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The Letters of Stewart Winfield Herman Jr. An American Pastor in Berlin, 1936-1941

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Abstract

This paper provides an analysis of the experiences of Stewart Herman Winfield Jr based on a collection of his letters on loan to Gettysburg College from the Gettysburg Lutheran Seminary. This paper discusses Herman's experiences as a student in Strasburg and Gottingen, and as the pastor of the American church of Berlin from 1936 – 1941. Born in Harrisburg, Herman attended Gettysburg College, and the Gettysburg Lutheran Seminary. Herman's letters provide both a pastoral and an American perspective on the start of WWII and Nazism in Germany. Herman traveled frequently and witnessed the changes that Berlin faced during World War II. He also records perspectives of the many different people he meets while abroad. His letters were sent to his family in Pennsylvania. An appendix to this paper includes a transcription of a letter Herman wrote to his parents while traveling through Bamberg in February of 1936.

Keywords

WWII, Nazis, German Churches, Gettysburg, Stewart Herman, German Christianity

Disciplines

Christianity | European History | Military History | Political History | United States History

Comments

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The Letters of Stewart Winfield Herman Jr. An American Pastor in Berlin, 1936-1941

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Although Berlin was a precarious place to find oneself between 1936 and 1941, it seems that, in the words of Pastor Stephen Herr, Stewart Winfield Herman Jr. “found himself in the right place at the right time.”¹ Throughout that tumultuous period, Stewart Herman, an American pastor, gives valuable insight into life in wartime Europe in letters addressed to his parents. Usually typed, his letters are lengthy, poignant and contain a certain wit and sarcasm. Perhaps due to his profession, Herman is highly opinionated and maintains steadfast beliefs especially relating to morality, and in later letters, foreign affairs. Being both a foreigner and an engaged community member in Berlin, Herman offered an outsider’s perspective on German affairs during a time of historical significance, taking the time to consider many sides of the harsh realities of his surroundings and the state of a world at war.

After completing his undergraduate degree at Gettysburg College and attending Lutheran Seminary in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania Stewart Herman sought further education abroad. This led him to the University of Strasburg and the University of Gottingen in Germany.² February of 1936 proved to be an eventful month for Herman as he moved from his fellowship in Göttingen to a position as the pastor of the American Church in Berlin. This church held services in English, as stated by a church pamphlet, was nondenominational and open to “anyone who was baptized in the Christian church and still stands by that confession of faith.”³ After wrestling with some uncertainty about his future, Herman explains in a letter on February 10th that “the die is cast and I go to Berlin”; although it is out of his hands, he is now content.⁴ In a handwritten letter dated February 19th, 1936, Herman recounts his journey across the German countryside and

¹ Stephen Herr, interview by Lucy Marks, Gettysburg College, February 22, 2017.

² Ibid.

³ Stewart W. Herman, *The American Church of Berlin* (Berlin: The American Church of Berlin, 1939)

⁴ Stewart W. Herman Jr. to his parents, February 10, 1936, Box 17, Folder 4, Special Collections, Gettysburg College, World War II Letters of Stewart Herman Jr.

through the many cities of Bavaria. This letter represents an excellent example of Herman's attention to detail and propensity for description. It also reveals Herman's interest in historical studies as well as his early opinions of the Nazi state. At the start of his letter, he recounts his visit to the memorial to the martyrs of the failed Beer Hall Putsch in Munich, Feldherrnhalle. He notes quotations around the words "martyr" and "monument" suggesting a tone of disdain toward the edifice, while criticizing the "pageantry" of the guards and Sarcophagi for a failed event. This is a common theme in Herman's letters regarding the actions of the Nazis.⁵ His distaste is usually clear, but he is not exceptionally outspoken. His journey continues with visits to the Bavarian castles of Ludwig I and Ludwig II, which he describes down to the bathroom tiling, and provides a wealth of historical context. In these accounts, Herman subtly includes his own sentiments, commenting reproachfully, but playfully on the corruption and frivolity of both kings. His style of recording these journeys illustrates his realization of the importance of the present on those of the future, not just because of the uniqueness of his situation, but because of the sheer importance of preserving the past.⁶

