The Barnard Bulletin

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A VERMONT WRITER

BY MARGARET EDWARDS

This column is an offering of The Danforth Library in Barnard and a chance to introduce a Vermont writer who deserves wider renown.

This is part two of of a two part column dedicated to Dorothy Thompson. Part one was published in the December 2022 Issue of the Barnard Bulletin.

Dorothy Thompson **1893 – 1961**

Dorothy Thompson cira 1926

In the 1930s, people who closely followed European affairs—journalist Dorothy Thompson chief among them—became increasingly alarmed at developments in Germany. Hitler was often on her mind. In March of 1933 she found herself back in Germany interviewing the "little man," as she called him. Hitler didn't make a good first impression, and Thompson published her view that he was not to be taken too seriously. He would never rise to greater power, she thought. But soon enough, she would change her mind. And when she changed her mind, finally convinced that Hitler was a dangerous psychopath, she did so in the public medium of her newspaper column.

The life that Thompson and her husband Sinclair (Red) Lewis were leading at Twin Farms—with their sweet child at their knees and many friends coming for visits—might have been perfect, had it not been for Lewis's binge drinking. The fights he had with his wife—both in the United States and during their times together in Europe—escalated in number and intensity. She would come home to their New York apartment to find that, in a drunken spree, he had wrecked the place. His rages frightened her. People who visited became alarmed at the vitriol between them. In February of 1933, Lewis stayed in London while Thompson worked in Vienna. She was annoyed with him, did not want his company, and did not write; but he wrote to her apologetically:

> *My lamb, be happy! Vermont!...I long to be there with you. It is true, isn't it, that there will be apple trees, and flaming lilies, and the moon over the low mountains and you and me, after dinner, sitting smoking on the terrace, and inside, when it becomes chilly, the fireplace and lamplight and lots of books? Love me, so that we can go home"*

Eventually, as usual, she forgave him. But the marriage had moved another step closer to its eventual disintegration.

On August 25, 1934, back in Germany to assess the Nazi situation further, Dorothy Thompson herself became the subject of news: She was suddenly expelled from the country by decree. She had been in Germany five times since Hitler's ascent, but this time his power extended to "punishing" her for her views. Her expulsion made world-wide headlines—expelling a foreign correspondent was scandalous because it was so rare. (Of course, it's not at all rare today.) Thompson became a heroine of sorts for having irked Hitler. And she began to write and speak of the menace of Hitler in very stark terms. She became a Cassandra figure, warning what would happen if America remained unprepared for the world war that was looming. It was at this point that "Dorothy Thompson" became a household name.

Before her marriage to Lewis, Thompson had been a valued foreign correspondent; after the marriage, she began to write not only for newspapers, but also for American magazines—especially *The Saturday Evening Post*. This made her even more widely read. The period of her greatest fame would be 1935-1940, the pre-war years. Lewis did not take her new success very well. *He* wanted to be the dominant partner, and he had been so for a time in the afterglow of receiving the Nobel Prize. Moreover, Lewis hated politics and political argument, and he soon found his household was full of it, much to his disgust.

There was another problem: Thompson felt keenly that little Michael needed other children to play with. By the mid-1930s Twin Farms was hosting so many young sons and daughters of the people she had hired to work there that the place "resembled a kindergarten"—said Lewis, who hated having children around. He didn't even like having his new son near him. And it was only at Thompson's insistence that he ever saw his grown son

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from his earlier marriage, Wells Lewis. Whenever Thompson invited the young man to visit, she herself spent the most time with him.

As anyone could have predicted, a great deal of entertaining happened at Twin Farms. Most of the guests were friends who were glad to get away from the city, and they stayed for days, or weeks. Some even came for a month or two. And as the 1930s wore on, refugees from Europe came piling in as well. There was a time if you went into the Barnard General Store, you could hear more German spoken than English. In various letters from that time, Vermonters describe seeing quite a few visitors dressed in *lederhosen* on the streets of Woodstock.

Vincent Sheehan, a younger friend who was often invited to Twin Farms, wrote in his biographical memoir *Dorothy and Red* (1963) about the pre-war years:

> *[Dorothy's alarm at developments in Germany] was called "fanaticism" and even "hysteria" by many of the time who did not feel that Hitler was a real danger to our own country and did not care about any other. The shortsightedness of the 1930s will ever be a marvel to students in generations to come. Hitler's plan was not only obvious, but was loudly and repeatedly proclaimed. He explained it in an enormous book, Mein Kampf, which was not translated into English until the decade was nearly over and found few readers even then. The Nazi songs and slogans were treated very near as jokes in the United States…The commonest slogan of Hitler's followers was: "Today Germany is ours, tomorrow the world." And yet there were important elements in the United States, even as late as 1940, which would not accept the idea that we were part of that world. They were not Nazis. They were simply …unwilling to face the struggles and sacrifices which history demanded. Many of them truly believed that it would be quite easy for us to let Hitler conquer everybody else, if he so desired, and leave us alone.*

Against this background, Thompson presented her arguments and fought with everything she had—as journalist, writer, speaker, woman and patriot—to change public opinion and government policy. While some influential Americans thought her overwrought and shrill, Winston Churchill deemed her the most important and effective writer urging Americans to go to war. What she had done for the Allies, he said after the war, "can never be overestimated."

In the 1930s, Thompson was not only sounding a national alarm, she was privately doing whatever she could to aid the Jewish flight from Europe. She was no snob when it came to saving people—she was interested in helping whomever she could. She quickly became the "go to" person for anyone wishing asylum, though she was never the head of any organization coordinating such relief. And from her wide circle of European friends, she invited as many as she could to flee to America.

