

## Foreword

In October 1970—the thirtieth anniversary, to the day, of the deportation of Jews from the Baden, Saarland, and Pfalz regions of Germany—there was widespread astonishment when Professor Walter Schmitthenner published 150 letters written by a victim of these events, Maria Krehbiel-Darmstädter (1892–1943). Schmitthenner’s edition of these letters<sup>1</sup> documented a more or less unique inner path at a time of persecution and atrocity. Maria Krehbiel-Darmstädter had written to friends and family members from Gurs internment camp in the Pyrenees, then later from near Lyon where she was staying on temporary sick leave, and finally from the detention camp at Drancy near Paris, prior to her deportation to Auschwitz on February 11, 1943, where she died soon afterward. Her accounts were measured, detailed, intelligent and precise but spoke less of the outer circumstances in which she was forced to live than of efforts to preserve her moral and spiritual integrity. She also sent remarkable poems of her own, and asked “Have we not, of necessity, all become poets?”<sup>2</sup> Of her letters she said,

They are riddled with errors; they’re imprecise, sentimental and often self-congratulatory. They are, however, true reflections of my striving and learning I. And may serve others through acknowledgement both of what is too much in them; and too little.<sup>3</sup>

In her book published after World War II, *Job and the destiny of the Jewish people*,<sup>4</sup> Margarete Susman made the following remark on the difficulty of writing anything after Auschwitz: “In relation to these events it is probably true to say that every word is either

too much or too little.” And Paul Celan began his poem for Nelly Sachs, “Zurich, At the Stork Inn,” with words alluding to Susman: “We spoke of the too much, and of/the too little.”<sup>5</sup>

Maria Krehbiel-Darmstädter wrote her witness-bearing correspondence at the time Simone Weil died and Nelly Sachs found her poetic voice—and these letters are on a par with the works of Simone Weil and Nelly Sachs both in the expressiveness of their language and their metaphysical and moral power. Shortly before her deportation to Auschwitz, a female friend wrote to say that she would accompany Maria Krehbiel-Darmstädter inwardly by rereading all the letters received from her—with their distinctive thoughts on confronting suffering and death. Maria rejoiced at this. In the last postcard received from her from Drancy, five days before transportation in a cattle truck to the concentration and death camp Auschwitz, she remarked: “The thought that you will read my old letters moves me infinitely. From afar I will add to them, won’t I, what I have to experience at first hand.”<sup>6</sup>

After the war ended, Walter Schmitthenner, Maria Krehbiel-Darmstädter’s godson, collected (with the help of Margot Junod) all the letters and postcards that had survived from the time of the deportation—more than 320 letters,<sup>7</sup> and in 1970 published a little under half of them in unabbreviated form and in the knowledge that Maria had indirectly authorized this in the following passage in a letter:

There are letters that, however personal they may be, acquire greater universality. Then we can say that they are generally valid because they release themselves from the “personality.” You understand me. Letters never ought otherwise to be “published,” yet even the most intimate are. When the necessary time has passed and this therefore becomes permissible. Maybe so that they ripen enough to fall from the tree of life and be harvested? True letters intrinsically bear a personal tinge as their color, the nuance of their landscape and origin. But then they can pass beyond this and be more. Because “it” speaks through them.<sup>8</sup>

Publication of the letters met not only with amazement, admiration and veneration but also bewilderment or unease, albeit only

after some time had passed. The author's very idiosyncratic and unusual way of writing—also in terms of grammar and syntax<sup>9</sup>—was acknowledged, but the sense that she relativized suffering or even made it taboo in her interpretation of events by trying to “render it meaningful” was regarded as problematic.<sup>10</sup> Maria Krehbiel-Darmstädter's letters passed through the camp censor's office at Gurs, and were likely to be opened several times by the authorities before they reached their addressees, which necessitated a degree of reticence in her formulations. But above and beyond this it was said that, because of her “religious and philosophical thought constructs,” the author of these letters had suppressed her sense of grievance until the power of this “spiritual-moral superstructure” grew weaker in the face of her forthcoming deportation to Auschwitz, and finally collapsed altogether, and she *at last* gave vent to an experience of fear and pain, loss, despair and hopelessness.<sup>11</sup> It is true that, compared with other prisoners at Gurs, Maria Krehbiel-Darmstädter rarely spoke of her sufferings, her physical ordeals and afflictions and everything connected with these miseries (“It is true to say, however, that this hardship, the daily struggle for space, or a little light, warmth and freedom of movement, so easily numbs you. Your thoughts soon start to focus just on your own weal and woe, and that of those closest to you in the camp.” Else Liefmann.<sup>12</sup>) In fact, Maria Krehbiel-Darmstädter's general silence about such things was the very opposite of an ultimately failed attempt at self-suppression. Viktor E. Frankl, who survived Auschwitz, wrote in 1945 of the possibility and necessity of maintaining spiritual freedom in extreme circumstances. He described the inmate's survival as a task of “turning his merely suffering state into an inner achievement,”<sup>13</sup> growing beyond himself in a real sense. The “courage to suffer,” said Frankl, was the imperative need at moments of destiny, rather than giving way to grievance and lament that consumed all one's powers. In his memoir of the concentration camp experience, he quoted Nietzsche's phrase, “One who has a ‘why’ to live can bear almost any ‘how,’” and stated:

In the face of our suffering, too, we have to wrestle our way through to the insight that our painful destiny is unique and never to be repeated in the whole cosmos. No one can take this load from us or suffer this suffering in our place. But a unique opportunity for an unrepeatable achievement...lies in the way we ourselves bear this fate and suffering. Suffering, for us, had revealed its potential for inward labors and achievement—of the same kind that induced Rilke to cry out “How much suffering we must bear!”<sup>14</sup>

With this outlook Frankl survived Auschwitz and three other concentration camps—at the same time supporting fellow inmates who caved in to despair. Maria Krehbiel-Darmstädter thought and acted in the same way, accepting and internalizing her suffering and her human anxieties, and sparing the recipients of her letters *because* she was fully aware of their distress (“And my experience tells me that others often find it harder to bear things than the person directly affected.”<sup>15</sup>) and because, in preserving an ultimate inner freedom, she accepted for herself, as Frankl did, the task (or “achievement”) of suffering. “For me, she was always exemplary: not only in her capacity to endure suffering but for the inner greatness and dignity that a person is capable of summoning in the midst of tragedy,” wrote Gertrude Spörri, former priest of The Christian Community, in a letter to Margot Junod on November 3, 1947.<sup>16</sup>

Maria Krehbiel-Darmstädter not only wrote special letters but was also a special person, a “rare woman.”<sup>17</sup> She thought differently from others, and possessed an understanding of herself and the world that exceeded the ordinary, and had tangible effects on her social surroundings. She was tirelessly devoted to her “close companions” at the camp, giving advice and helping those around her to find and maintain their inner dignity. In Drancy the Polish Jews she was locked up with spoke of “Mère Maria.”<sup>18</sup> A fellow inmate<sup>19</sup> wrote:

She was an extraordinary person, and she helped many people there in their distress. She herself passed seemingly unscathed through all privations and degradation, always thinking only of others. She emanated a...powerful spirituality.

Gurs signified a trial, an abyss and a threshold in the “mystery play” of the twentieth century:

It did not matter where you came from or what your past was. Here all that counted was who you were. Here each person had to live by their own strength, prove themselves good or bad, without support or backdrop. Gurs was a testing ground where only the authentic proved its worth.<sup>20</sup>



The source of strength that Maria Krehbiel-Darmstädter drew on in her life was, primarily, Rudolf Steiner’s Spiritual Science. She did not regard this as some kind of “religious and philosophical thought construct” or “spiritual-moral superstructure” but felt it belonged intrinsically to the substance of her inner being, to the “authentic” reality of her existence. Krehbiel-Darmstädter spoke of Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925) as her spiritual “teacher” and of Anthroposophy as the “most important” aspect of her life. Of all the fields of work and institutions initiated or facilitated by Steiner, The Christian Community founded in 1922 as a “movement for religious renewal” was closest to her heart. She felt herself to belong deeply to its world of sacrament and worship, and spoke of it as “my community.”<sup>21</sup> To categorize Anthroposophy as “thought construct” and “superstructure” would have drawn a wry smile from her. Having an intimate knowledge—as she did—of this Spiritual Science and actually practicing the path of meditative schooling, becoming different in the process, growing more mature and entering the domain Schiller described as the human being’s higher “I” (“for it is the great task of our existence to seek accord with the immutable unity of this “I” through all changes and fluctuations”<sup>22</sup>) means becoming simultaneously more circumspect and more differentiated in one’s evaluations, judgments, and formulations.