In the same letter, Herman moves on to the town of Schlangen, in which he alludes to the conflict between the church and the German state preceding and during the war. On an archway in the section of town claimed by the French Huguenots which reads "No Jew is not wanted here!" and, "No Jew is our death-enemy!"⁷ He comments that both in the time of Huguenot persecution and now, in a time of Jewish persecution, the Huguenots must feel proud to support refugees. This observation is a prelude to the tensions that Herman will feel as a pastor between

⁵Stewart W. Herman Jr. to his parents, February 19, 1936, Box 17, Folder 4, Special Collections, Gettysburg College, World War II Letters of Stewart Herman Jr.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

his own sentiments toward the plight of the Jews and the sentiments of Nazis, Americans, and even other pastors in the Christian community.⁸

The declaration of this archway points out to the reader that not all churches are accepting of all. From Hitler's perspective, the church could be considered a stumbling block to his rise to power. In a sense, Hitler's goal was to make German nationalism and Nazism the state religion. The Catholic churches of Bavaria faced Nazi surveillance and antagonism leading up to and during the war because of their popularity in the region. They often suffered restrictions and punishment.⁹ This would have instilled fear in the Huguenots in the area, and shows the gravity of the statement the Huguenots were making. Protestants faced similar surveillance to the Catholics¹⁰, and under this pressure many churches came to represent German Christianity, a sect of Protestantism that was described as "enthusiastically pro-Nazi" to the point of claiming that "Hitler was sent by God."¹¹ A bishop named Heckel is a recurrent character later on in Herman's letters. Heckel embodied this movement, occasionally scolding Herman for his sensitivity.

The tension Herman faces from a variety of opposing forces is very evident in his interactions with powerful people. Quite often, Herman found himself in the company of influential characters. On February 23rd, 1936, Herman describes in a quite lengthy letter his experiences in his first few days in Berlin feeling like both an insider and an outside. In his letter, he attends a luncheon dedicated to the birthday of George Washington and hosted by the German

⁸ Stewart W. Herman Jr. to parents, February 19, 1936, Herman Papers, Box 17, Folder 4, Gettysburg College Special Collections

⁹ J.S. Conway, *The Nazi Persecution of the Churches: 1933-45* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1968), 67.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 72.

¹¹ Susannah Heschel, *The Aryan Jesus: Christian Theologians and the Bible in Nazi Germany* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 3.

Chief of Foreign Press, Dr. Putzi Hanfstangl. This luncheon, the first of many which Herman attends and is encouraged to fraternize, was a way to mark “mutual friendship as nations.”¹² Those in attendance included Prince Louis Ferdinand of Prussia, Dr. Hjalmar Schacht, an economist, William Dodd, the American Ambassador to Germany, Graf Eckener, a Zeppelin pilot, and many other unnamed German and American officials. Herman, who presented his role as minimal, observed the various sources of tension throughout the evening. This starts with Eckener, a Jew, and his story of forced flight to Genoa; Herman notes that “the [German] commander’s right eyebrow became even more perpendicular” as this story continued causing Herman to fear conflict. Before the meal, Herman gives a grace that calls for “human fellowship” and “peace,” a discrete way of expressing his political opinions.¹³ He observes that German Christians were turned off by the mere idea of saying grace and were further “paled” by his message. After their meal, Dr. Hanfstangl made a speech in which “the air tightened when he drew the only possible connection between George and Adolf, namely, they both came from the southern parts of their respective nations” and claims that he only salvaged the speech with a comment about Frederick the Great and unity which, by this point in the night, seemed difficult. Aside from the clear conflict between the ideologies of the two nations not yet at war, the most obvious takeaway from the night was Herman’s ability to stay true to his beliefs; as a new foreign guest, it is a precarious move to make such a statement within his blessing in the political climate he seems already to understand.¹⁴

On November 14th, 1939 Herman wrote a letter to his family recounting his observations of the aftermath of the Kristallnacht pogrom, making this letter by far his darkest account. Upon

