

Zum Briefwechsel
Wolfgang METZGER - Max WERTHEIMER
1929 - 1937

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Michael WERTHEIMER, Sohn Max WERTHEIMERS, stellt hier den Briefwechsel zwischen seinem Vater und dessen bedeutendstem Schüler im deutschsprachigen Raum vor: dem Mitbegründer und Ehrenvorsitzenden der „Gesellschaft für Gestalttheorie und ihre Anwendungen“ (GTA), Wolfgang METZGER (1899 - 1979).

Den Briefwechsel veröffentlichen wir im nächsten Heft (GESTALT THEORY, Vol. 20, Heft 1, 1998) zusammen mit einigen z. T. bisher unveröffentlichten Photos.

When Max WERTHEIMER died suddenly on October 12, 1943, he left many papers, reprints, lecture notes, books, letters, and other documents both at his home at 12 The Circle, in New Rochelle, NY, as well as at his office at the New School for Social Research in downtown Manhattan, in New York City. The papers that had been at his home are currently stored at the Department of Psychology of the University of Colorado at Boulder, while those that had been at the New School are now deposited at the Manuscripts and Archives Division of the New York Public Library.

Both sets of documents have been examined by several different scholars, and an effort has been made to select items of correspondence in the collection, including original letters, carbon copies, and drafts of letters, and to arrange them by correspondent and by date. Among the many folders making up this collection is a file on Wolfgang METZGER, which contains carbon copies of three letters from Max WERTHEIMER to METZGER, a couple of letters from Mrs. METZGER to Mrs. WERTHEIMER, and almost twenty letters from METZGER to WERTHEIMER. The set is clearly incomplete, even for the eight years or so of correspondence that have been identified; some of the letters refer to queries in intervening correspon-

dence that has not been found, and a few letters themselves are incomplete, with missing pages. Max WERTHEIMER probably kept those letters that he considered important in some way; and the others have been lost. So this collection of correspondence is fragmentary and to some extent haphazard.

Even though the collection is incomplete, it is a rich source of detailed information about the relationship between the two men: Max WERTHEIMER, one of the original founders of Gestalt theory, and his disciple Wolfgang METZGER, almost twenty years younger than his mentor, who was to be identified as the chief promulgator of Gestalt theory in the German-speaking world during the last three or four decades of his life. It also provides reports about several of the major studies carried out during the eight-year period of its existence under the aegis of Gestalt theory; METZGER supervised the completion of several doctoral dissertations that had been begun under WERTHEIMER. WERTHEIMER repeatedly queried METZGER about the fates of Gestalt doctoral students after WERTHEIMER had emigrated to the United States, and METZGER dutifully reported both on their progress toward the doctoral degree and on their careers after completing their dissertations and examinations. Much can also be read both substantively and between the lines about METZGER's relationship with Wolfgang KÖHLER.

The correspondence focuses in part upon the work of graduate students first at Berlin and then at Frankfurt; WERTHEIMER had obtained the chair at Frankfurt just before the correspondence starts, in 1929. METZGER came to Frankfurt in 1931, and there is a lacuna of more than two years, from early 1931 to mid 1933, in the correspondence. Early in 1933 WERTHEIMER left Frankfurt for Marienbad, in western Czechoslovakia, and then emigrated to New York that September. Much of the correspondence also concerns the journal *Psychologische Forschung*, the chief publication outlet of the Gestalt school. KÖHLER and WERTHEIMER were among the co-editors of the journal and Adhémar GELB and Friedrich SCHUMANN were also involved, and METZGER helped in the editorial process by rewriting, shortening, and in other ways modifying manuscripts for the journal (several of them based on doctoral dissertations at Berlin and Frankfurt), and made suggestions about the contents of various issues. It is clear, though, that WERTHEIMER and especially KÖHLER took primary responsibility for the contents of the journal - METZGER's role was subordinate to both. Indeed the last letter in the series refers to an incurable rift in the relationship between KÖHLER and METZGER that was occasioned by METZGER's having made some editorial decisions that went directly counter to KÖHLER's orders.

The personal relationship between METZGER and WERTHEIMER emerges in the correspondence. METZGER was respectful of WERTHEIMER, took care of various tasks WERTHEIMER asked him to undertake, and expressed interest in events in WERTHEIMER's family life. Clearly METZGER's oldest child, Till, played with WERTHEIMER's third surviving child, Lise (inexplicably spelled „Liese“ by the METZGERs in the letters) while both families were in Frankfurt, and there was a warm personal relationship between the two families. Nevertheless,

METZGER and WERTHEIMER never achieved a degree of intimacy with one another that was sufficiently close to yield use of the informal „Du.“ Perhaps this was due to their perceived difference in status or to their differences in age, but METZGER (with the exception of a late letter, in which he addressed both WERTHEIMERS with „Liebe Leute“) consistently opened his letters with „Lieber Herr Wertheimer“ or „Lieber Herr W.“ as the salutation, and signed his full name or used the initials „W.M.“ or just „M.“, while WERTHEIMER's letters opened with „Lieber Herr Metzger“ or „Lieber Metzger“ or even „Lieber Herr Dr. Metzger“. Toward the end of the correspondence, in the last two letters, a hint of stiffness is especially noticeable.

More than a hundred different names occur in the letters. Some are readily identifiable, but some (including occasional abbreviations) remain obscure. Dr. Hans-Jürgen WALTER has prepared a directory of these names, together with comments on many of them, which is appended at the end. He also undertook the arduous task of trying to decipher all of the handwritten letters, which were written mostly in the now archaic SÜTTERLIN script and, with a very few exceptions, managed to decode all of them. Max WERTHEIMER's late widow, Anni, deciphered several of the letters about fifteen years ago, which helped to remove a few remaining ambiguities (especially concerning the postscript to METZGER's letter of 15.10. 1929).

This correspondence, as a unique corpus, manages to bring vividly back to life the interactions among some of the earlier significant figures in the history of Gestalt psychology. Gestalt theory, the research it spawned, the everyday concerns about details of experimental work and of the preparation of manuscripts for publication, as well as the complex interpersonal relationships among the principals and those around them - KÖHLER, METZGER, WERTHEIMER, LEWIN, DUNCKER, LAUENSTEIN, GOLDSTEIN, HORNBOSTEL, KOFFKA, NEWMAN, OPPENHEIMER, TURHAN and others - come to life in these letters in a manner that can never be captured in a textbook or a learned treatise. The flesh and blood of these human beings is evident on every page. There was no television or video recording between 1929 and 1937, and audio records as well as non-commercial use of film were still very crude. These letters provide the next best technology for capturing and preserving some of the real-life events during the later years of maturity of classical Gestalt psychology in Germany.

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