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**ERNST WIECHERT**

**62 letters to Gerhard Kamin**

**Introduction**

In *Das einfache Leben* Ernst Wiechert, the German novelist and hero of the resistance movement, remarks through his protagonist that "no one had the right to know what he or his house looked like simply because he wrote books."<sup>1</sup> Wiechert was understandably reluctant to make new acquaintances when he wrote these lines; he had just been released from a concentration camp. Nevertheless, as his voluminous autobiographical writings attest, Wiechert at other times was not unconcerned about the image his wide circle of readers formed of him. The wealth of critical writing about him — over 250 monographs, dissertations, and articles at last count — has largely come to terms with his books. With four exceptions,<sup>2</sup> the impression we have of Wiechert the man is drawn from his own writings about himself.

These reminiscences were, for the most part, put to paper late in life, sometimes twenty years or more after the described events. As a result, tempestuous happenings of earlier years tend to be viewed in the transfigured light of old age. His letters to Kamin, on the other hand, are a clear and direct index to thoughts and events that span a period of over twenty years. Regrettably, they are the only letters, barring one, to find their way, thus far, into print.<sup>3</sup>

1. IV, p. 672, in the ten-volume "Sämtliche Werke" (Munich: Kurt Desch Verlag, 1957). *Das einfache Leben* has been translated into English ("The Simple Life", trans. by Marie Heynemann, London: P. Nevill, 1954) as have all of Wiechert's novels, with the exception of *Jeromin-Kinder II*.
2. These are: Seidlin, Oskar, "Begegnung mit E. W.," *The German Quarterly*, XIX, no. 4 (1946), pp. 270-73; Kamin, Gerhard, "E. W. — Der Weg des Menschen und Dichters," pp. 6-42 in "E. W. — Der Mensch und sein Werk" (Munich: Verlag Kurt Desch, 1951); AM, Herbert, "Ein Sommertag auf Hof Gagert" (pp. 177-83) and Roeders, Otto (pp. 271-77), also in "E. W. — Der Mensch und sein Werk".
3. In my article, "E. W.'s Inward Emigration" (*The German Quarterly*, January, 1965), a letter culled from the files of the Berlin Document Center of the U.S. Foreign Office is reproduced. In it, among other things, E. W. rejects an invitation to address the Hitlerjugend in 1934. In this article, a longish letter from a ranking official in the German Propaganda Ministry to the German Secretary of State, dated 1940, is also reprinted. This letter sums up the official attitude toward Wiechert and the measures taken against him.

Mr. Gerhard Kamin, the addressee of the following sixty-two letters, was a student of Ernst Wiechert's in Königsberg during the late twenties and a firm friend until Wiechert's death in 1950. At present, Mr. Kamin is a master in the Voss Gymnasium in Eutin and an author in his own right. His books include a study of J. H. Voss and a collection of finely chiselled novellas.

Approximately twenty letters from Wiechert to Kamin were unfortunately lost during the evacuation of East Prussia in 1945. All that Kamin still possesses are printed here — although some of the early ones are little more than thank-you notes or Christmas greetings — because, in a sense, they do form a unified entity. For this entity, Mr. Kamin has suggested the title "*Briefe an einen Werdenden*", letters to a man who is becoming more mature.

Much of this correspondence will be of use to Wiechert scholars because it is replete with comments about his own writings and he often mentions which books he was reading while writing a particular work. An allusion is also made to his Traum-buch, a manuscript which has as yet not found its way into print. This book of dreams, put to paper in 1942, was given by Ernst Wiechert, along with the major part of his literary remains, to Swiss friends who will, I hope, publish it at an opportune time.

Letters No. 32 and No. 33 make reference to the Totenwolf and Wiechert's rejection of this early work. Number 45 mentions the fact that the collection of African fairy tales by the ethnologist Leo Frobenius was a major stimulus for Wiechert's two volumes of Mdrchen, and No. 50 and No. 52 state that the "Werwolf-Gefechte," attacks by Nazi partisans after Germany's military collapse alluded to in *Missa sine nomine*, Wiechert's last novel, were based on personal experiences. Threats upon his life in late 1945 and 1946 were one major reason for his decision to move to Switzerland.

In the letters Wiechert also elaborates on his life during the Nazi years, although there is, understandably, no direct reference to his imprisonment in Buchenwald until quite late in his correspondence. Letters to Kamin, fighting on the Eastern Front and later with the German occupation army in

France, were clearly censored, just as were any books that Wiechert submitted for publication in Germany.

Nevertheless, a clear picture of Wiechert's life at "Hof Gagert", his villa near Wolfratshausen, does emerge. References to his working habits and his circle of close friends (the pianist Wilhelm Kempff and the artists Kathe Kollwitz and Leo von König) are interspersed with touching entries about his love of flowers and his shortage of paper during the last stages of the war. His pretty bell-inscriptions, written for the church in Degerndorf, are printed after letter 58.

The postwar correspondence illuminates Wiechert's decision in 1946 to leave Germany for good. His trip to the United States and the reasons for it are mentioned in No. 60, written a year before his death: "ich tue es nicht meinetwegen," wrote the former inmate of Buchenwald, "sondern Deutschlands wegen ... ich gehe ungern hinaus aus meiner Stille, und nur, weil ich es für meine Pflicht halte."<sup>4</sup>

It is hoped that more of Ernst Wiechert's correspondence will be collected and printed, perhaps as another supplementary volume to his *Sämtliche Werke*. If this attempt is not made soon, much of value will assuredly be lost, when the generation that knew him has passed on.

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4. "I am doing it for Germany, not for myself .... I am giving up my quiet life [in Stäfa, Switzerland] only because I consider it my duty to do so." In this regard, the reader might consult my biographic article, "Ernst Wiechert in Stäfa," *Études Germaniques* (January, 1965).