¹² Stewart Winfield Herman Jr. to his parents, February 23, 1936, Box 17, Folder 4, Special Collections, Gettysburg College, World War II Letters of Stewart Herman Jr.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

first laying eyes on the scene he describes it as something similar to Pompeii and makes the comment that journalists could not accurately describe just how horrific the damage really was as it was that severe and that heartbreaking. The way in which Herman describes the damage shows his ability to consider multiple perspectives, trying to sympathize with the Jews, but also the common German. Throughout the letter, Herman expresses that his family should not assume that such hateful acts should be attributed to the opinions of average Germans; to him this hatred is an anomaly. He then recounts a sermon he gave following the attacks in which he preaches that having German blood should not be a source of shame as these acts do not represent a German morality. He states that above all, this adversity should ground them to be more firm in their Christian morality. What seems to stand out the most to Herman in all of this devastation, aside from the implications for the Jews, is the burning of the Synagogues, which he finds simply deplorable. Although this might make sense from his perspective as a pastor and as an American, it speaks volumes about his character and ability to empathize; while the financial devastation of Kristallnacht is stifling, it is the attack on the values and culture that are the most appalling to Herman and most likely the Jewish people themselves.¹⁵

Herman is very impatient with American foreign policy during this period. At this point in time, President Franklin D. Roosevelt is practicing conciliatory diplomacy as he tries to keep the United States from further conflict, in light of the Great Depression and public opinion.¹⁶ As Nazi aggression toward Jews increased, so did the pressure from the State Department to remain neutral in this conflict. Herman found this neutrality to be offensive in this time of violence.

Although he does not say it outright it seems that Herman wanted the United States to provide

¹⁵ Stewart Winfield Herman Jr. to his parents, November 14, 1939, Box 18, Folder 2, Special Collections, Gettysburg College, World War II Letters of Stewart Herman Jr.

¹⁶ Robert Jenner, *FDR's Republicans: Domestic Political Realignment and American Foreign Policy* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2009), 98-99.

more aid for Jewish refugees, he makes many references to the assassination of the German junior diplomat in Paris, Ernest von Rath, in response to the German policy. The assassination of von Rath made this issue of German displacement of Polish Jews globally visible;¹⁷ Roosevelt however, “never found a satisfactory solution to the Jewish refugee problem.”¹⁸ Because of this string of events, Herman “lambaste[s] Americans” for not taking responsibility. Herman often has to refuse aiding Jews because of his own lack of resources, which is another source of anger for him at this time. Further in this letter, Herman makes the chilling statement that there are rumors of the construction of Jewish concentration camps. In his mind this is utterly impossible because of the sheer number of German Jews which he states to be around 500,000. While it is easy to consider these letters in the context of the present, this comment reminds the reader of the nature of the atrocities of Hitler and the Nazis.¹⁹

Once the war officially broke out in September 1935, with the German invasion of Poland, the nature of Herman’s letters moves from genial descriptions of his daily activities, occasionally marked with some of the unpleasantness of the depressed pre-war Germany, to more dense news reports of the war. In a letter written on September 12th, 1939, after assuring his family of his safety and explaining the new ration system, Herman recounts the events leading up to the invasion of Poland, and the events that followed. He explains these events in a logical and objective manner. For example, when explaining his first experience of an air raid, he reports that he was awakened very early in the morning, followed protocol and all was well. In

¹⁷ Alan E. Steinweis, *Kristallnacht 1938* (Cambridge, US: Harvard University Press, 2009) Web, 2 March 2017, 17-18. <http://site.ebrary.com/lib/gettysburg/reader.action?ppg=27&docID=10402513&tm=1488559127228>

¹⁸ Frank Freidel, “FDR vs. Hitler: American Foreign Policy, 1933-1941”, *Massachusetts Historical Society* 99 (1987): 27.

¹⁹ Stewart Winfield Herman Jr. to his parents, November 14, 1939, Herman Papers, Box 18, Folder 2, Gettysburg College Special Collections.

this letter, Herman also states that he is applying to work at the American Embassy, the next significant chapter in his life in Berlin.²⁰

Censorship becomes a more relevant concern for Herman at this time. He noted, “we have no reliable news.” He reports that newspapers are no longer in print and that the radio only plays operas and marches which he claims are played with the purpose of inspiring the people to fight. The news he does receive, he claims is only of happy soldiers. To this he states quite sarcastically that “apparently, soldiers are conquering Poland with flowers stuck in the muzzles of their guns”. He ends this paragraph on censorship claiming that foreign radio stations are forbidden and “the spreading of ‘false news’ is punishable by death,” a rather chilling comment illustrating the darkness of Germany at the time. Despite this control over news, Herman’s letters seem to lack any elements of censorship as the Germans are not yet at war with the Americans.²¹

