

HANNAH ARENDT: Her 1940s.

A nonbiography in three parts

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PROLOGUE

DETERMINATION OF POSITIONS

Hannah Arendt's positions when the book opens: On the Atlantic. A pariah. Between past and present.

On the Atlantic, in May 1941, she approaches New York, having fled from a Europe where she and others are being hunted, driven out, isolated or murdered.

At this point in time, "pariah" is the word Hannah Arendt uses to describes herself and other members of groups whose place in society, the society in which they live, is being questioned, made conditional, made the object of negotiations, of measures of integration, of measures of segregation, of limitations, of special laws. During the years prior to the early 1940s, a number of countries all over Europe decided that Arendt's particular pariah group – the Jews – and various others, were not to have any place at all there.

Between past and present Arendt discerns a crack, a space in which it is possible for people to act. To change course. To stop the trend. To start something new.

From Part One

THROUGH THE EYES OF A PARIAH

1. NEW ARRIVALS

CITY OF MIGRANTS

(pages 19-21)

What she got (...) was a feeling of uniqueness and identity, a feeling she had once had when, at twenty, she had come to New York (...) but which had slowly been rubbed away by four years of being inside the world that had looked magic from Portland, Oregon.

Mary McCarthy, "The Man in the Brooks Brothers Shirt" 1941

As I stand awake on our solar fabric,
That primary machine, the earth, which gendarmes, banks,
And aspirin pre-suppose.

W.H. Auden, "At the Grave of Henry James" 1941¹

In New York, Arendt and Blücher are far from the only new arrivals. Of the city's approximately 7.5 million inhabitants in 1940, nearly one third had been born in another country. Nor is Arendt's Jewish background unusual. A few years after she arrived, some two million people, or about one out of every four New Yorkers, were of Jewish descent.

The Manhattan to which she disembarks already has an impressive skyline consisting of immeasurably tall, individually sculpted buildings, not to mention a plethora of factory smokestacks. In the early 1940s New York and London are the two

most-industrialized cities in the world. Nearly two thirds of New York's industries are situated in Manhattan.

Against this factory landscape glitter theaters, as well as advertisements and billboards announcing the latest movies. Endless varieties of music are performed on the stages of brightly lit concert halls and dimmer club venues. Thoughts and stories about everything that goes on in the city are written up, reviewed and published in books, newspapers and magazines, which may then become the object of debates that sometimes come full circle back into printer's ink as reviews, irate letters to editors or new books and magazine articles.

With its factory smokestacks and layered rhythms, its bright glitz and exacting gravitas, New York entices throngs of fortune hunters and job seekers from all over the country, small town folk longing for all that is urban and up-to-date, longing to be drawn into the whirlwinds of people and potential that is New York.

In August 1941, while Hannah Arendt is preoccupied by money and fascism and the unruly English language, the main subject of discussion and debate in some of the cafés on Manhattan is something completely different: a literary sex act on a train, published in the most recent issue of *Partisan Review*.

The author of this hotly debated short story, "The Man in the Brooks Brothers Shirt," is Mary McCarthy, renowned as a critic for her biting tongue and sharp wit, and a member of the intellectual circle surrounding *Partisan Review*. What is particularly scrutinized is the malicious effect of a few well-chosen details in the story, such as the woman in the sexual encounter having a safety pin in her threadbare underwear or the author offering both the readers and the well-dressed man full insight into the woman's disgusted morning-after vomiting when he tries to kiss her again the next day.

Like the woman in the short story, Mary McCarthy is one of the many people lured from other US cities and rural America by the glamour of New York, where she has been living the intellectual, bohemian life since the mid-1930s. The external parallels lead to speculations that the story is just a depiction of McCarthy's personal experience, which provides more fuel for the debate: is it courageous or a blatant lack of good judgment to go public about one's sex life².

In either case, this brave or injudicious writer eventually becomes one of Hannah Arendt's closest friends, and many years later also one of the people to whom Arendt will leave her literary legacy.

The same issue of *Partisan Review* contains an article by a fellow migrant who also eventually becomes a close friend of Arendt's, the poet Wystan Hugh Auden. His contribution to the issue is a twenty-eight-verse contemplation of life and literature from the graveside of Henry James. According to the list of contributors, W.H. Auden is "A British poet", now residing in Brooklyn.³

5. PARIAH STRATEGIES

(page 70)

political thinking begins in each person's response to the "events" that affect us that result from human initiatives.

