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Within Four Walls

*The Correspondence between
Hannah Arendt and Heinrich Blücher
1936–1968*

EDITED AND
WITH AN INTRODUCTION
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II

September to December 1939

At the outbreak of World War II, all German male immigrants in Paris were interned in the Olympic Stadium, at Colombes, in the north of the city, and were later sent to various camps in the provinces. Only letters written in French could pass the censor. Heinrich Blücher's letters, written in imperfect French, have survived, but not the letters that Hannah Arendt sent to him. He was released at the beginning of December and allowed to return to Paris. The following eleven letters, selected from the twenty-three that he wrote during this period, are translations from the French.

Olympic Stadium, Colombes
[Early September 1939]

My sweet,

Two nights now I have slept on a nice lawn. Cohn¹ and I found these nights very nice, but quite cool.

I am safe and sound and was signed up today at the center of the stadium. The note from the police serves as an internment paper.

I have met up with all our friends here—including poor Benji. There's talk that there will be Sunday visiting hours, but it seems quite improbable in view of the enormous crowd. Registration etc.—all that will take at least a few more days.

No one here will take into account that we are intending to marry.³ We're going to have to wait a bit. Military things first.

We know nothing, till now. All the servicemen and the agents are full of kindness. I have everything except for my knife, my lighter, and all my matches. I've decided to grow a big beard.

My sweet, do your best. I will do my best, too. It is good to be able to think about you under the stars.

Kisses.

Your H.

One can send packages here by mail. I am in group 38.

[Colombes, September 1939]

My sweet,

There are many "rumors" here about our fate—so I don't believe a thing, and with patience (one definitely needs it) await developments. Word has it that on Wednesday we are to be sent to another camp in the provinces—word also has it that we are to stay here for weeks and weeks. I hardly care about any of that anymore, since I can't change anything anyway. Well, there will be no visiting rights—which I can definitely believe—I can't imagine how they intended to do that.

I am allowed to write only every Saturday. "Word has it" that we can receive packages, but only by mail. So, if possible: red wine, cigarettes, chocolate. No one knows what they want from us. We'll see. Not easy, all this, but it'll be OK.

Darling, I love you with all my heart.

H.

[Villemalard,] 9.18.39

Darling,

I am happy to have received your letter, and I'm so much in agreement with you that I have nothing to say.

Now we are placed in a new camp. Address: H. Bl. Villemalard par Fossé, Loir et Cher, Camp de Rassemblement. Everything is fine here. You can come see me on Sunday, but only for 30 minutes, 12:00–12:30. It's not worth such a long trip—but once will be OK.

I need:

1. My ski boots.
2. My winter jacket.
3. Pants (Manchester velvet, beige or brown).
4. My winter socks.
5. 2 shirts.
6. A stainless steel kitchen knife (not a pointed one!).
7. Mess tin.
8. [...] to wash my head.
9. My small pipe (the one you gave me as a present.)
10. My tobacco pouch.

Malard is 7½ km. from Blois. You have to get a return ticket for Blois, and then figure something out with the other women who'll be coming here.

My sweet, I'm always thinking of you and waiting for you.
Best regards to the two of you.⁴

H.

[Villemalard,] 9.29.39

My dearest,

I received your big package yesterday already—so you see, communications are perfect now. I felt great joy seeing all the little things from our apartment, and I feel cared for by your hands. The second pipe is good for Alfred Cohn, who has become my good friend. Today I got your typed letter—so now I've received two letters and two postcards.

My sweet, there's no reason for you to get all upset. I'm not chatty because there's no place for chattiness during wartime. Above all, one shouldn't make too much of a fuss about oneself. As you can imagine, there are quite a few people here who think of nothing but their own personal destiny—and in response I have gone a little to the other extreme.

Here are some "details": We are now in the beautiful Loire region, in the middle of a tiny village which Cézanne taught me to love. We are quartered like soldiers on maneuver. In other words: pretty prim-

itive, but quite sufficient. We are given coffee in the morning, and twice a day we are given a meal of soup, vegetables, and meat. Bread and wine included. In the morning (wake-up call at 6:30) we do a little work to fix up our place, and every afternoon we go for a little walk on the banks of a tiny river where I sit in the sun for an hour thinking of you, for the weather is still fine. In the afternoon we do our own work. I go to sleep at seven-thirty already.

