A Letter to Helene Berg

Introduction

Soma Morgenstern (1890-1976) was an Austrian Jewish journalist and novelist; his family language was Yiddish, but he wrote in German, working as a Vienna correspondent for the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung and publishing several important novels that were later translated into English. The Austrian authors Robert Musil ("The Man Without Qualities") and Joseph Roth ("Radetzky March") were among his friends, and he was especially close to Alban Berg, becoming his literary advisor. In 1938, just before the Anschluss, he left Austria and made his way to New York. His memoir of Berg, Alban Berg und seine Idole (Alban Berg and his Idols), was published in 1995. The letter below, written in 1970 and probably never sent, is an extract from that book; it is translated by Mark DeVoto and published here by permission of the author's son, Dan Morgenstern. DeVoto February 27, 2013

Sketched in the hospital in Englewood, New Jersey, in January 1970, where, suffering from heart trouble, in my sleepless hours, I believed I had come to the end of my road. Recollections of the unfinished business [*Versäumnisse*] in my life ran through me now and then with the evil persistence of the Furies. Not the least among them, over and over, the failure to have written this letter as early as the fall of 1968 and to have sent it to my friend, the widow of my dear friend Alban Berg.

****

Dear Helene,

I attach the word "dear" to your name not out of a habit that is now nearly fifty years old. And not without wistfulness [*Wehmut*]. There was a time when that word "dear," in connection with your name, was not enough. At that time I would have gladly combined your name with a truer word: beloved. That was too early, like the feelings. At that time, I knew you as I also knew Alban—not personally, but from sight. Then came a time when you would have gladly heard that little word "beloved", and just as gladly combined it with my name. But as my feelings were too early, yours were too late: by then I was already in the deepest friendship with you and Alban. At that time there was a rough day in the friendship that bound both of us, Alban and me, together. It was after we had been together, the three of us, in the Café Stöckl. You were close to tears. Alban took you back home, came back to me, and we had a long conversation. He said to me: "It cannot go on like this, Soma. Helene complains that you were 'horrible' to her, and we have to talk about it. " To make a long story short: Alban had the nobility, the honesty, by his very nature, to say to me, loud and clear, that he was no jealous husband,

and he gave us *plein pouvoir*. With your approval. I declined. Not because I was so timid. Not because I believed in "outdated taboos." Simply because I myself was not so pure and free of jealousy as Alban was. Back then I was certainly no saint. I had love affairs with married women. But in such cases I didn't know their husbands, indeed I avoided getting to know them, and if I did already know them, I broke off relations with them. — Alban didn't take my objections seriously. He was very sad, and said: "Helene won't forgive you. You don't know her. She will destroy our friendship. "I begged him to leave it to me, with the assurance that I would find a way out. "How will you do it? "he wanted to know. "Why do you believe that you'll succeed?" "For two reasons," I told him. "I have a way that I have already tried out. In such cases I talk the woman into believing that *she* is the one who isn't willing, that she doesn't have the courage. "He repeated: "You don't know Helene. She is too smart not to notice that. "If the woman isn't smart, naturally it's easy. Then she believes me, that she doesn't want it. If a woman is as wise as Helene, then she notices the trick and for a long time she holds it against me. Later, however, she's happy, even grateful that I played the trick. "We'll see, "said Alban; "I hope you're right." But he said goodbye to me with a sigh, which left me even sadder. But then he came back and asked: "You said you had two reasons. What's the other reason?"— "Alban, I won't tell you the other reason until I succeed. "