Ulrika Björk on Arendt, "Nativity, action and freedom" 2011⁴

"Coming out as a pariah," "becoming aware of one's position as a pariah," "translating one's position as a pariah into political terms," and "fighting for the whole pariah group". Seen in these naked formulations, the pariah strategies adopted by Arendt in the 1930s and 40s bear many resemblances to the strategies of other movements. The battle cries of groups who are not only repressed but who are also shamed.

However, naked political slogans, programs or theories ring false unless they are personified in life and in action. This awareness permeates Arendt's working method – her writing and her analyses are almost always focused on an individual, a single event or the story of a unique course of events. Such as the life of Rahel Varnhagen. The unique events Arendt depicts are seldom meant to serve as examples of a certain idea or theory; they are in themselves the objects of her examination, and at the same time they are aspects of a historical narrative. What actually happened? How did it happen? What can we do today?

The stories of pariah lives are stories of strategies for an uncertain existence at the periphery. Each pariah has his or her own history, but each one is also, at the same time, always the story of circumstances she shares with other pariahs and which, in different ways, affect their lives.⁵

OBLIGATION TO REBEL: ARENDT

(pages 71-73)

...politically speaking, every pariah who refused to be a rebel was partly responsible for his own position and therewith for the blot on mankind which it represented.

Hannah Arendt, "The Jew as Pariah" 1944⁶

Like Hannah Arendt's story about Rahel Varnhagen, Arendt's own life can be narrated as a series of pariah stances, different ways of interacting with the shifting attitudes of the world around her to Jewish people.

Arendt writes of her childhood in Königsberg, that the word "Jewish" was seldom mentioned at home. It was just not a major theme. The family was secular, her mother being one of the first women to take advantage of the new opportunities for higher education, and sympathized with the Social Democrats even before the party was allowed. Their home also welcomed some of the great Zionists of the new era, including Kurt Blumenfeld who later became both mentor and close friend to Arendt.

Arendt's mother Martha's strategy as a pariah parent follows three main trajectories: firstly, Hannah is given the opportunity to become acquainted with the shared traditions and history of the Jews via religious and Zionist relatives and friends of the family – although Judaism is not a major aspect of their family life, Martha wants Hannah to regard it as an asset. Secondly, Hannah is given clear instructions to follow at school: if any teacher makes an anti-Semitic comment to Hannah or anyone else, Hannah is to get right up and go home, note carefully down what the teacher said, and then leave it to Martha to tackle the administration – in Martha's view it is up to the parents to defend their child against any attack by adults. If other children tease or pick fights with Hannah because she was Jewish, her instructions are equally clear: she is to defend herself and the fact that she is Jewish – a child has to learn to handle hostility on the part of her equals and to stand up for the group with which she is affiliated.

As a doctoral student during the 1920s, Hannah Arendt begins by devoting herself to philosophical aspects of Christianity, writing her PhD thesis on the concept

of love in the work of Saint Augustine, after which she goes on to study Rahel Varnhagen. By then she is residing mainly in Berlin, and living with a Jewish man. As anti-Semitism picks up steam in Germany, Arendt becomes an increasingly “conscious pariah,” and in 1933 when the National Socialists come to power, she begins to perform little subversive acts, such as helping her mother arrange temporary shelter for individuals in hiding, or doing archival research for the Zionists.

After she escapes to Paris, pariah affiliation becomes one of the main themes of her life; at the same time as the persecution of pariah groups becomes the main political theme of various European countries. To make ends meet, she takes a job with a Zionist youth organization that arranges passage to Palestine for European children and adolescents who need to escape. She studied Jewish history, with special emphasis on the “pariah tradition” as articulated in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century by Bernard Lazare, a Jewish French lawyer and writer. Now that Arendt has become a rebellious pariah, the last chapters of her book on Rahel Varnhagen take on a clearly political slant. Rahel’s fundamental problem, according to Arendt, is that she considers her pariah status an individual problem, an unfortunate personal circumstance that had befallen her, rather than an attack on an entire group, requiring collective defense.

During Arendt’s early period in New York, the political situation in Europe is escalating, and the pan-European, systematic holocaust taking on industrial features. Even as a refugee in the US, her main forms of income have their sources within the pariah collective – she is a regular columnist in *Aufbau*, directs a research project the objective of which was to trace stolen European Jewish cultural artifacts and later begins to take on work for a publishing house, where she contributes to the introduction of European pariah literature in the US. One of her achievements as an editor is to collect some texts by Bernard Lazare, her source of inspiration to pariah politics, and to publish them in English translation in a small volume entitled *Job’s Dungheap*.⁷

During this period she also writes a large number of articles that are attempts, in different ways, to arouse the consciousness of other pariahs, and incite them to action. One important aspect of these efforts is to raise awareness of the pariah tradition in Jewish history, mysticism and literature, via the work of authors such as Heinrich Heine and Franz Kafka. In texts such as “The Jew as Pariah: A Hidden Tradition” she formulates a nutshell version of the attitude of the pariah as “an

admission of Jews as Jews to the ranks of humanity, rather than a permit to ape the gentiles or an opportunity to play the parvenu.”