The contents of Rudolf Steiner’s books and lectures—including numerous texts concerned with the profound challenges and afflictions of the twentieth century—and the path of inner development

taught by Steiner, had to some extent prepared Maria Krehbiel-Darmstädter for the travails of 1940 to 1943. She was familiar with Steiner's Christology, and his teachings about Christ's return "in the etheric realm"—in other words our increasing capacity to experience Christ, specifically in circumstances marked by misery and distress<sup>23</sup>—and this formed part of her ongoing studies. Writing in a letter on August 21, 1942,<sup>24</sup> she says, "You know it is the time of his [Christ's] return." We can scarcely understand a way of living and an outlook like that of Maria Krehbiel-Darmstädter without some knowledge of Anthroposophy, its content and implications. The people Maria came to know in Gurs, on whom she made an unforgettable impression, respected the fact, at least, that she drew on a remarkable spiritual source in her actions, words and letters. Rudolf Steiner had spoken of a forthcoming "culture of selflessness" that would draw on capacities of the highly developed "I," its powers of conscience and responsibility; and it was not hard to see that Maria Krehbiel-Darmstädter, in the religiosity and morality intrinsic to her, belonged to such a culture ("We are made of the very essence of devotion. The most profound thing we learn is a fearlessness that we would never, never otherwise have learned."<sup>25</sup>). By no means did she affirm and accept Gurs as such, but she did embrace the fact that the world's outmoded bourgeois ways of life were falling apart, and she had long since recognized that "homelessness" is part and parcel of our existence in the contemporary world and will continue to be so in future. It was necessary, in her view, to learn to live through the pure powers of the "I," out of the inmost Christ or Sun ground of the human being—free despite all threats and the complete lack of existential security:

For how many years have we no longer had any "safety." No longer free. A state we seem destined for—and that, once resolved after the very greatest battles—allows us to glimpse a new world. The true world of *grandeur*, of the free condition.... Unspeakably difficult to grasp it; since after all it no longer offers any "refuge" as we understand this (such as parental home, mother tongue, name). Even memory "impairs" it. A

wall become transparent—with a clear view to the other world. (Wall in the sense, almost, of the Orthodox Church; except that, instead of the icon, pain-woven veils are stretched across it.)

On the path toward initiation, homelessness is the first “probation” and stage. How hard this is already. But what grace in the fact that today so many people are relieved of this choice and have been “compelled to embark on the journey.” The immensity of this is something we can experience at first hand in the way we grow weak and faint. In the laceration accompanied by unearthly protection. In accompaniment by a truth such as this: “in peace I meet the world.” Departing from everything—that is, leaving all behind—we have gone forward to meet the “I,” accompanied by what is eternal in it, which cannot be lost.

Thus the second world is built; which consists far more strongly of expectancy than the first and—of *a particular* expectancy. (April 11, 1942<sup>26</sup>)

There is no doubt, surely, that these are times of initiation. And—you’re about to see; what I discovered early this morning (after “reading” it) is really true: we are close to allowing ourselves to be deprived of our “I” while we are still alive. And—what is left for the second death, of the physical body, if “I”-consciousness is already extinguished in spiritual death—and the Christ impulse does not mightily and overpoweringly encircle and storm round us? (September 12, 1942<sup>27</sup>)



In a letter written after World War II, the evangelical priest Pierre Toureille, who met Maria Krehbiel-Darmstädter at Gurs, spoke of her “extraordinary nature,” adding: “I am certain that Germany, Europe and the world today has urgent need of a great number of people of her kind.”<sup>28</sup> Given this irrefutable fact, the present volume, which continues the work of Walter Schmitthenner, seeks to document Maria Krehbiel-Darmstädter’s inner path. For this purpose I studied anew the texts of all available original letters and postcards preserved at Mannheim City Archive, along with many additional documents that

relate to her life. I have not tried to write a biography but to gain as precise a picture as possible of the inner path that Maria Krehbiel-Darmstädter actually followed in the years of persecution and deportation, which such terms as “thought construct” and “superstructure” are entirely inadequate to describe. I have quoted from many of her letters—both published and unpublished—in the main body of the book.<sup>29</sup> Part 2 of the book contains longer passages from the letters, which speak for themselves and can stand alone. The selection of letters, with commentaries by Walter Schmitthenner, which the latter published with Verlag Lambert Schneider, Heidelberg, in 1970 after decades of research, has been out of print for a long time now.

The present volume celebrates a human life and is thus partly a commemoration. It also shows what Anthroposophy meant to this person—indeed, what it can become in a particular individual. It would (or does) accord with Maria Krehbiel-Darmstädter’s own views if this account not only reveals aspects of her own individual nature but also intimates the quality of things that were of such spiritual importance to her, and whose significance has so far made little headway in our culture: Rudolf Steiner, the Spiritual Science he founded, and the sacraments of The Christian Community.<sup>30</sup>

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