



GRUNEWALD: THINKING OF ITS PAST
AND PRESENT
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The invitation to spend three months at the Wissenschaftskolleg arrived a few months before I agreed to write a biography of Walther Rathenau for a book series planned by Yale University Press. Although I had already given another topic as the centre of my work at the Kolleg, this switch, so I felt, could only be welcome to my hosts. After all, there couldn't be a more appropriate location for thinking and writing about Rathenau. The little memorial stone, placed near the spot at which he was shot to death, can almost be seen from the windows of the Kolleg. It is just around the corner. His elegant villa, Koenigsallee 65, is a short walk down from the Kolleg, a bit further than the Hagenplatz,

almost across the street from the Vienna Café, where I often met some Fellow colleagues when our home restaurant was closed or on one of these rare free afternoons.

Rathenau's grandparents, moving to Berlin from the Mark Brandenburg early in the 19th century, lived in the more central Tiergartenviertel, on Victoriastraße 3, no longer an address in modern Berlin. When his father began an independent industrial career, rather unsuccessfully at first, the family lived in close proximity to the plant on the Chausseestraße, in what was then considered the northern part of the city, and it was only much later that Walther's father, Emil Rathenau, by then one of Germany's most prominent industrial magnates and head of the famous AEG, decided to move back to the old family quarters. He then enlarged and redecorated it to fit his new status, but at the same time, in fact, forced Walther out, since he had been living there upon his return to Berlin in 1900. It was then that the son decided to join so many of Berlin's economic and cultural elite by moving to Grunewald, into a small but impressive new villa he had designed almost entirely by himself. A year earlier, the young and by then successful entrepreneur had bought the pretty Schloss Freienwalde, some 50 kilometres east of Berlin, a Hohenzollern property from the early 19th century, meant to serve him as refuge for life as a thinker and social critic, away from all daily business affairs. But city life proved too attractive, and giving up the privileges attached to it was easier said than done for a man of Rathenau's economic means and social connections. After all, by that time he was an established member of the imperial elite of the Prussian capital, with many visible and invisible ties to its unique lifestyle.

From my own leisurely scholarly life at the Kolleg, in the midst of that same Grunewald, I began to reconstruct this lifestyle. Moving west, I found out, was truly "in" at that time, despite the distance from the centre of town and the unmitigated suburban conditions and atmosphere that characterized the new neighbourhood. Even today it must be considered somewhat remote and in many ways inconvenient. Shopping for the most basic commodities, as we have all experienced, requires a long walk; carrying it all home was surely a task only for maids and servants in these distant times. Still, West Berlin had grown rapidly and soon many of Berlin's "who is who" were living there. From the documents I was reading, while enjoying its peace and quiet, emerged something quite different from the present idyll. Surely, in comparison to the life we were leading as Fellows at the Wissenschaftskolleg, life in Grunewald was much more hectic a hundred years ago – indeed, unbelievably hectic.

Rathenau himself kept up a huge private correspondence and a partial diary. He often commented on his social life. But doubtlessly, the best witness to the milieu in question was the man best known as his biographer, Harry Graf Kessler. Kessler, in contrast to Rathenau, did indeed live a life of leisure, making sure to fully record it for posterity. Surprisingly, indeed, it seems that the busy industrial, commercial and financial barons who made up the local elite enjoyed as much social intercourse as did this artistic dandy. Networking seems to have been one of their most important preoccupations.

They met for long breakfasts not only on weekends but on weekdays, too. Then came lunches, often at the elegant Berlin Automobile Club or the Adlon Hotel, where business affairs were interwoven with socializing. And in the evening they were sure to meet again, sometimes till the early hours of the morning. Everyone was inviting everyone else, though of course some hosts, or rather hostesses, were considered more desirable than others. Some, indeed, enjoyed particularly privileged positions, if their wives were capable enough or ambitious enough to run a proper “salon”. Members of the elite could meet each other daily in such a posh environment, enjoying luxurious meals, the best wine and often the most brilliant conversation. As befitting the upper class of the time, property *and* “Bildung” had to be displayed in such gatherings, and in order to reach the right mix, a clever hostess would make sure to have both her husband’s business colleagues and an assortment of intellectuals and artists at hand. Men of letters, theatre directors, actors or critics, musicians and painters, some of them far from prosperous, were constant guests in these soirées. Dinner was often served after a theatre premier or a concert, while on other occasions private performances – by amateurs or professionals – were given at the private salons themselves. Strikingly, only few academic men were invited. A small number actually lived in Grunewald, but most remained outside Germany’s high society. The likes of us, men and women of the Wissenschaftskolleg, would have probably been considered far too boring.

Interestingly, Jews were not excluded. Many of those included, to be sure, were baptized, but – like Rathenau – many were not. This did create some awkwardness. In some homes, usually in the predominantly aristocratic setting, Jews were less than welcome. But the prosperous and successful among them, known to be entertained even by the Kaiser, though only rarely of course, could not be entirely shut out. In addition, some of the more impressive salons were kept by rich and prominent Jews, such as the Fürstenbergs, the Friedlaender-Fulds, the Mendelssohns, Felix and Lili Deutsch, soon to become Rathenau’s only lover, and others. Edith, Walther’s younger sister, married to Fritz An-

drae, a wealthy banker in his own rights, held an “open house” every Sunday afternoon in her sumptuous Grunewald residence. In a later memoir, her daughter reported how Edith used to put together her guests’ seating order “according to culture” and then “according to posts and honour”. Thomas Mann and his wife, the Hauptmanns, Wolfskehl, Wedekind, Hofmannsthal and sometimes Rainer Maria Rilke represented the literary world; Edwin Fischer, Busoni, Furtwängler the musical side; Lovis Corinth, for instance, was among the painters, and then came politicians, bureaucrats of the highest echelon and occasional attractions such as Einstein, Max Reinhardt and more. The obvious guests, that is the business colleagues of Edith’s husband and the assortment of wealthy neighbours, were taken for granted, not even mentioned in this list. Clearly they were present too, together with the much-beloved uncle, Walther.

