

NOTE

HANS ROTHFELS, 1891–1976

Among the historians Hans Rothfels was the grandseigneur. His very appearance was impressive. He moved about majestically; his well-chiseled head was clearly that of a scholar of distinction, and his keen eyes surveyed his world with an air of sovereignty. And then there was his engaging but always skeptical grin. He loved life and people although he was well aware of their imperfections. And history was to him a way of probing into the laws of politics and society if not the mysteries of God's creation. In his introductory essay for the *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* he alluded to the "dignity" of history which resided precisely not in its constituting the cold, knowable "neutral otherness" but rather in its speaking with all its complexity to our sense of values; he thus understood his craft to be a "disciplined quest for truth." When he parted from us on June 22, 1976, at the biblical age of eighty-five he left behind him a legacy of generosity of vision, honesty, and wisdom which will speak to generations of historians to come.

Hans Rothfels's work was shaped by his life, and in turn his life was shaped by his work. And his long life exposed him to changes, more often than not in the form of adversity, which he seized upon as challenges that made, as his venerable teacher Friedrich Meinecke appropriately once wrote to him, his "soul" win out over his "fate" and lent him a triumphant serenity. Born on April 12, 1891, in Kassel, one of Prussia's new annexations, he made the Prussian ethos his own. His study of history was interrupted by service in the first War, in which he was badly wounded, losing one leg. After the war he habilitated himself in Berlin and in 1926 was called to Königsberg where he taught until the Nazis forced him to retire in 1934.

Hans Rothfels belonged to the majority of German university professors, to whom defeat as well as revolution in 1918 was a shattering experience and who temperamentally and politically maintained a reserve and remoteness toward the Weimar state. But if he chose Bismarck as one of his chief scholarly concerns, it was not to bolster, as he once put it, the "banal legend" of the "iron chancellor"; neither was it, to be sure, to sit in judgment on the wily and unprincipled "opportunist." Hans Rothfels's conservative vision detected the essentially religious dimension of the Bismarckian *Realpolitik*, informed basically by the imperative of coping with a reality that is unfathomable to man and in its fulness privy only to God, and he underscored that the unification of Germany was not after all the work of a nationalist but a European statesman who practiced the virtues of restraint and whose ulti-

mate concern was the stability of the European order. He thus laid the ground for his argument, which in later years he felt a need to pursue vigorously, namely, that the lineage from Bismarck to Hitler, so readily assumed during and after the second War in the Allied countries, was spurious, and that, if anything, there was a divide between Bismarck the realist, and Adolf Hitler the somnambulant ideologist.

Moreover, his studies on Bismarck and his activity in East Prussia, which was borderland between Germans and Slavs, led Hans Rothfels to a pre-occupation with the nationality problem. It became evident to him that the nation-state, which had become in the nineteenth century the norm and for the Germans the ideal form of political organization, was not after all the ultimate answer to Europe's problems. Certainly as a result of the treaty system of 1919 Europe was left with a minority population of more than thirty million, which impelled Hans Rothfels to look into the possibility of, what he called, the "loosening up," if not revision, of the post-Versailles frontiers, partly through minority protection. The fact that the Prussian historian thus saw fit to look for guidance from the experience of the old Habsburg Monarchy is not without irony; but it does speak for the searching generosity of his mind. Certainly his awareness of the limitations of the nation-state concept made him receptive to the problems of the German Resistance to National Socialism and its adherence to broader loyalties, to which he devoted much of his attention during the following phase of his life.

Exile is a bitter fate, and it hit Hans Rothfels hard, since he was in every way so closely tied to his land and his people. He first found a temporary haven at Oxford, but then moved on to the United States, initially to Brown University, and subsequently to the University of Chicago, which gave him due recognition and scope. It was during his Providence days that I first met him and a friendly relationship developed between us which endured and deepened through the years. I remember his concern during the war years about the alliance with Stalin's Russia and in particular about the American unwillingness to face up to the possibility of an intensified Russian "Drang nach Westen" in Europe. Yet those were days when such warnings were anathema in academic circles. This meant that Hans Rothfels lived in relative isolation then; but it was one of his own choosing.

Hans Rothfels's turning toward a study of the German Resistance was no less a matter of personal courage. This was the time when in the Allied countries the very existence of a resistance in Germany was compulsively ignored. His book then on the German Opposition to Hitler, which he first published in the English language, alerted the Anglo-Saxon world to the existence of the "other Germany." The 20th of July 1944, as he saw it, was a clear manifestation of the "crisis of the nation-state" since the resisters found themselves in an "extreme situation" (*Grenzsituation*), that is, in a conflict between their loyalties to the nation and their consciousness of a broader Euro-

pean responsibility. No doubt this book, which was the most influential one of those written by Hans Rothfels, has since in many ways been superseded by other more elaborate or indeed more critical studies, but beyond having the merit of having been an impressive pioneering work it will in its conception and in its style always remain a classic.

When, in 1951, Hans Rothfels returned to his native country to assume a professorship at Tübingen University, he turned altogether toward the new discipline of contemporary history. In fact, he was not the only German historian who, prompted by his conscience as scholar and citizen in the course of the war, became preoccupied with the most recent history. But the very concept of *Zeitgeschichte* was Hans Rothfels's creation, and he took it upon himself to introduce to the historical guild a new endeavor which, bordering so close on political and moral engagement, was bound to be risky professionally. However, the *Institut für Zeitgeschichte* in Munich, of which he was a founder, and its journal, of which he was editor together with the political scientist Theodor Eschenburg, established the study of contemporary history in the Federal Republic of Germany as a widely recognized and acclaimed discipline. One of his major concerns during the last decades of his life was the editing, under the aegis of an international board, of the *Documents on German Foreign Policy, 1918–1945*.

It has been said that, in retrospect, Hans Rothfels thought that his expulsion from his profession and country had been his good fortune. Such a statement, if correct, can only be read as a measure of his resilience, that is, his capacity to overcome adversity. The world that Hans Rothfels had to survey ever since his emigration encompassed both sides of the Atlantic. He had become part of the proverbial "sea change." Just as in exile he had set himself the task of interpreting Germany to the Americans, he did the reverse after his return to his native country. During one of the last years of his teaching I stopped for a visit in Tübingen and attended one of the optional discussion hours which he had scheduled for the students of his lecture class. There he sat, the master, rejoicing in intimate exchange with his students. Few German professors, in particular of the older generation, can be found giving their time to such informal teaching. Hans Rothfels had brought Chicago to Tübingen.

The last twenty-five years of his life brought him many honors. In 1961 he was elected a member of the Order of the Pour le Mérite, thus joining a distinguished group of German scholars and artists. And it must have given him a deep sense of satisfaction when, on April 1, 1965, upon invitation of the Federal Government, he addressed Bonn's Bundestag to commemorate Bismarck's hundred and fiftieth anniversary. The greatest satisfaction, though, the old gentleman derived was from the majestic view into the hills of the Swabian Alp from his house up over the city of Tübingen, beyond which on clear days the contours of the *Burg Hohenzollern* became visible.