Another theme in this letter is further sympathy, but certain lack of compassion for the Jews who are being displaced. He tells the story of a Christian woman who falls in love with a Jewish man and gets him to convert upon their marriage, but who is still worried for their future. Herman is sympathetic to their plight, but observes that they may not have made the best choice given the state of affairs. In previous letters, when Jews have come to him for help he is always very sympathetic, but has to remind them that he can only do so much in his position. This illustrates the tension that those who were not persecuted felt from pressure from the government and questions of their own morality which Herman must frequently face.²²

²⁰ Stewart Winfield Herman Jr. to his parents, September 12, 1939, Box 18, Folder 6, Special Collections, Gettysburg College, World War II Letters of Stewart Herman Jr.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

Herman's time in Berlin ends with his internment in Bad Nauheim following the attacks on Pearl Harbor. His letters continue to follow a reportative style until this time. In a relatively short letter written on December 22, 1941, Herman first assures his family that he is safe and out of Berlin. He then recounts his final days at the embassy and the church which he is not unhappy to leave after the last few months of tension and reduced attendance. He speaks of his first sermon at Bad Nauheim in which he explains the importance of finding strength within oneself to endure the tests of life. It seems as if he is preaching to himself as he notes that he finds it difficult to think of anything else besides the war, especially considering the uncertainty of the duration of their internment. Herman describes his stay in the hotel as mostly leisurely and a well needed break, although stressful and rather unfulfilling in the ways he likes to run his life. Most of his letters from this period proceed like this one until his eventual departure back to the US in 1941.²³

While his time in Germany was over, Herman went on to recount his time in Berlin in the United States. In 1943, his book, *It's Your Souls We Want*, was published as an analysis of the relationship between Nazism and Christianity in Germany. In his introduction, he mentions that in his time in Bad Nauheim, he could look back upon his records of his time as a pastor in Berlin and notice "patterns the seemingly unrelated events revealed when placed in juxtaposition." Although his time abroad had ended, Stewart Herman remained cognizant of the importance of the time he spent in Germany and how being in that place at that time allowed him to view the war from a perspective that was valuable and uniquely his own.²⁴

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²³ Stewart Winfield Herman Jr. to his parents, December 22, 1941, Box 18, Folder 9, Special Collections, Gettysburg College, World War II Letters of Stewart Herman Jr.

²⁴ Stewart Herman, *It's Your Souls We Want* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1943), xii.

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Bamberg, Feb. 19, 1936

Dear Family,

If you are tracing me on a map you will be surprised enough at the way I am criss-crossing this country. Indeed, after this trip, I'll have seen Germany rather completely. Already I prefer to read rather than sit open-mouthed at this window gazing on the German countryside.

But I had brought you up to last Monday night & now still have 2 days to report: chiefly, this attempt to see still more of Munich. On Tuesday morning I started off downtown & took time to [anend] the pavilions where the 16 "martyrs" to the premature Putsch which have been interred in state. They are divided into 2 groups in the twin pavilions & rest in identical sarcophagi with the words "ihr habt doch gesiegt" (You won anyhow!) & then "Hier!" followed by each name—as though the roll were being called. The total effect, this permanent guard, the required salutes,—all add to the pageantry being built up around the "monument." I heard there was some distress of [cultures] at this idea of their men being buried in unhallowed ground—but that was taken care of evidently.

From here I went down to this American Express, remembering my way as I went along & recalling my other visit to this city. I found your letter and went down to a restaurant on the Ratham Platz to have breakfast and read the latest news. Everything sounded good—minding the suspense under which I had kept you. After disposing of 4 sausages, three rolls with butter and marmalade, & 3 cups of coffee, I felt fortified to go up to the Residenz—the old Bavarian royal palace—& give it the "once over." And so I did. It took more than an hour just to move thru the better sections of that mammoth pile. An I was more impressed with its elegance than many another residence I've see. The Bavarians had inherent good taste in addition to the desire to be lavish.

