

**Writing to Stephan Lackner on 4 June 1939, Walter Benjamin expresses his thoughts  
on the situation in exile and on the suicides of Jews in Vienna<sup>1</sup>**

Letter from Walter Benjamin,<sup>2</sup> Paris, to Stephan Lackner,<sup>3</sup> dated 4 June 1939

Dear Mr Morgenroth,

By now you will have gained a first impression of the city, if not the continent. I would be much obliged to hear news of what you have seen here and there. Or would such a wish be difficult for you to fulfil? Has the bustle of the American pace of life already swept you away? Even if this be the case, I cannot imagine you hurtling around for long without meeting mutual friends. That ought to inspire you to send me a line or two.

Have you run into Gumpert<sup>4</sup> yet? I assume so. Wiesengrund?<sup>5</sup> Have you come across my friend Wissing in Boston? And have you, after the Russian pact<sup>6</sup> (which the coming days will bring us), planned a date for your return journey yet? The risk of war could be considered less with this pact in place.

As for me, there is little news to report; even less so of an optimistic nature. Horkheimer's<sup>7</sup> last letter to me began with the words: 'Even without having heard from you since the arrival of your last letter, I can imagine that you are understandably worried about the future.' This sentence, as you see, hints at the darkest prospects. By the way, the letter provides me with no substantial news at all.

1 Max Beckmann Archiv, FMBA VI 6, published in Stephan Lackner, *Selbstbildnis mit Feder: Ein Tage- und Lesebuch. Erinnerungen* (Berlin: Limes, 1988), pp. 135–136. This document has been translated from German.

2 Walter Benjamin (1892–1940), philosopher; emigrated to Paris, 1933; worked for the exiled Institute of Social Research in Frankfurt; imprisoned for three months in the autumn of 1939; took his own life after a failed attempt to flee to Spain via France (Marseilles); author of works including *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1968 [French edn, 1936]).

3 Stephan Lackner, born Ernst Morgenroth (1910–2000), philosopher and writer; emigrated to France, 1933; had his citizenship revoked by the German Reich, 1939; emigrated to the USA; worked as a journalist for *Das Neue Tage-Buch*, *Pariser Tageszeitung*, *National Zeitung* (Basel), *Aufbau*, and *Argentinisches Tageblatt*.

4 Martin Gumpert (1897–1955), physician and writer; from 1927 physician in Berlin and active in healthcare reform; barred from his occupation, 1933; emigrated to the USA, 1936; from 1952 head of the Geriatric Clinic at the Jewish Memorial Hospital in New York.

5 Theodor Ludwig Wiesengrund Adorno (1903–1969), philosopher and sociologist; until 1933 tutor in Frankfurt am Main; emigrated to Britain in 1934 and to the USA in 1938; returned to the Federal Republic of Germany in 1949; director of the Institute of Social Research, 1958; author of works including *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1972 [German edn, 1947], with Max Horkheimer).

6 In the summer of 1939, representatives of Britain, France, and the Soviet Union held negotiations on a mutual assistance pact. However, the German–Soviet Nonaggression Pact was signed instead on 23 August 1939, dividing up the spheres of interest in East-Central Europe.

7 Max Horkheimer (1895–1973), philosopher and psychologist; co-founder and from 1931 director of the Institute of Social Research; emigrated in 1933 to Switzerland and in 1934 to the USA, where he re-established the institute; returned to the Federal Republic of Germany, 1949; rector of the University of Frankfurt, 1951–1953.

I wrote to your father in the same batch of mail.<sup>8</sup> I think it would be appropriate for him to initiate the meeting with Horkheimer, if this has not already occurred. If I were him, I would do a figurative *acte de présence*.<sup>9</sup> Nothing would be more disastrous for me right now than to impress *in absentia*.

I sent your father a little French manuscript along with the outline of a chapter about Baudelaire.<sup>10</sup> I actually wanted to make another attempt [at writing] in French, with subject matter that I grasp fundamentally. If the result does not appear too discouraging, it would indicate that the reserves of material and ideas when writing in a foreign language must be substantial enough to compensate for [one's facility in] the language learned from childhood.