The other reason was you, Helene, and your love for Alban. I already noted then that my influence over Alban was so valuable to you that you would have forgiven me all my sins. You noticed that from year to year, though I had taken a good piece of it away with increasing success, I had admittedly not cured Alban of his fanatical devotion to Schoenberg. You also noticed that I had talked him out of "épater le bourgeois"and also other disturbingly romantic attitudes. That was more important to you than the confusion of your own feelings, for which I, perhaps, was not completely blameless. For this reason I forgave you much. That was your great merit. It was to your merit, too, that you were more ambitious for Alban than he was himself, who—like every genuinely noble Viennese—never felt very important. You often pushed him to work, even forced him. And that was necessary. Not because Alban was lazy, like so many fools would believe, even well-meaning fools. But because like many great artists, he thought over every planned new work hesitantly and had an actually physical timidity about beginning it. Your help cannot be too highly valued. For these and other reasons, which I don't need to mention, Helene, I have forgiven you a great deal. But not forgotten. For example: Alban came to me once. At that time I was already no longer living in Hietzing. He brought out of his briefcase a thick envelope and said: "I have something unpleasant to show you. I've received this form to fill out. The people from the Reichsmusikkammer [in Germany] are inviting me to send them proof of my `Aryan' origins. I don't need to tell you how repugnant this is to me. But I have to do it. "I could see how repugnant it was to him as I looked at him. But I didn't agree that he had to do it. "I wouldn't advise you *not* to do it," I said to him, "if I knew that it would be useful to you. Your music isn't 'Aryan,' and it's not going to seem any less 'degenerate' to Dr. Goebbels just because you have proof that you're 'Aryan.' "Dr. Wiesengrund-Adorno invited me to come to Frankfurt and compose music for a film about Storm's *Schimmelreiter*. Of course I didn't go there and I don't want to write music for any film. But what should I do with

this rubbish [*Wisch*]? Ernst Křenek also received one like that, and he told me what he did with it. What did he do? He threw it in the wastebasket—perhaps because he didn't want to plug up his toilet. With a sigh Alban said: "Ernst Křenek isn't married to Helene." I forgave you for this, but, as you can see, I didn't forget.

It was my good luck to have fled from Vienna just one day before Hitler marched in. An "Aryan" friend, Frau von Demel, accompanied me to the Westbahnhof. Her husband knew, from a reliable source, that the last train to Paris, on which one could leave without a permit, would be leaving; the next day a permit would be needed. On the way I begged my friend to accompany me to my mother's house, and also to your home in Hietzing, so that I could say goodbye. She had some reservations, and talked me out of it. I was lucky enough to escape from the fiends. From Paris I begged Inge to call you and and tell you that I was already in Paris. A week later came the Lifczis brothers, one of whom was Alban's attorney. As I anxiously asked him about you, both brothers laughed at me, and the older one, Hugo, said, "Let me reassure you, Soma. A week before Hitler came in, Frau Berg sent us a letter terminating our relationship and signed 'Heil Hitler.' Nothing will happen to her." I didn't forget that, either, perhaps because I seem to have been really stupid.

What I've written here hasn't been important any more for a long time. I've written it down more for me than for you, in order not to come to you unprepared, to tell you that our friendship, unfortunately, has ended. A friendship that has lasted so long doesn't die so easily. It has lasted a few years, as I've tried to set forth here. Nevertheless it has often seemed to me as though I would never manage to take my farewell of this friendship. Before my illness I made a weak attempt to read the riot act to you, for a reason that was really not important to me. At that time I really did intend to say to you what I now must say. So much the better. Now I can precisely fix the time when this friendship died. It happened in your home in 1968, at my last visit. You had picked out for me a few of my letters, letters that I had written to Alban, and you promised to look for some others, although I knew perfectly well that you didn't need to look for them. You knew very well where they are, and you had long since decided which you would "pick out " for me and which you would suppress. It was a kind of censorship. I refrained from saying to you that I could see right through this censorship. And I could see that there would be no sense in reproving you, because I was certain that you had long since destroyed whatever didn't suit you. And I divined that we were probably seeing each other for the last time, for I did not plan to see Vienna ever again. In a wistful mood I sat across from you and waited only for my friend, Dr. Conrad Lester, who had promised to fetch me from your home. At that moment you said it. Something that obviously you had already been preparing for many years. Something that you didn't want to write down, because you were afraid, and with good reason, that you would be sticking your neck out too far. Without looking at me. With a glance, as though you were pondering a missing but fatal fact, you said, in a soft voice: "To think that a doctor would do something like that! Simply to cut!" Although the fatal deed lay 33 years in the past, I knew immediately what deed you meant. The deed, that *you* committed. Not the doctor.

