

Victor Klemperer (1881–1960)

- 1881 Born in Landsberg
1893 Attends French Secondary School (*Gymnasium*). 1896 continues secondary-school education at Friedrich–Werder Gymnasium
1897 Management assistance apprenticeship
1902 Earns secondary school diploma (*Abitur*)
1902 Studies philology in Munich, Geneva, Paris, and Berlin
1905 Journalist, writer
1906 Marries Eva Schlemmer
1912 Converts to Christianity
1913 Doctorate in Munich
1914 Habilitation
1914 Serves as university lecturer in Naples (until 1915)
1915 Volunteers for military service
1919 Professorship in Munich
1920 Professorship at TH Dresden

Serving as a professor at the university, Dresden remains his scholarly home for a many years.

June 6, 1920: "Rector Dülfer tends to be a bit absentminded. On Friday at noon, in the presence of a chancellor, he stood up in my defense on two fronts: First on the strength of the presidentially signed Weimar Constitution (*Reichsverfassung*) and second because I was a civil servant. He read aloud and I spoke the closing phrase: I swear by God Almighty. I swore to be a faithful and upright civil servant, to obey my superiors. So now I am an honest-to-goodness civil servant with a pension, a widow's pension, and Saxon citizenship." In addition to his teaching post, Klemperer devotes himself to the municipal adult school.

November 22, 1920: "This morning saw the commencement of an adult school teacher training course. The old Minister Seyfert (Richard Seyfert 1862–1940) spoke first, using the warm and friendly voice of an old teacher. It was just like the time I recently heard him inaugurate the vacation course. He spoke to the necessity of education, of organization, etc. Then came Dr. Ulich (Robert Ulich 1890–1977), director of the Ministry's central office for adult education. He spoke well, if not exactly off the cuff. Starting off with generalities, he

quickly got to the point. He informed us of: Objectives, methods, organization. He wants to impart knowledge and not hold coffee parties. We are not here to discipline, which adults resist anyway. We are not here to reconcile or mediate.

Those are all things that have to emerge from the material, from the scholarship. Nevertheless, the knowledge we impart should be vivid. This shouldn't be a purely intellectual endeavor. It should create values that people take with them for the rest of their lives." Klemperer's diaries reveal a politically sensitive person, someone who was a shrewd observer of times in which he lived.

October 27, 1923: "The school semester has caught up with me, meaning that work on the book will have to wait a bit. I almost feel like this is the easier part of the job, half of which seems to consist of bustling. Rest, meetings, negotiations, files, all of the scheming, the complete waste of time spent on issues related to the pedagogium... The pedagogium will be turned into a university, Seyfert into a tenured professor. The educational theorist will be a 'cultural philosopher' and not an experimental psychologist, as Kafka would have wanted. Politics and personal matters now play a role in everything. And I couldn't be more indifferent. I find 9/10th of the entire university odious and view the remaining 1/10th with indifference." Nevertheless, Klemperer is fascinated by academic study.

June 24, 1924: "First, I spent some time chatting with Heiß in his Romance studies seminar and then Kroner came and picked me up. Heading a class with around ten male and one female students, Kroner was teaching a lesson in Hegelian logic. He imparted Talmudic wisdom about the sameness of the unique and about the uniqueness of the same. I understood most of it. Kroner's warmth and his considerable talent for teaching were delightful. Astute and animated, the majority of the students—including a number of young Jewish minds—went along."

July 20, 1924: "The appointment battle between Luchtenberg (Paul Luchtenberg 1890–1973) and Kroner (Richard Kroner 1884–1974) is significantly more absorbing and nerve-racking than my research study. Everyone is conniving, acting in their personal interest. I'm no exception. What's poisoning the well is this moment of anti-Semitism and philo-Semitism we are experiencing: the battle between Kafka's admirers and his detractors. Objectivity

does not seem to a factor into it. Uhlig (Robert Ulich) is defenseless. He told me that I had an easier time of it than he did. He was in danger of being suspended without pay in case he fell out of favor politically. He is a socialist. The Minister is an adherent of the Kaiser's National People's Party (...) The Senate approved the version that I redacted for, and forced upon, the Senate Commission by a vote of 5 to 3. Kroner and Luchtenberg will be recommended in alphabetical order. The majority seems inclined to support Luchtenberg, mainly due to his particular aptitude as an educator. But they also realize that Kroner adds significant value in terms of his pure academic, philosophical and cultural studies accomplishments. One of the members pointed out that theoretical pedagogy and cultural studies were identical. He also emphasized that no one at THD was advocating in favor of a Cultural Studies specialization. The decision is now in the hands of the Minister."

February 2, 1929: (...) "I am also supposed to join the pedagogium's advisory board, to which Seyfert will be added as well... All the faculty meetings and internecine battles between faculty members are excessive. The question is who will succeed Kroner. Seyfert is using every weapon in his arsenal, every machination you can imagine, to support Bäumler (Alfred Baeumler 1887–1968). Bitter clashes are a constant."

One of the first pieces of legislation enacted by the National Socialist regime was the Law for the Restoration of the Professional Civil Service.

October 9, 1933: "I ran into Ulich in the State Library. He has been suspended on half pay. He tells me that he is being pressured to give up his honorary professorship 'voluntarily', otherwise his salary would be reduced to 200 M. Since his first wife, Ulich-Beil, was dismissed as well, he now has to provide for two families on his own."

February 15, 1934: "Today was the first session of the entire faculty under '*Führer*' Beste (Theodor Beste, 1894–1973). Raised right hands, a student representative, Extraordinary Professor Scheffler wearing an SA uniform, Extraordinary Professor Fichtner wearing a Party badge—all of it a mere formality and masquerade. All of this saluting with our hands raised literally makes me sick. I keep ducking out of it, however, and some day they'll wring my neck for it."