In the late 1940s and early 50s, in the aftermath of the war and the holocaust, the word “pariah” appears less frequently in Arendt’s writing. Although her focus shifts from the situation of pariahs to the entire human condition, the gaze she turns on humanity remains that of the pariah. Pariahs, like all other human beings, bear shared responsibility for the human condition, and not only for their own situations but for the world as a whole. In this view, a pariah is never just a victim, never just one who suffers.

From Part Two

DEATH

(pages 103-4)

Human history is not a hotel where you can stay at will; nor is it a vehicle you can embark and disembark when it suits you(...).

Hannah Arendt, "Moses oder Washington" 1942⁸

That every individual life between birth and death can eventually be told as a story with beginning and end is the prepolitical and prehistorical condition of history, the great story without beginning and end.

Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* 1958.

Betty from Vilnius who, at seventeen, proudly accounts to a reporter for the six Germans she killed, did not choose the historical period in which she grew up, nor did those six dead Germans. She never chose to grow up in an era when armed men would try to exterminate her entire people. The Germans did not choose to be born in an era when they would be expected to attack and murder unarmed strangers. The Germans, however, did choose how to relate to these expectations. And Betty, as Arendt asserts in *Aufbau* on August 11, 1944, chose how to react to the attacks on herself and her family. According to Arendt there are two ways of responding to an attack – you duck or you defend yourself. Her own version of the story, as Arendt records it via a news reporter's account, was that Betty tried both approaches. Two years earlier, in 1941, she had ducked, as had the rest of her family and many others, when a solitary German herded them into the ghetto. "She was ashamed" remembering it, according to Arendt. Now, in 1944, Betty had managed to defend herself and thereby to eradicate her shame.

Telling the story of Betty and the six shots fired in *Aufbau* is, to Arendt, a contribution to written public history, a contribution that also tells of the European

antifascist movement, and of the existence of an active, armed Jewish resistance. But like all of us, Betty is not only a member of the public world. She also lives in her own privately woven web of relationships. The people with whom she has private relationships will also tell stories of Betty, scattered stories of things she said and did, stories that seldom concern acts of life or death significance, or report on her interviews with the world press. This private history writing is usually about things Betty said and did that mattered very little in the eyes of the world press or academic historiographers; it is a loose collection of stories revealing who Betty and those around her were and what was important in their private lives, in a common world. In the vacuum left by the deaths of the six Germans, others, elsewhere, were telling other stories about how these men spoke, acted and reacted in their private and public lives.

The vacuum of death is filled with stories about those who are gone. About what happened. About who those people, now vanished from the world, once were.

¹ Both these quotations are from pieces published in *Partisan Review*, number 4, 1941.

² For reactions to this short story, see Frances Kiernan (2000), *Seeing Mary Plain*, Chapter 8.

³ *Partisan Review*, no. 4, 1941.

⁴ Ulrika Björk, “Natalitet, handlande och frihet: Arendts bidrag till händelsens fenomenologi,” (“Nativity, action and freedom: Arendt’s contribution to the phenomenology of action”), in Björk and Burman (2011).

⁵ Cf. Michael Jackson’s more general interpretation of Arendt’s way of looking at narrative: “Stories thus disclose not just ‘who’ we are but ‘what’ we have in common with others, not just ‘who’ we think about but ‘what’ shared circumstances bear upon our lives and our fate.” Quoted in the foreword to the second edition, Jackson, (2013), *The Politics of Storytelling. Variations on a Theme by Hannah Arendt*.

⁶ “*The Jew as Pariah. A Hidden Tradition*” in *Jewish Social Studies*, no. 2, April 1944. Reprinted in Arendt (1978) *The Jew as Pariah*.

⁷ Bernard Lazare (1948), *Job’s Dungheap*. Edited and with a foreword by Hannah Arendt.

⁸ *Aufbau* March 27, 1942. Die Geschichte der Menschheit ist kein Hotel, in das man sich beliebig einmieten könnte; auch kein Vehikel, aus dem man willkürlich ein- und aussteigen kann. NB: Translation of this quotation and all other original German texts in this excerpt by Annika Ruth Persson and Linda Schenck.