I have come to this point, Helene, to say to you: God knows, you have reason to forget what happened and how. But you'll never make me believe that I could ever forget anything regarding Alban. And for this reason, I'm now writing down what did happen.

Alban had already written to me during the holidays that he was suffering from a carbuncle. And when he came back to Vienna in the fall, it seemed as though the illness was over. But it became apparent that the irritation had not healed. In December 1935 it had reached a point that, when I visited him in his room, he could not sit on his sofa. He sat better on a chair, because he could sit with half of his buttocks on it, so as not to stress the other half. On my second visit to your home, the mood was good. Alban felt better, and you told me what had happened: "I took my scissors, boiled them well, and cut the boil open. " Alban praised you for your courage in doing this, and felt as though he had been relieved from the long illness. I had no experience with carbuncles, but I remembered that Inge's Uncle Heinz had once had one, and had been cured in a sanatorium with injections. I was dismayed by your news, and as soon as I got back to my house I called my friend, Dr. Kasper Blond, a surgeon known to you by name, and told him about the case, without naming names. Dr. Blond was horrified. Horrified, Helene, by your attempt at surgery. He thought that a sepsis, blood poisoning, was a possibility to be feared. Thereupon I called Alban and suggested to him, as urgently as I dared, that he should consult a doctor. But Alban calmed me. He felt fine, he said, and that was the main thing. I called again the following day, and he stuck to his guns—he felt well, and he talked me out of my anxiousness. One day later, on a Saturday, I received the first copies of my novel, *Der Sohn eines verlorenen Sohnes*. I knew how Alban would be pleased, and I telephoned to tell him the good news, proposing that I bring him a copy in person at home. Alban wouldn't have that; he would come into town himself, to the Café Museum, to get the book. Of course you came with him. I was happy about this turn of events. Immediately I called Dr. Blond, reminded him of the case I had told him about—this time telling him the name of the person on whom the homemade operation had been performed—and begged him to come to the Café Museum. His wife, the sister-in-law of Jascha Horenstein and an enthusiast of Schoenberg, urged him on also. And although at that moment he had other things to do, he was there. As he had done at home, prior to the intervention, Alban preferred not to sit on the upholstered bench at the Café Museum, but on a chair. He was nevertheless animated, and you both were happy about my pleasure in the especially successful format of the book, which you already knew so well in manuscript. I took advantage of this good mood and mentioned that my friend, Dr. Blond, was sitting right there in the coffee house, and I proposed that you consult him. You, Helene, wouldn't hear of it. Alban followed you. Because I was suspicious of you, because of your well-known stinginess, suspicious that you didn't want any interference from a well-known surgeon, I assured you both that Dr. Blond never sent any bills to my friends whom I recommended to him, and no questions asked. Even then you declined, and Alban, unfortunately, followed your lead again. Two days later, early in the morning, Alban's attorney, my friend Dr. Lifczis, telephoned me and read me the sensational headline in the *Neues Wiener Journal*: Alban Berg brought to the Rudolfsspital.

When I visited him in the hospital for the first time, Alban lay with many other patients in a general ward. As I left, you accompanied me outside, and in tears, in the hospital corridor, you complained: "Professor Demel is being horrible to me. Can you speak to him? Please!" I promised you I would. But what was there to speak about? I accepted that he knew, from you, what had happened, and because of that he was horrible to you. What could I have done to change anything? To tell him that you meant well? He would certainly have preferred that there were fewer people who knew about it; unfortunately, those who knew weren't just a few. For just as you had boasted to me about what a courageous deed you had committed, so had you boasted to many friends—good friends, and so-called friends who after Alban's tragic end didn't hesitate to speak about it freely.