The next issue of *Maß und Wert*<sup>11</sup> contains an essay on Brechtian dramaturgy which I wrote not so long ago. Incidentally, Baudelaire is completely occupying my mind. The *flâneur* chapter has been completely revamped. I think you will find it interesting.

Josef Roth died a few days ago.<sup>12</sup> I do not know whether his chosen death – intentional alcohol poisoning – is less terrible than the one Toller chose.<sup>13</sup> Incidentally, nobody here knows anything about the circumstances surrounding Toller's suicide. Are they known over there?

There is a story from Vienna that would have found its true chronicler in Karl Kraus:<sup>14</sup> the gas has been cut off in Jewish households over there, at least for the time being. It was getting too expensive for the gas company to supply the Jewish customers. They were using too much. And since they were using it to commit suicide, the gas bill often remained unpaid afterwards. –

I have read a lot of Joubert in recent weeks. He is the last of the great French moralists; he lived during the era of Chateaubriand. I have found in him not only one of the great masters of style, but one of the greatest theorists of written expression.

What are you up to? Are you busy with the novel? Art dealing? Probably both and much more besides. Have you had a look at the market for Klee?<sup>15</sup>

8 Sigmund Morgenroth (d. 1963), retailer; initially lived in Franconia; in around 1910 established a telephone company in Paris; factory owner in Berlin, 1914; manager of a watch factory in Bad Homburg, 1919; emigrated to France in 1933 and to the USA in 1939.

9 French in the original: put in an appearance, show one's face.

10 Probably the 'Notes sur les Tableaux parisiens de Baudelaire', in Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 2: *Aufsätze, Essays, Vorträge 1892–1940*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schwepenhäuser (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1991), pp. 740–748.

11 Bimonthly magazine edited by Thomas Mann and Konrad Falke; it appeared from Sept. 1937 until Oct. 1940.

12 Joseph Roth (1894–1939), writer; journalist, 1919–1920; Paris correspondent of the *Frankfurter Zeitung* from 1925; emigrated to Paris, 1933; author of works including *Radetzky March* (1933 [German edn, 1932]).

13 Ernst Toller (1893–1939), lawyer and dramatist; leading member of the socialist Bavarian Council Republic in Munich, 1918–1919; imprisoned, 1919–1924; denaturalized in 1933 and emigrated to Switzerland, then to Britain in 1934 and later to the USA; hanged himself on 22 May 1939 in a New York hotel.

14 Karl Kraus (1874–1936), publicist and writer; founder, author, and co-editor of *Die Fackel*, 1899, and editor of the journal from 1911; author of works including *The Last Days of Mankind* (1974 [German edn, 1918–1919]).

15 Paul Klee (1879–1940), painter; from 1920 at the Bauhaus, Weimar (later in Dessau); co-founder of the artists' group Die Blaue Vier, 1934; emigrated to Switzerland, 1933.

If you could possibly send me a little aid by 15 July, that would be most helpful. I wanted to add: and very friendly of you. But you could interpret that as meaning that such support would benefit a friendship. This is not supposed to be the case. (I do not wish to and I cannot approach your father, as I already told you, for as long as he is attending to.)

Erika has not been in touch.

I wish you a wonderful, bright summer.

*Bien à vous*,<sup>16</sup>

4 June 1939

Paris XV

10 rue Dombasle

Yours,

Walter Benjamin

PS I really enjoyed the poem 'Der preußische Friedrich', which I have just come across.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>16</sup> French in the original: yours truly.

<sup>17</sup> Stephan Lackner's poem 'Der preußische Friedrich' ('The Prussian Friedrich') appeared in the magazine *Das Neue Tage-Buch*, ed. Leopold Schwarzschild, vol. 7, no. 18, 29 April 1939, reprint 1976, p. 431.