

Frido Mann
The White House of Exile (Das Weiße Haus des Exils)
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A political place of exile—then and now: the “Thomas Mann House” in Pacific Palisades

In 1942 Thomas Mann moved into his new house in Pacific Palisades. It was a refuge for the writer, a gathering place for émigrés and a place of safety for his grandson. Frido Mann returned to retrace his memories in March 2018, shortly before the house was to be opened by the German Government as center for transatlantic dialogue. Frido Mann remembers the political commitment of the man in exile and he saw himself confronted with the question of what influence open dialogue can produce today – in Trump’s America. His essay presents a radical case for responsibility and communication in an age of global crisis.

Frido Mann, born in Monterey, California in 1940. Studied music, Catholic theology, and psychology. He subsequently spent many years working as a clinical psychologist in Münster, Leipzig, and Prague. Today he lives in Munich as a writer. Recent publications include *An die Musik: Ein autobiographischer Essay* (Ode to Music: An autobiographical essay) and together with Christine Mann *Es werde Licht: Die Einheit von Geist und Materie in der Quantenphysik* (Let There Be Light: The unity of spirit and matter in quantum physics).

Translated by Bradley Schmidt

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Preface

This book is a personal journey through the different eras of this house of cultural and political importance on the American West coast, built by Thomas Mann in exile during the war for himself and his family. He lived there for ten years, the location of his literary production and his passionate political engagement. The house, which was subsequently in private hands for several decades, was purchased by the German government in the summer of 2016 and, as the Thomas Mann House, rededicated as a center for transatlantic dialog and cultural exchange. “In the spirit of Thomas Mann,” that systematic exchange is to take place between Fellows in Residence from Germany of professions of all kinds and their American colleagues, as well as institutions. The program, initiated by the German government and driven by Frank-Walter Steinmeier, then minister for foreign affairs and now president of Germany, is understood as a model of international understanding in our time of global crisis, and for good interpersonal cooperation in the service of protecting an open spirit regarding the future of our democratic social order.

In many respects, the tense, dangerous, often divided situation in which we find ourselves globally today is reminiscent of the historical period in Europe one and a half millennia ago.

With the end of the Roman Empire and therefore the end of Antiquity imminent, a great migration began. Between the fourth and sixth centuries, Huns, Vandals, Franks, Goths, and Lombards were all searching for a new home and a share of Roman prosperity in the Roman provinces from Britain to North Africa. They overran huge areas from all directions, at times simultaneously, with raids, pillaging, and murder. They left behind everywhere not only death and destruction, they also caused a dramatic reduction of economic prosperity and the cultural and educational levels in the areas they ravaged.

The written witnesses of antique culture as well the humanist spirit anchored within it would largely have been lost if not for a series of newly-established monasteries founded by the Catholic Church. These monasteries traced their heritage to the early ascetic hermits and the Desert Fathers in Egypt and Syria, who fled from persecution, gradually forming communities of priests and Christian women, forming the first fraternities in Egypt and the Middle East. This was soon followed by the foundation of the first monasteries near Poitiers and Tours in what is now France, urban monasteries in Rome (Basilians), and the establishment of the first

large monastic order the Benedictines in the sixth century by Benedict of Nursia, with its mother abbey in Monte Cassino. With their charitable and medicinal work, their penances, and their intense cultivation of culture in keeping with monastic spirituality, these houses acted like blessed oases in the desert of material and intellectual destruction left by the various groups of immigrants. . In keeping with the words that were later summarized in the Rule of Saint Benedict: *Ora et labora et lege* (“pray and work and read”), these monasteries were the most important locations of education for several centuries. Libraries were established. Copyists produced copies of valuable documents and books, and exchanged them with other monasteries. Most Roman literature would have been lost without the meticulous work of the monks and nuns. Monastic schools produced works of art, book illuminations, objects worked from gold and precious stones. Agriculture expanded greatly, and new forms of farming emerged. Their own monastic medicine with select spices and medicinal herbs received a significance similar to the care bestowed upon human salvation.

It was these monasteries, primarily in what is now Italy and France, which saved Western culture from oblivion during the great migration, and therefore paved the way for a new European order.

And now?

Small, limited migrations have occurred repeatedly since the sixth century. However, it appears to me that the new migration of peoples that has been in the offing since the end of the Second World War, and currently steadily escalating, is numerically most similar to that at the end of Antiquity. Today, thousands of refugees from war zones outside of Europe arrive daily, primarily in southern European ports via the Mediterranean. There they wait in miserable camps for their distribution to other European states. Aside from a minority of covert terrorists and criminals, these people seeking shelter are in no way comparable to the Huns, barbarians, and Vandals at the end of Antiquity. But their traditions and their differing understandings of religion, law, and society are once again changing the face of Europe in the long term. The prosperity of the industrial countries as a result of enormous societal, political, and industrial development over many decades led to an almost explosive migration movement. In return, this modern migration of peoples changes the self-awareness and understanding of the people in the host countries and of course the immigrants themselves.

In the Western world, even before the beginning of the great migration and refugee movements, in the 20th century the temptations of continuously faster and seemingly unlimitedly developing advanced technology and material culture led to a position of hubris

and extravagance, opportunism and egotism. The peoples of the industrialized nations are not exposed only to general emotional uncertainty and disorientation, and an ongoing erosion of their traditional western Christian value system. Concurrently, the threshold of inhibition to the exercising of violence, and to armed conflict in foreign lands, is sinking. The unscrupulous treatment of our natural environment and our planet's increasingly scarce resources intensifies in a frightening way.