In 1957 I was in Vienna again, for the second time since the war. Unfortunately I didn't find you there. I wrote to you in Carinthia, and got from you the information (on a picture postcard) that you couldn't come, because a stove had to be repaired in your summer house. In Vienna I then heard for the first time that Alban had been improperly treated by a doctor by the name of F., and had died as a result of this improper treatment. I learned later from Alma Mahler just how little this Doctor F. had had to do with the matter. Alma, a friend of Doctor F., told me that you and Alban and Doctor F. had been invited by some family to dinner. Alban complained to him of his pain, and the kindly Doctor F. was persuaded to examine the carbuncle in the bathroom. Doctor F. was very upset that Alban was not under a doctor's care, and advised him urgently to go to him or to another doctor the next day—as you know, that didn't happen. I didn't know Doctor F. in Vienna. But I got to know him in Paris. We were together in a concentration camp in France, where we had ample opportunity to talk about our common circle of friends. He told me when he had seen you and Alban for the last time, and that agreed precisely with Alma's account.

At that time, in 1957, I attempted to find out who had invented and spread around that story about Doctor F.'s treatment. I would gladly have talked with you about it. But you had refused to come back to Vienna. I didn't think it important enough to correspond with you about it. After all, what wouldn't they be gossiping about in Vienna! Even in more beautiful times.

Like all Jews, I lost many who were near to me. Above all the closest ones who were killed by the fiends: my mother, a brother, a sister, and many other relatives. Since Alban left us, 36 years have passed. But I can say it with a clear conscience: in those years, hardly a day went by when I would not have painfully felt the loss of Alban, this most beloved of friends. How could it be otherwise! By the calendar, he was fifty when he died. As a man he was no more than forty. As an artist he was still younger. What would Alban still have had to say to us and the whole world! How much joy he would have been able to experience still, that was destined for his work. When a living being dies, a whole world is lost. How many worlds have been lost in the being that was Alban Berg! And for such an absurd reason. I believe in the Creator of the World. But I don't believe that He takes the measure of our days here on Earth. Even if one believes in

destiny, not in God, it was a depraved error of destiny. In an absurd hour, when your surgical infidelity occurred to you.

After it happened, I feared for your life. And I didn't breathe a sigh of relief until the first days after the burial, when I visited you and noticed that you had immediately saved yourself through the world of spiritualism. Even in those days the furniture in the apartment was creaking, and it was Alban—he was doing it, and thus he was still with you at home. When I came back to Vienna in 1950, to see you once again, it was to experience once again a relief that Alban still remained in communication with you through the creaking of the bookshelves. Perhaps it was still true in 1957, when I didn't meet with you in Vienna. Not until 1968—and this time I was often in your home, for I was five weeks in Vienna—did I notice the change in you. Not even once did the furniture creak. Everything changes, as long as we go on living, even the different kinds of consolation. Already, years ago, you had attempted to make me contemptuous of too long "clinging to earthly clothes," as you put it.

But there was no more of that spiritualist superstition, that had saved you. I didn't understand that, not until you took the daring step of tempting even me to follow your way out: Doctor F. did it, not you. No, Helene, I cannot follow you down that path. I have forgiven you much. But not at this price. Because Doctor F. is no longer alive, should he be the guilty one? You have lived too long with the Nazis. Obviously something still clings from the cry: the Jew is to blame. One day, in a moment of truth, you will once more regret it. If you push back all forms of your superstition to find your true faith, you'll be grateful to me that I wouldn't have any part whatever in your life of lies. As God commands.

Translated from *Alban Berg und seine Idole: Erinnerungen und Briefe*, by Soma Morgenstern
(Lüneburg, zu Klampen, 1995)