I am glad that the two of you are safe and sound and I hope you will get a travel pass. It's impossible to set things up from this end. We'll have to wait. I know you will do whatever you can, and I'm calm and wait patiently for the government's decision on our fate. All my best to Charlotte and Chanan.⁵

I will write to you again on Tuesday to give you some more "details." I'm sure you will do your best, as I'm sure you know I'll do mine too. For the time being I don't need any books. I still have my Descartes. I have a weekly allowance of 50 francs—and I also have 200 francs in reserve with the camp commander. If I need money, I'll ask for it.

I love you with all my heart and kiss you.

H.

Kiss Mother.

Villemalard, 10.3.39

My sweet,

I write to you twice a week, and I sent you all the "details" you asked for in my Friday letter. I hope you will be a little happier now.

I was so glad to see Anne⁶ on Sunday, and to hear that all is well with you, and that you can still make yourself useful, and that Mother is so interested in what is going on. If we are to stay here for a while, I hope that the question of a safe-conduct will be settled in the next few weeks. I agree with you completely. Maybe we will begin our military service soon. In that case it will become easier for us to see each other.

Anne hadn't known that Alfred Cohn was here. I don't understand that, because I spoke twice about him in my letters. I asked Anne to report to his wife news about his health. He is holding up better than one could expect.

We had sat down yesterday afternoon on the banks of our little river, where I always find time to think of you. I imagine you in the middle of our little apartment and feel so close to you, my sweetheart, that I feel more warmed inside by these happy memories than outside by the nice October sun.

Darling, I love you, and will keep repeating it to you time and again, for only in the continuity of this expression lies the capacity to give voice to the strength of my feelings.

Some comrades have left to help the peasants. I will do the same when the opportunity arises. As for the rest of us, we do the odd jobs you know all about now both from Anne and my Friday letter. We are awaiting our mobilization.

There are still two or three hours a day where I find time to read my Descartes and my Kant, and I keep making little discoveries. I'm not yet knowledgeable enough to express myself on philosophical matters in French, but I will attempt to do so in the near future, despite the danger of making something of a fool of myself.

I am happy that Charlotte is being sensible, and that she has now found a clinic where she can be delivered.

My sweet, you should not be "ashamed" of sleeping between sheets. Just for that reason, I am happier between my blankets.

I love you with all my heart.

Your
H.

[Villemalard,] 10.17.39

My dearest,

I am still so happy.⁷ Particularly when I think of the great reservoir of love in the three years of our married life.⁸ I still see the reflection of this time in the light of your eyes, and I know it is in mine too. It is through this that I understand the poet H. von Hofmannsthal so well, for it really gives me something to think about.

Over here, we are leading our regular life. There is a chance that good weather might return with the waxing moon. I feel better,⁹ and the doctor has given me permission to take part in the afternoon walk in two days' time to see how healthy I really am, and to check the reaction of my stomach. The Loire is in full wine harvest. That will be

quite nice if the sun stays. I received a letter from two young Jewish comrades who have left for the wine harvest. They are very happy, about both the peasants and the food. Here, the work of fixing up is continuing.

I hope that you have received my letters of the past week now. It is obviously very annoying that the mail isn't functioning properly. But there's a war on, and, like you, I think about all the French women desperately waiting for the mail. Communication by mail will get better with time.

Mother's cake is marvelous. It's a great joy for me. It was really made with love. Thousand thanks.

All my best to Charlotte and Madame Poujollon.¹⁰

I hug you and give you a thousand kisses. For I love you with all my heart.

Your
H.

[Villemalard,] 10.31.39

My darling,

I feel even hotter in my heart and clearer in my head. I thank you so much.¹¹ This way I'm comforted to know you are safe and sound. My beauty, what a present of happiness to have a feeling that one feels so strongly will last a whole lifetime, not changing except to grow stronger. You know, you know.

We had a full moon yesterday (remember?) and today we again have the beautiful sun of this country. We are working a lot to reorganize our camp, for November is knocking on the door. I'm going to get a bed tonight, and I'm impatiently waiting for the sleeping bags to arrive. But this is my only impatience, and it's not that bad, right? Concerning my illness, I will do my best to get better, but it will take some patience if it's an old illness. The woolen stomach-wrap that Madame Cohn¹² made for me is a miracle. A thousand thanks. I had some small kidney attacks, but the doctor calmed them down. I will do my best to do some light work, but there are days when I need a real meal. All this will be done according to the good rules of French good sense, the roots of which I'm still seeking in Descartes with profound joy.

