said, "the Renaissance American is dying." I said, "what do you mean?"

Although I knew what he meant, I always knew. " Renaissance man," he said, "is a man who wants to know. He wants to know how fast a bird can fly, how thick is the crust of the earth, what made Iage evil, how to plow a field. He knows there is no dignity to a mountain, if there is no dignity to man, you can't put that in man, but when it's there, put your trust in him?" (680)

Fanny and David give Kurt their support. The children and Sara will stay with them there, with little hope that Kurt will ever return. Kurt leaves and Sara goes upstairs to comfort the children. At the end of the play, Fanny tells David, "we are shaken out of the Megnolias Oh?" (682)

David asks her if she understands that they are going to be in for trouble. Fanny replies in a line reminscent of The Little Foxes but spoken to a much different purpose:
I understand it very well, we will manage. I am not put together with flour paste. And neither are you - I am happy to learn. (682)

Hellman said in *Pentimento* that this was her purpose - "to write a play about nice, liberal Americans whose lives would be shaken up by Europeans, by a world the new Fascists had won because the old values had long been dead." 8

In the play, Fanny and David see those old values of culture, honour, and dignity in Kurt. The title of the play, coming from a German patriotic song, is ironic. As in *The Little Foxes*, in this play also Hellman employs "boomerang irony." This is seen in Teck's threat of blackmail, which causes his death. The parallelism to Horace's death in *The Little Foxes* is evident. Again Hellman employs dramatic irony in letting the audience know Teck's plans, Kurt's work as a member of the resistance movement and Fanny's misgivings about David and Marthe. Before the climax, as Act II opens, as a background to Teck's probing questions, we hear the piano played by a man with hands broken by the Nazis. These qualities apart, one of the salient features of *Watch on the Rhine* is its character development. Fanny might be an autocrat at the breakfast table. But she is a generous, loving and old fashioned
liberal. Though naive, David rises to the moral occasion and is led to asserting himself because of his love for Marthe.

The play *Watch on the Rhine* concerns itself with the theme of ethical responsibility, the theme touched upon in *The Searching Wind* as well. When viewed as a melodrama or solely as the story of Kurt Muller, the play may be dated. But the play is more in the nature of a character drama like *The Autumn Garden*. Apart from this validity as character drama, *Watch on the Rhine* has a topical relevance as one of the best anti-Nazi plays. Brooks Atkinson makes a relevant observation about the play:

Since Miss Hellman has communicated her thoughts dramatically in terms of articulate human beings, *Watch on the Rhine* ought to be full of meaning a quarter of a century from now when people are beginning to wonder that life was like in America when the Nazi evil began to creep across the sea.¹⁰

Successful in its reconstruction of the anti-fascist atmosphere and also as a play which projects a theme that the world we inhabit is constituted by the sum of our personal acts, *Watch on the Rhine* has a strong contemporary appeal. In terms of its contemporary
appeal. *The Searching Wind* also ranks high. But it is a play relying to a large extent on the sparkle of its dialogue. *Watch on the Rhine* is more appealing than *The Searching Wind* in terms of its characterization, plot construction and other aspects of dramaturgical production as also in entwinning the personal and world situations.

*Watch on the Rhine* won the New York Drama Critics Circle award for 1941 in spite of several major playwrights of the day having their war dramas running concurrently in the theater at that time: Maxwell Anderson's *Key Largo*, Robert Sherwood's *There Shall Be No Night*, Ernest Hemingway's *Fifth Column* and Elmer Rice's *Flight to the West* were prominent in the theatre, at the time *Watch on the Rhine*, was staged. Sherwood's play was the most often cited in theatrical circles, but it is a play which depended somewhat heavily on sermonizing. As Wolcott Gibbs pointed out, Hellman's play demands greater attention because it deals with the fundamental issue of America of that period with "dignity, insight, and sound theatrical intelligence."11

That is the reason why Hellman's observation that these plays come along at the right time and that the right time is the essence of the theatre is very pertinent.
REFERENCES:


