

THOMAS MANN
His exotic interests and the Jewish connection

A biographical essay by
Arthur Stupay

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I would like to draw your attention to an excellent review of Mann's life and work by Tom Slavin, our host, completed six years ago, in November 2010, when we read *The Magic Mountain*.

He was born in Lubeck in 1875. Lubeck is located on the North Sea, close to Hamburg and Denmark. It was the main city of the Hanseatic League, a major trading power until the 19th century. With its location on the North Sea, Lubeck was removed from the militarism of the Prussians and was not part of the German empire until incorporated by the Nazis in 1937. In fact, Hitler was not allowed to campaign there in 1932, a fact that he never forget. In the late 1930s, it became an important naval base and training center and was completely destroyed by British bombers in 1942.

Thomas' father was a wealthy merchant and a Senator, making him a member of the all-powerful town council. Lubeck was a trading town and its citizens knew the world. His father, Senator Mann, became the model for Senator/Counsellor Buddenbrook, as I will discuss.

Thomas mother, Julia da Silva, was born in Brazil to a wealthy family, who had Portuguese origins; they established plantations and trading businesses over several generations. Her father, Johann Ludwig Bruhns, from Lubeck, sought adventure and fortune in the Brazilian *velt*. He eventually established a coffee and sugar export business. When his wife died, Senhor Joao Luiz Germano Bruhns, as he was known, returned to Lubeck to take up a privileged life in his home town, the free state of Lubeck.

A number of facts to keep in mind.

1. As noted, Mann was born in 1875, and died in August 1955. He grew up in the heyday of German imperial and intellectual accomplishments. To be German was to be considered superior. It wasn't a place for peasants. After Bismarck, Germany became a world power establishing colonies in both East and West Africa as well as developing a colony (concession) in China and even in Jerusalem. Germany also became a leader in science. Of course, we know about Max Planck, Fritz Haber and Albert Einstein, but it also became a leader in applied science and industry. Its universities and research institutes were renowned and attracted the best students of Europe and even the U.S. It was a golden age.

2. While German science and industry were pre-eminent, its cultural accomplishments lagged, though music, opera and theater became important in public life. Art and literature developed mainly after the Great War.

3. Mann and his siblings understood that they were different, brought up largely by a Brazilian creole mother. This background impacted their lives. Mann's grandson put it that Heinrich and Thomas would probably be more cheerful had their mother been of good Nordic stock, instead of being a Portuguese belle"; it seemed to undermine their sense of masculinity at home. But their mother's exotic beginnings inspired several novels by the Mann children. For instance, Heinrich Mann's first novel was about a German father and a creole mother. His later novel was *Between the Races*, inspired by his mother. In *Death in Venice* by Thomas, the main character also inherits "exotic racial characteristics." This emphasis on the attraction of differences informed his fiction throughout. It is certainly true in the *Mario* and in *The Magic Mountain*. Also, in *The Magic Mountain*, there are all sorts of strange characters involved, such as Lodovico Settembrini, Frau Clavdia Chauchat from Dagestan beyond the Caucasus, and Leo Naptha from a small town on the border between Galicia and Volhynia, whose father was a *shohet* (which he italicizes), a butcher, "a profession very different from a Christian butcher; it is a spiritual office."

4. I would also make the point that Mann was obsessed with Jews, Judaism and their exotic lives. I will come back to this in a moment. Jews and other minorities by the end of the 19th century were considered inferior and uncouth, except if they dropped their religion and adopted German attitudes, language, and became fully integrated into German life.

5. His family, friends and acquaintances became models for the characters in his books. Of course, the obvious example is his own father Senator Mann in *Buddenbrooks*, Tom Slavin mentioned in his earlier report that the book went through 100 editions before he received the Nobel Prize in 1930 and which was a highlight of his oeuvre. Other have pointed out that Thomas Mann himself was the model for Hans Castorp in *The Magic Mountain*. It could be of some significance that he was called the Magician by his family as a pet name, something we can refer to again as we analyze Mario.

I am not sure in which books he included the women in his life: his mother, Julia, and his wife, Katia. We know a lot about his early life and courtship in Munich from a delightful and breezy account by his wife, Katia Pringsheim Mann, the daughter of wealth and privilege, and also may I add, of Jewish heritage, since the Pringsheim's were converted Jews, a fact that she does not mention in her memoir, entitled "Unwritten Memories".

He was taken by her beauty, confidence and independence. She was reluctant to become serious since she was barely 20 years old (he was 8 years older) and wanted to complete her education. But he had seen her and was intrigued. Eventually, he asked Max Bernstein, a royal counselor and a well-known lawyer to arrange a meeting.

Incidentally, this is where a Cleveland connection enters. It is a lovely story that was told by Katia in her memoir. She wrote, "One morning he arrived and said that I promised we would take a bike ride. I hadn't said anything of the sort... We took our ride. I had a very good, fast American Cleveland bike and rushed off ahead of him."

Ah, the good old days, when industrial Cleveland was the new, hot and cheap source of consumer goods for an expanding German economy.

There has been quite a bit written about the possible jealousy or difficult relationship between Thomas and his brother Heinrich. According to Katia, the break came after Heinrich's article on Emil Zola, which Thomas took personally. Heinrich wrote that "It is characteristic of those who are to dry up at an early age that they are already on the scene in their early twenties with a high degree of

worldly wisdom.” In response, Thomas wrote *Reflections of a Nonpolitical Man*, directed at his brother,

He was awarded the Nobel Prize at the age of 54 years, which pleased him immensely. The Nobel Committee, headed by a man with the delightful name of Fredrik Book, highlighted Mann’s role in the realistic novel, which according to the Nobel Committee, “has been the creation of the English, French and the Russians...associated with the names of Dickens, Thackeray, Balzac and Flaubert. There was no comparable contribution from Germany...when the twenty-seven year old son of a merchant...published his novel *Buddenbrooks*, a masterpiece that fills the gap...It is a bourgeois novel, for the century that it portrays was above all a bourgeois era.” There is something here that is apparent in *Mario*, as we will discuss.

Later, at the banquet for the Prize, Mann is humbled and very reflective that the award was given to a German, only ten years after the most destructive war in European history. He said, “I put this international prize at the feet of my country and my people, that country and people to which writers like myself feel closer today than they did at the zenith of its strident empire.” He added, “The prize is also ‘sympathy’ for German intellectual and artistic achievements for the last fifteen years which have not been favorable to body and soul.”

Yet, only a few months after that speech in Stockholm, he gave a talk in Beethoven Hall in Berlin entitled German Address: An Appeal to Reason, which according to Katia was given “to warn against the Nazis, to speak out against them...I will never forget that evening,” she added, “up in the gallery was Herr Arnolt Bronnen with some like-minded companions –pro-Nazis—trying to stop the speech, interrupting my husband with ‘Nonsense!’, ‘Enough!’ and the like so that he had to break off for a while...At that point, he was officially identified as an enemy of the Nazis.” To his eternal credit, he saw the menace of the Nazis and spoke out strongly and courageously about the abuse of Jews and others. Most intellectuals and writers did not, including many of Mann’s ex-friends.

The year after the award of the Nobel Prize, Thomas and Katia travelled to Egypt to do research for the book on the biblical Joseph in Egypt. They also made it

Jerusalem where he gave a speech. They did not return to Germany from Jerusalem, but settled in Zurich after Hitler was installed as leader.

In 1938, with a Czech visa in hand, the Mann's were able to leave Switzerland, helped by getting a guest professorship at Princeton, which lasted two years. From there they went to Los Angeles, Pacific Palisades, where they bought a house. In January 1944, they became American citizens.

The California trip was triggered by a contract with one of the Hollywood studios. When movie studios gave "emergency" one year contracts, the U.S. Immigration Service could issue visas since the contracts were evidence that the immigrant family could support themselves.

To finish the description of his life, because of the McCarthy era in the 1950s, the Mann's returned to Switzerland, where Thomas died in 1955 at the age of 80, writing until his last days.

Thomas Mann was very methodical in his writing schedule, producing some 5-6 pages per day, every day no matter where he was, with production of an estimated 100,000 pages over his lifetime. He wrote in the morning and took long solitary walks, to think about his stories and their resolution. As noted, he used real people he knew as models, admitting, "I didn't mean him at all. I simply used the traits that were right for my characters."

Now, my point about the exotic in his characters, including Jews. In *Buddenbrooks* it is the upstart family, headed by Hinrich Hagenstrom, who is aggressive and active in many civic committees, becoming a rival to the Buddenbrooks' and their enterprise, even buying their in-city residence on Meng Strasse. In an earlier draft of the book, the family was named the Kohn, but Mann changed it and also toned down the virulent anti-Semitism of the Senator Buddenbrook's sister, Tony. As the book evolved references to Jews were dulled or eliminated, making it hard to determine who is who.

In *The Magic Mountain*, I was struck by the level of detail of the life of a former Jew, Leo or Leib Naptha, one of the locals who Hans Castorp meets on his walks near the hospital. It is obvious that he created the story based on the experience of his wife who in 1912, who had an old lung infection. As noted earlier, Mann

mentioned Naptha's father's occupation as Kosher butcher, who used relatively humane methods, specified in Torah. Mann added, "Leib was a mere boy, but he saw that the methods of those clumsy goyim, though excusably charitable, were also profane that they did not honor sacred things in the same way as his father." Further on he added, "There was something unorthodox about him (Leib or Leo) as if he were conversant with God, a baalshem or zaddik, a miracle man."

Naptha later converted to Christianity, but Mann explains sympathetically "that Judaism—thanks to its earthy, practical character, its socialism its political spirituality—was far nearer to the Catholic sphere, was incomparably more closely related to it than to the self-absorption and mystical subjectivity of Protestantism."

Mann was also drawn to other outsiders, the loner, the southerner (Italian)—Settembrini and Cipolla, the Eastern European and African as well as homosexuals. One can see this in *Joseph and His Brothers*, which started as many of his books as a short story and then expanded. In the case of Joseph, it became four volumes. *The Magic Mountain* also began life as a short story.

One short story that has also received attention is one included in the collection containing the Mario story, called Tablets of the Law, written in 1944, about Moses and his acceptance of "the pure and holy...invisible god Jahwe." He added, "This God was inclined towards their tribe and was ready under certain conditions to enter into a covenant with them, choosing them above all other peoples." It is obviously the story of Moses and the escape from Egypt, right out of the Passover story, and goes on for 60 pages, and includes all of the main characters.

In Mario, we also have a southern or Jewish image of Cipolla, who is described as "A man of age hard to determine, but by no means young; with a sharp, ravaged face, piercing eyes, compressed lips, small black moustache, and a so-called imperial in the curve between mouth and chin. With a name like Cipolla, or onion in Italian, he could be Italian, maybe a Gypsy, someone from the Middle East or North Africa, definitely an image not native to northern Europe. He was exotic, mysterious and foreign, the perfect character for an outsider. Could he be a Jewish conjuror, or a Muslim?"

I will now move to some comments on the short story.