Yesterday I went on a very small walk with Cohn, and saw that he can walk quite well. I now have enough time to think of you, and I have much to think about you, quite simply because I love you, with all my heart and all my sense.

Right now I've been informed that your package has arrived. We are happy. We will sleep tonight in our sleeping bags—that changes my living quarters here a bit into a sort of annex of our apartment, and that's a nice thought.

Kant's works on morality are my great pleasure. Every time one understands new things and new men, one suddenly understands more deeply some of the topics of the great masters of philosophy.

With all my senses,
with all my heart,
with all my reason

Your,
Henri

My best to Mother, the cake is very good.

[Villemalard,] 11.6.39

My darling,

I have suddenly received, all together, the letters and cards you had sent to Colombes,¹³ and I read them many times over with such emotion! In one of these old letters, which will always remain apropos, you pointed out that love letters always have, to some extent, a monotony about them. This is true, but what an incredible monotony! A monotony like the sound of the sea. The more one hears it, the more one wants to hear. A monotony so basic that it gives space and a whole life to all the infinite variations of the world within their "grandiose" frame. This is how I read your love letters, and this is why I need to reread them so many times.

I have also received your card of Monday, and Juliette¹⁴ has visited me. She is really nice, but I feel she is a little too much of an optimist. I can't judge it yet, and I have got used to thinking things through a lot before reaching a conclusion. I've already confirmed the arrival of the sleeping bags, but I am doing it one more time with all the joy that they give us. We have finished our beds and sleep very well. The sleeping bag and the fur are acting as great benefactors to my kidneys.

But better still, I am finally sitting at a table, writing to you, and afterward I will be able to read at this same table we now have in our quarters, made by dear Mr. Knaus, who is proving to be one of the best comrades in the camp. Tomorrow or the day after we are going to get a stove. You see, step by step we're getting there.

I asked you for some winter clothes for the Loinger brothers, the Rehbock brothers and Mr. Lippschitz. They are good fellows. Especially the two Loingers, one of whom has studied carpentry for Palestine. The Loingers' sizes are 43 and 44, and the Rehbocks', 43. Old Mr. Loinger wants to meet you to get some news—I'll let you know beforehand. As for Mr. Hamiel, he no longer needs any material assistance, but please do all you can to inform the authorities of his noble character and his service to France.

There's a possibility that we'll be given by the camp commander a certificate by means of which one can get a safe-conduct in Paris.

My sweetheart, here is some "monotony": I love you with all my heart, with all my reason, with all my sense. I always feel you near me, and yet I miss you wherever I go. I seek you every day and I find you only in my heart, but at least that is completely sure. And this way I cherish the hope actually to find you yourself soon. I have patience, darling, don't run away.

I kiss you.

Your
H.

[Villemalard,] 11.24.39

My dearest love,

I've done my absolute very best to get the certificate. Because of the releases that are being initiated. I hope that you have already spoken to Alfred, who has been one of the first beneficiaries of this.¹⁵ I don't know anything yet about the direction the releases will take, but it seems to me that at first they will consider men with French wives. It is possible that they will then deal with the sick, who, like me, are on a second list with the camp doctor. So, darling, I beg you to be patient one more time. Once the winnowing-out has been completed, the question of the certificate will be relevant again and everything will be arranged.

I received your letter of the 16th, and as always I agree with you completely. Five times already I've declared myself willing to do my duty for France, to assure my right to asylum as the statutory order concerning refugees from Germany provides—and that with all my heart! I hope our fate will be decided soon by the government. As there are problems far more urgent than our own in times of war, we must have patience.

Darling, it's cold here now, but one can admire the beautiful winter landscape in the sun. Yesterday I went for a walk in Villemalard and I thought about many things. Particularly about you. For I, too, feel that you are around me, often so closely that I am tempted to speak to you so I can let you participate in both my impressions of the landscape and my thoughts. I love you, my sweetheart, I love you, I can't express how much.

I kiss you.

Your,
H.