The truth speaks for itself but a lie needs press and radio to speak for it."

September 4, 1934: "Language of the 3rd Reich: First State Secretary in the Reich Education Ministry writes that in future, primary school teachers should no longer be academically trained. They were to teach German youth arithmetic, reading, and writing. Furthermore: The focal point of the ideological school was to promote a total science of the people and the state, based on the principle of National Socialism. An excerpt from the periodical *Volk im Werden*, taken from the August 22, 1934 edition of the *Dresdener Neueste Nachrichten*

(a) Return to the primitive; (b) total science! Apart from language studies, this means the end of the Pedagogical Institute in Dresden. It means that my last two students have been taken from me. As a result, I expect to be in retirement by April at the latest."

September 27, 1934: "Reorganization of the student body. They boast about having reduced the student body from 12,000 to 4,000 (in order to avoid the emergence of an academic proletariat). These 4,000 are supposed to form a unified team that lives in the same comrade-housing and wears the same standardized clothing (i.e. barracks and uniforms) for two semesters. Victor Klemperer's life spanned three dictatorships, was shaped by two World Wars, and was marked by being persecuted for being Jewish, forced labor, and discrimination.

May 21, 1940: "In the midst of the chaos of the move since Friday (to a tenement building to which Jewish people were restricted (*Judenhaus*, Caspar-David-Friedrich-Straße 15b) and myself taking more active part than ever before (...) Instructions for handling of my manuscripts: Should anything befall me, they are to be given to Dresden State Library. After circumstances change, that is."

May 22, 1940: "My principal activity on this day: burning, burning, burning for hours on end. I incinerated letters and heaps of manuscripts. It's irritating on the eyes. These things need to be turned over and over again. Otherwise, the manuscript pages, which are tightly packed and stacked, only burn around the edges.

February 8, 1942: "It's always the same emotional seesaw. The fear that my constant writing could land me in a concentration camp. The feeling that it is my duty to write, that it is my life's work, my very calling. The feeling of *vanitas vanitatum*, that my writing is worthless scribble. In the end, I go on writing anyway, the diary, the curriculum."

February 22, 1842: "Then off to the public works service camp on Zellescher Weg. Shoveled snow for the remainder of a day that never seemed to end down in the university quarter (Hempelstrasse, Zeunerstrasse, etc.: names of former colleagues). Clearing snow with a view of the (new) university! Unfortunately, the clock tower of the Lukaskirche was also constantly in full view. Minutes creeping by. Yesterday, Saturday morning, 14 degrees Celsius, frost-covered. Back at Zellescher Weg. Hands totally chapped. Feet flayed as are my legs above the ankles." Many of the events detailed in these entries took place in the immediate vicinity of Weberplatz, where the current Faculty of Education is located.

March 16, 1942: "Cohn went to see Frau Voss with some kind of errand. He said to Eva 'in private' that he had told Dr. Fetscher (Rainer Fetscher, 1895–1945), a physician who is treating him, I was concerned about my manuscripts. Thereupon he was supposed to pass me a message from Fetscher: I could bring my papers to him (Fetscher). That was the first and only sign of decency coming from any of my TU colleagues. In the last few days I've been hearing that the most dreadful concentration camp is supposed to be Auschwitz (or something like that), which is near Königshütte in Upper Silesia. Worked to death in a mine within a few days. Buchenwald, near Weimar, is said to not be necessarily or immediately fatal, but certainly worse than a workhouse."

January 30, 1943: "He (Jacobi, custodian of the Jewish cemetery) told me there will be seven funerals next Wednesday, of which six were to be kept secret. They would be for the bodies of Jews from the Protectorate, who were condemned to death. They were to be brought to Dresden for execution. In the Regional Court (*Landgericht*) house on Münchner Platz, there is an electrically powered guillotine. A head rolls every two minutes. Not just Jewish heads either. The slaughter tends to peak around 6.00pm It was common for as many as twenty-five heads to be taken in a row. I unhesitatingly assume that the term 'common' and the exact figure are exaggerations, but even if only half of what he says is true, then... "

Miraculously, Klemperer survives World War II and manages to avoid the camps. Miraculously, decades-worth of notes from his diaries were preserved. At the center of his life's work is

the production of a history of French literature. His history was released in five volumes between 1925 and 1931. In 1954, a new edition of *Das Jahrhundert Voltaires* was published. This was followed in 1966 by a new edition of *Das Jahrhundert Rousseaus*. Romance languages were the focal point of his teaching activity. Klemperer served as a professor of Romance languages for nearly thirty years. From 1920–1935 he trained secondary school teachers. At the same time, he was a keen observer and analyst of contemporary language. "The language of the Third Reich began in a lyrical, ecstatic style. Then it became the language of war. Then it glided into something that was mechanistic and materialistic." In 1947, Klemperer's survey of National Socialist language entitled *LTI-Lingua Tertii Imperii* is published. Klemperer's perspective makes him particularly sensitive to the way language is used and instrumentalized in the GDR. Only a few years after the war ends, Klemperer reaches the conclusion that a

" 'LQI' is beginning to emerge—a language particular to the 'Fourth Reich.' " His legacy and message endures: A society must always remain vigilant when it comes to the use of language. In 1945, he joins the German Communist Party (*KPD*). In 1950, Klemperer joins the *Volkskammer* as a representative for the Cultural Association of the GDR (*Kulturbund*). In 1952, he is awarded the National Prize of the GDR for achievements in art and literature. Nevertheless, Klemperer succeeded in maintaining his critical political and academic faculties.

In a melancholic and acrimonious note from December 31, 1958, he writes that, "Germany is sort of like an earthworm cut in two. Both parts squirm about, both are contaminated by the same Fascism, both in their own unique way."