It is hard to imagine how anyone had time to work with all those goings-on. Rathenau, for instance, was on the board of no less than 86 German and 21 foreign companies since the mid 1900s, in addition to his duties as member of the Board of Directors of the Berliner Handelsgesellschaft and the Supervisory Council of the AEG. At the same time, he was writing shorter and longer essays mostly for Maximilian Harden’s *Die Zukunft*; he kept up his correspondence and had time to paint, rather surprisingly well, beautiful oil portraits and pastel landscapes. Work, to be sure, included a lot of travelling, too, by train and by boat, all rather leisurely and very time-consuming. Moreover, travelling was undertaken not only for business but for pleasure, too. A summer month in the mountains, on the North Sea coast or occasionally on the Italian Riviera, was a must, and more or less prolonged stays “to take the water” in one of the many Central European spas was likewise unavoidable, especially for those more advanced in age. Many members of the elite also kept their own country houses, some of them impressive mansions, often quite far away from Berlin, using them as locations for extended vacations, to which friends and relatives were invited to recuperate and be entertained. The familiar city gatherings were re-enacted there, with the added pleasures of nearby nature, hiking, swimming and the like. Thus, one’s social network could be maintained, even improved, by being away. Life was constantly and everywhere lived within the same social milieu. The rest of the world, in fact all those who were not part of this network, must have seemed far away, a foreign country, indeed.

Economic interests played an important role in all that, no doubt. As the economy and politics grew nearer, during this period of “organized capitalism” late in the 19th century, political interests were gaining in significance, too. But it was family ties that made up the

most substantial part of this networking, and family interests were inseparable from the life of the elite to a degree unimaginable today. My attention was attracted to this fact by observing Rathenau's life. For years, Walther's social circle was almost entirely composed of sons of his parents' relatives, colleagues and neighbours. In the many letters to his mother, the young Rathenau repeatedly tells of evenings at the homes of his parents' acquaintances, who made sure to invite him, introduce him to their own relatives, thus preserving a closely knit social milieu. Rathenau himself never married, but endogamy was clearly an important aspect of this system. Having worked rather intensively on the social history of German Jewry, I always assumed that endogamy was particular to them, a tactic in the struggle against assimilation. Endogamy, however, was in fact generally common among members of the imperial elite, regardless of confessional belonging. Once I noticed it, examples began to pile up. Hugo Stinnes, surely one of Germany's most powerful industrialists, both before and after the First World War, though not a Berliner, was related to his wife Cläre on his mother's side. The two met while their families were on a joint vacation, and much of their social life remained within the family, even when Hugo's business grew to enormous proportions. Max Weber, to take another example, had little in common with either Rathenau or Stinnes, but his too was a well-established family of the educated upper bourgeoisie, and here too, family connections were the centre of social life. Max was first engaged to one of his cousins, but then married another relative, Marianne, who had lived in his parents' household for years prior to their engagement. Examples from among prosperous Jews are particularly easy to find, no doubt. Max Warburg, the Hamburg-based Jewish banker, married a relative from the Altona branch of his own family and much of his business and social life was conducted in the company of his relatives – close and distant. The picture is similar for other wealthy Jewish families: the Tietzs, the Walichs and many more. The Rathenaus were no exception. To be sure, the AEG was not a family business, but family considerations played a major role in every move. In some ways, the Berlin-based elite I was describing functioned like an extended family, busily keeping contacts alive, constantly interacting, finally also exerting its influence on wider social, economic and political circles.

Most of the men involved had no official posts but they were often consulted and learned to use their unofficial, social ties for their own benefit, sometimes – as in Rathenau's case – also for what they deemed the country's benefit. It was these connections that decided much of Germany's fate prior to the First World War. Grunewald's peaceful and lovely appearance conceals a potent history, from the alliance of the richest,

most powerful and often also most cultivated, mainly interested in preserving the status quo, to the tragic events that transpired at the Grunewald train station under Nazi rule. Like so much of pre-World War I Germany, the solidarity, even the intimacy among the members of this close-knit elite disappeared without a trace. Behind the façade of luxury and culture in the streets of Grunewald there must have always lurked a great deal of suspicion and affectation, much egotism and pretence. There is no point in nostalgically thinking of all that fraternization: the concerts, the brilliance, the good living. In many ways our own Grunewald, reconstructed, at least partly democratized, much less grandiose and glamorous than that of the Kaiserreich, is a better place to spend one's life. In any case, my three months' stay, moving between Wallotstraße 19 and Koenigsallee 20 along the Dianasee, learning about Rathenau's life, were far too short. I was only beginning to comprehend the combination of attraction and distaste that I felt towards that Grunewald of his and mine. I keep trying to decipher its meaning; I keep thinking about it.