[Villemalard,] 11.28.39

My sweet love,

It is with especially great happiness that I received your little package. First of all, because I see that Cohn arrived safe and sound in Paris. And then because of the contents, particularly the olives; when I eat them, their taste conjures up the beloved image of our happy days in Avignon and on the Côte d'Azur. A thousand thanks, my darling. A health bulletin: I stayed in bed for eight days and now the kidney attacks have subsided again. I hope the break will be long. Now I need to eat well, and I am doing my best. The medical commission has turned me down for the second time. Right now only the cripples are being released. So let us hope the kidney attacks will subside for at least a few weeks. The camp doctor is determined to present me for a third time, but you know that I usually don't count on individual solutions. So I'm never pushy.

Concerning the "important matters," in other words important in relation to the camp, I have the impression that the solution is approaching slowly. I can't see things too clearly yet, but it looks like

soon all men up to forty will be able to join some sort of foreign legion, or a sister legion to the real Foreign Legion, and these men will have all the rights of French soldiers. We are still waiting for the final decision. For those unfit for military service, and there are great numbers of them because the medical authorities require perfect health, there may be the possibility of serving France in a program of voluntary work. Those who are over forty (including me), haven't received orders yet. Word has it that we're under the auspices of a central commission in Paris. I hope that step by step they will find a place for all "men of goodwill" to do their bit to help civilization against barbarism.

But now to the important matters concerning the whole world. Having done some thinking on my sickbed, I find my fundamental opinions concerning the European situation have gotten even stronger. As Napoleon predicted on St. Helena, Europe is faced with the option of whether it wants to be ruled by Cossacks or by Republicans. That's the question. Now the first Cossacks are on the banks of the Rhine, and the last are still in Moscow. This is the most dangerous period in the history of civilization. And as M. Daladier¹⁶ has stated in view of the situation: "It is now for France to take command"—it remains for a foreigner of goodwill to add: "Yes, for the world needs it!"

And all special viewpoints must be placed beneath this general viewpoint. Let every man do his duty.

In this initial period of the great war, which stands under the sign of a war of nerves, we must all stay calm and strong, like the people of France.

So, my darling, patience and more patience. In a few days I hope to get a certificate for you, and in a few weeks at last I will see you again. In the depths of my being there is a staying power that has its roots in my love for you, which is everywhere, in all my being and all my life. I love you with all my senses, with all my reason, and all my heart.

I kiss you.

Your,
H.

My best regards to Mother, Charlotte, and their baby.
I wrote this in bed, forgive my handwriting.

[Villemalard,] 12.4.39

My sweet love,

I received your letters and the little package. I am enchanted by your artistry in cake-baking, and particularly by this special cake. As for your letters, I understand your worries perfectly, but you are wrong, darling. I'm doing my best to get better. The camp doctor is very knowledgeable and is doing his best, but I definitely value the instructions of my Paris doctor, and follow them, because, of course, he knows my case better than anyone else. But, darling, the camp doctor's instructions are almost the same. I didn't want to give you all the details of my illness, since one shouldn't alarm one's wife. But I see Alfred has spilled the beans, so it is better for me to give you the facts. For the last two weeks I've been lying in bed. For six weeks now the doctor has disallowed all work. Also, I don't participate in roll calls and walks. Whenever I mentioned walks in my letters, I meant walking about in front of the building. For quite a while now, the camp doctor has wanted to put me in the hospital. I resisted for quite a while, because the hospital was full and I didn't want to take up the space. But a recent kidney attack made it necessary for me to enter the hospital. All my meals strictly follow the diet. Those are the facts.

I have received my medicines, and I swear to you that I'm taking them. The camp doctor wants to present me again before the medical commission. But enough of this sad illness, my darling.

Lying in bed, I always have time to think about you, and it's always with surprise that I come to the conclusion that I love you with all my heart. And this conclusion will always stay the same. You have known this the three years we've lived together, but my reasons for loving you increase every day. One of the consistent reasons is the fact that I could never once take you for an "idiot." Another one of these enduring reasons is that since the first days of knowing you, I could no longer see things without relating them to you. I suddenly felt, You're no longer alone, my friend! It has always been like that, and so it will remain. Let me chat a bit more to brighten you up a little, since I'm not with you and this is now the only way I can pay you compliments. So, another one of the main reasons for my love: our points of view in regard to the big things in life are always the

same. There's no difference between us. This is how it is and this is how it will stay.

My darling, my sweet love, I am happy when I think you are mine. And I think a lot, darling.

I kiss you.

Your,
H.