As I remember I toured the Nibelungen Rooms—so-called because of frescoes of the old sages. Then went up to the Pope's rooms—quite imperially golden, like an illuminated mind—, then into their – with picture galleries, red plush walls, etc. One of the most interesting apartments was the series of rooms on the third floor belonging to Ludwig II—the mad king who in the last century built those fairy castles in the Bavarian Hills. He really lived in and loved elegance but unfortunately lived 100 years after Louis XIV & others of that type. I remember the blue velvet upholstery & the gracefulness of all the furnishings in those few rooms that are really modestly small. But—the fabulous winter garden that he had built on the roof is gone—& so are the secret stains in the boudoir below. & Only the white of his shower-bath remains.

Now I came thru the Stone Rooms, named for fine stone doorframes & and [dim draperies],—a theme to the Minor Boudoir & and the other spacious chambers along this part of the palace & peering on the Hofgarten. Next you pass the royal stairs enter the real State Rooms, five large Throne Rooms with the golden Wittelsbachen standing between the pillars that will see no more royal glory. But the astounding thing to remember here is that in these halls the echos of marriages, coronations, etc. have not yet died away. It has only been 15 years since Bavaria has ceased being a real Kingdom—with the end of the war and the crash of the Hohenzollerns, Habsbergs, etc. and by coming thru these other rooms dedicated to Fred Barbarossa & Karl the great & the splendid large ball-room, you come to the famous Schönherts Galerie—or Beauty Galerie—collected by Ludwig I and established only 100 years ago. But this democratic tendency was clearly apparent in the fact that he has placed store clerks & tailor's daughters on a par with noble ladies when it came to beauty. One result is a long series of maiden portraits of women who really are worth preserving in oils. And one of the elects was a Jewess!

Well, I have forgotten the order & the characteristics of all the rooms. Not the Electoral rooms & The King's (Ludwig I) & the Governor's followed—some with tapestry, others with illustrations from Greek or German mythology, poetry, etc. I really enjoyed wandering thru the rooms surrounding the surreal courtyards of all shapes & sizes & I must admit that I sighed for the glory that is irretrievably gone.

From the Residenz I walked out Ludwig [Stave], then the Odeons Platz, & along the broad avenue full of uniform buildings, dignified & simple. I found the U. Library, Ludwig's Church, & there the U. itself,—a low, stream-lined affair,—right near the Victory Gate. It must be admitted that Ludwig I did well by his capital & Hitler will have some catching up to do. Now my intention was to visit the Alte Pinakothek & so I came back to the [Pension] first of all in order to rest my bones for a few minutes & order a bath for the evening. But later I found that the Painting Gallery was closed & so I decided on the Glyptothek in the Königliche Platz as a substitute. And I tried to enjoy the ice-cold halls of ancient sculpture but it was practically impossible. Besides it wasn't of the quality of its counterpart in Copenhagen.

From there I re visited the Basilica as a special favor to old Ludwig I. (A couple of months ago I read a book called "The Ludwigs of Bavaria" & now I feel on intimate terms with them all—especially #1 who was led astray by a pseudo- Spanish dancer who later immigrated to U.S.A. & is buried in N.Y. state.) Now coming to the Palace of Justice I walked the whole length of the main street, re- exploring all of the old landmarks clear to Isar [low] & Deutsches Museum. But I had no heart to tackle another big museum & besides I had to see Ernie Herbtan before leaving. So I found where he lived & had a good talk,—among other things out-lining my plan for Phi Sig Fellowships—& telling him this idea.

Now I caught a train to come back for my bath & to go out to the Mensa with Paize for supper. We had a pleasant meal & then a cup of tea in his room. About 9:00 I set off to the chamber—or something—where the International Students' Club was having its big carnival party, "Ball der Nationen". I was hoping to see the other friends I hadn't so yet met & I looked forward to a marvelous parade of costumes. The latter part turned out better than the former. No one could possibly be found in the mob in those several highly decorated rooms but it was truly a night: students of all nations with in their own nations outfits or in something completely outlandish. The best I could do was to buy a big white paper carnation from the [Winter Help Works]—out there were Germans as Scottsmen, Chinese as English traders, Americans as Spanish dancers,—& one girl tried to be a zebra or at least her paint and powder became very streaked. But it was this sort of party I attributed to Munich at carnival time & I stuck out until midnight (the affair probably lasted until dawn!) & then I came back to bed. I was tired from having walked all over the city all day.