In light of the global spread of hate and discrimination through political extremism, of murderous and culture-destroying terror, of war, corporate crime and social inequality, we—Christians, Jews and Muslims, believers and unbelievers together—are standing on the edge of the abyss. In the absence of a generally accepted system of values for human coexistence and world peace, the global collapse of a social order worth living in seems to approach ever closer. Here saving impulses can neither be expected from the monotheistic religions frozen in their dogmatism nor in the Far East's spiritual communities, detached from the world, which would be somehow comparable with the effect of the early Christian monasteries.

Fortunately, today there are plenty of non-religious organizations and groups that attempt to counteract the calamitous developments on our globe with measures supporting peace and the environment, and that appeal to many people to assume ethical and political responsibility, occasionally with remarkable success. They greatly contribute to a growing awareness of the importance of this responsibility.

In the area of culture and the arts, it is impossible to mention the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra too often. It was founded in 1999 in Weimar by the Argentine-Israeli director and pianist Daniel Barenboim together with Edward Said, the American literary scholar who was born in Palestine and who died in 2003, and was made up of young musicians, half of whom were from Israel and half from Arab countries. The goal of this collaborative orchestra is the promotion of a sustainable, interpersonal understanding between the cultures and countries – with deep religious and political divisions – from which the two groups of musicians hail.

In the area of science, CERN, established in 1954 and now comprising 20 member states and 3,000 employees, can be highlighted as a prospective example of international scale. CERN (*Conseil Européen pour la Recherche Nucléaire*) is headquartered in Meyrin near Geneva and is the world's largest research center for particle physics. In addition to the research of fundamental physics, the institution pursues the establishment of the overarching societal and also essentially political goal of an intense and constructive collaboration between engaged and competent scientists from as many nations and diverse cultures as possible. The intention

is to dismantle any prejudices and resentments in the hope that those employees from all over the world can best use their opportunities for constructive scientific and political influence in their home countries.

Following the areas of art and science, religion should be offered as an additional example. While the established churches are characterized by ossification and impoverishment, an increasingly large scene of dialog-centered, pluralistic spirituality is developing. All across the world, centers are being founded in which first and foremost Christian and Buddhist oriented people come together for meditation and contemplation.

The spirituality practised in these communities produces a dialog and interfaith-based empathy, also comprising a socio-political dimension, in which people attempt to implement these experiences in a humanistic and political consciousness.

It is in this context of the promotion of empathy and in cross-border understanding that I see the commitment of the German government when they acquired my family's historically significant house in Pacific Palisades in California in 2016, in order to transform it into a place of transatlantic meeting of minds and interdisciplinary dialogue.

The project's main purpose is to defend the basic values of a free and democratic society against nationalist and fundamentalist movements across the world and in so doing, contribute to the maintenance of peace. My family emigrated to the US in 1938 and from 1942 on this house was the center of their passionate struggle against German fascism in a country then largely characterized by liberal tolerance. It was here that Thomas Mann composed his numerous radio addresses for America and to German, from here that he started his annual lecture tours across the US, sometimes lasting months, and here is where his great later works were created, influenced by his American exile. He constantly evoked his vision of a supranationally connected world without divisive borders and continents. Very soon after the war, however, when a nothing less than paranoid fear of communists became rampant in America, due to the advance of communism in Eastern Europe and shortly afterwards in China, aimed especially at intellectuals, artists, and scientists, an increasingly difficult and burdensome period started for my family. Thomas Mann and particularly his eldest daughter Erika came into the sights of a hysterical witch hunt for communists that continued to expand menacingly, led by the infamous Republican Senator Joseph McCarthy and the House Un-American Activities Committee. In an anti-democratic climate of denunciation and spying,

these attacks increasingly escalated into the infringement of constitutional rights, summons, interrogation, and detention of supposed communists. Thomas and Erika Mann were put under intensifying pressure and my family's position became increasingly unbearable; in the early 1950s they saw no other way out than to leave their newly settled exile home and return to Europe. Despite Thomas Mann's express wish for a return to "the old soil," the resettlement in Switzerland that could no longer be delayed became, according to his desperate diary entries of the time, a sort of second exile.

Now, nearly seventy years later, and in an age that is hardly less dangerous than back then, the German government has rededicated this former "White House of Exile" as a transatlantic center for encounter. Here an interdisciplinary exchange led by experts will aim to counteract the conflict-laden polarization between Europe and the US, renewing and strengthening the foundations of democracy. This house's residency program is also to set a particular counterpoint to the highly problematic current administration and the presidential leadership in the US. This leadership represents a reflection of the country and its difficult, decades-long development, and shows the critical state in which it finds itself in political as well as intellectual-cultural regards. In turn, this demands an exceptional willingness for discussion and communicative competence from all counterparts. Moreover, this problem would be by no means eliminated, even after a hopefully soon, urgently needed replacement of personal in this administration. For it was precisely the contemporary American people that elected a clown as president—the degree of manipulation we can only guess today—whose dangerous contempt for decorum, honesty, culture, and human rights is without comparison in American history. In this situation, it is certainly not easy to accomplish the expectations placed on the interdisciplinary and international center for encounter created German government. In addition, the stipulated transatlantic dialogue, which takes place under the omen of an open society, today also stands for symbolic and prototypical call for transcontinental dialogues that goes far beyond that. These dialogues should serve as a global peacekeeper and advancement of a collective awareness of responsibility towards our unsound, continuously more heavily populated and exploited planet.

Even our bastion in "Europe," blossoming and stronger economically than it has been for quite some time, is threatened to be infiltrated washed over by poisonous antidemocratic trends from all directions, partly from inside. All of us must summon our remaining reserves of power, derived from our specific cultural tradition, to persist against these trends.