And so I come down to today. I was up bright and early owing to my common sense of the night before & I packed while Frida brought me some breakfast. Then I started off once more to see the Alte Pinakothek & this time I entered and enjoyed. Without question, this collection is one of the best & most interesting in Europe. The best rooms are the German ones—from the early anonymous primitives to the days of Dürer. There are several especially fine alter pieces—somewhat like that reproduction I brought home for father—& it is always fascinating to see the form that the religious conceptions of the artists took. Holbein and [A...] are in abundance. Then there are the two panels of the 4 apostles by Dürer & after seeing so many reproductions it was fine to see the originals, wonderfully better of course. And then there was that fine self portrait of Dürer I had to buy a small copy of it.

There is a good Netherlandish representation including some interesting Rembrandts & some amazing Jan Steens. Then comes Rubens, Van Dyck, etc. & one more I must wonder (aloud) how it was possible for Rubens to use so much [print] paint in his works. Now came the French, Spaniards, etc.—but nothing extra. But it was a grand morning's entertainment & I achieved a new appreciation for the Italians because they seemed to have only the early ones here & del Santo, Botticelli, among others, are very fine.

Now I didn't know whether to search the American Express again or not. I was planning to leave either at 1:00 or at 4:30 &, the more I considered it, the more I wanted to leave at once. But I went down and found that a packet had been forwarded here for me—exceedingly stupid of those at Göttingen. I dashed back to the [Pension], paid my bill, grabbed my bags & started for the stairs. Now I had to go to the Zollant & found that the package was a bundle of fine magazines sent by Mrs. [Beamish]. I was really grateful for the reading material on the train & if you see any of the [Beamishes], please thank them.

So, after storing up on fruit, sandwiches, etc.—for I didn't have time for luncheon—I got on the 1:00 train & we came speeding back thru Augsburg, & Dönaunworth, thence up to Nürnberg—then Schwabach where the Lutheran articles were written—& then to Schlangen where I decided to [descend] & take a look at U. town. Besides my intention was to stop in Bamberg for the night & thus break the journey. But Schlangen was a bad disappointment—& the late Franconian town, pretty dismal.

I could have seen the town in 15 minutes but the first train wouldn't leave for 1 ½ hours & so I was stuck. The first thing I saw was a plate on a house to indicate the fact that Goethe had stayed there overnight & I thought that I was more fortunate than Goethe was—because I wouldn't have to stay the night. And I became more thankful for Göttingen as I was what I might

have got into. Of course Paul Althaus is here and I'd like to meet him but at this point I didn't bother.

I saw this French Reformed Church. There was quite an influx of Huguenots here—a special section of the town being built for them. And I thought of the pride they must have felt receiving religious refugees of those days. Today on the arch that leads into the French quarter there is a sign “No Jew is not wanted here!” “No Jew is our death-enemy!” Up the street is a University in the old castle—a dumpy sort of residence—& it is the “light” of the city. The nicest thing about the U. and the town is the old Hofgarten, which, involuntarily has become a campus for the [retted] buildings.

And I walked from one end of the town to another & found nothing but the rather shabby looking mansard-roof homes in plain cute dark stone. The people looked rather dull also & the few local costumes were quite uninspired. So instead of waiting for a decent train I took the first one that came along, [imposing] a [temper] in the few [sites] that separated me from Bamberg. I rode with all of the country people who stared at my coat & my luggage as though they had never seen a traveler before. We stopped at all the stations to let the old people with hampers & back-baskets get off & on. But finally we arrived & I could look forward to only one more night “on the road”.

At Bamberg I began walking in toward the center of town, keeping my eye peeled for a clean & cheap hotel. And I found one. I wish you could see this room in which I am writing—a long chamber full of plain benches & tables covered with [severable] cloths. Farmers & laborers surround their tall glasses of beer, play chess, cards,—& the whole table to my left has pulled out battered brass instruments & the result is a deafening roar of old German tunes. Only a German could play chess with a brass band in his ear. My room is a quaint affair &, I believe, on the

court. But tomorrow I'll be just at a strategic point for attacking the town before calling my trip done & pounding to Berlin. At this point I feel very sleepy—& satisfied!