Thompson was even instrumental in the creation of a famous little book. Titled in its English translation *The Farm In The Green Mountains*, it was originally written in German after the war and published in 1949 as *Die Farm in den Gruenen Bergen.* Its author was Alice Herdan-Zuckmayer, wife of famous German playwright Carl Zuckmayer. In 1939 this couple came to Vermont at their friend Dorothy Thompson's instigation. The slender, classic memoir, still famous in Germany, describes a year in the Zuckmayers' Barnard life. Under Thompson's wing, they rented a farm nearby. The farmhouse and one outbuilding still exist. Occasionally, even today, German tourists show up hoping to inspect the Zuckmayers' idyllic refuge—the place where the two wrote copiously and milked goats and waited for World War II to be won, so they could return to Europe. Which they did.

What made Dorothy Thompson so widely known and so influential in her day was that she didn't just write about war and politics, she wrote with "verve and dash" about a host of other subjects, even describing the butterfly collection of the emperor of Japan. Fearlessly she would attack or extol a popular idol in any field (from Walt Disney to Toscanini). Vincent Sheean admired her "zest for life and her intrepidity on all subjects."

> *She would assault popular fallacies or absurd forms of advertising or anything else that seemed to her worth the trouble; she would praise a book or a play if she saw fit; she used to make lists of her favorite people or stories or scenes. One of her most diverting efforts [in]1939 consisted of an outline for an "ideal party," to which she named the guests and gave her reasons for wanting them. This kind of thing, which sounds more like popular magazine [fare] than a newspaper [column] was immensely readable to a vast public and contributed much to her national popularity, though it is not part of her historic significance. The point is…that she could never have acquired such a public [of many millions] through [writing about] politics alone—[Sheehan]*

Thompson's divorce from Sinclair Lewis occurred after thirteen years of marriage, though during some of that time they had stopped living together, and there were still many letters exchanged between them. Their son Michael, as he grew up, turned out to be a bright boy with severe behavioral problems, who caused his parents no end of worry. (As an adult, he inherited his father's fondness for drink.) In 1939, Red Lewis's lawyers notified Thompson that the Twin Farms property would be made over to her. It would be hard to overemphasize how much Twin Farms had come to mean to her.

The divorce from Sinclair Lewis seemed to spell an end to Thompson's chances at marital happiness. Certainly she herself thought so. But the war years (1940-1945)

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were not just years of career success with interviews, speeches, and opinion pieces, as well as broadcasts and incessant travels. "She would never have expected to fall in love again at the age of 49" writes Kurth—but that is what happened.

In the summer of 1942, Maxim Kopf, a poor artist and penniless Jewish refugee, a Czech who had been born in Vienna and raised in Prague, came to "Twin Farms" to paint Dorothy Thompson's portrait. He was the guest of a Berlin refugee who was her research assistant for the newspaper column. Thompson at first refused to sit for a portrait, but then relented. She and "dear Max" fell in love at once.

Kopf was a burly, no-nonsense, kindly, forthright person. He was also married to a woman in New York whom he rarely saw. Even so, the first wife only reluctantly gave him up so he could marry the famous journalist who described him as "the man I should have married all along." They wed at the Universalist Church in the center of Barnard on June 16, 1943. One friend described it as "the wedding to end all weddings."

1943 Dorothy Thompson and Max Kopf on their wedding day.

In their fifteen years together, Maxim Kopf made Dorothy Thompson feel safe and protected. He watched out for her and tried to make her life easier; he made few demands and did not mind that some of her fancy friends thought of him as beneath her, as a mere "house husband," limited in his conversation and a second-rate artist. In October of 1957, perhaps because her husband's health was failing and finances were pinched, Thompson sold the bulk of the Twin Farms property: the main house and a large share of its acreage.

Expressing herself happy to be done with "farming," Thompson kept the small, old farm house, consolidating her furnishings and living there with Kopf. (This house her son, Michael, inherited from her. Then it passed to Michael's younger son Gregory and, by accident, was burned down twenty-six years after his grandmother's death, in November of 1987.)

Thompson adored her third husband, and Kopf adored her. Their happiness lasted until his death of a heart attack on July 7, 1958, at Mary Hitchcock Hospital in Hanover, New Hampshire. He lies buried in the oldest Barnard cemetery, close to the center of the town.

In the months following Kopf's death, Thompson gave up her newspaper column and more or less retired. She began to envision writing her own memoirs, and she decided that she would spend the winter months not in New York, as usual, but at an apartment in Hanover, near Dartmouth's library, to aid her research. But in Hanover the creative juices were not flowing. She never could get this project off the ground because she was, by this time, very ill with heart disease herself.

Dorothy Thompson's last few years were frustrating ones that she spent trying to bring herself to work on her autobiography, as well as trying to help her son, Michael, sort out his life. In the summer of 1960, she visited Sinclair Lewis's grave in Sauk Center, Minnesota. Afterwards, despite bouts of feeling unwell, she spent precious time writing a generous profile of him.

In December of that same year, Thompson decided to go visit Michael's two boys, her grandsons, and their mother, Michael's ex-wife, at their home in Portugal. There she died of a heart attack in Lisbon, on January 30, 1961. Much as she had traveled the world, it was Vermont—and specifically Barnard—that was always most important to her, and that's why her remains were brought back from Portugal to be buried in the cemetery beside Max's grave.

> *Give me Vermont. I want to watch the lilac hedge grow tall and the elm trees form, and the roses on the grey wall thicken, and the yellow apples hang on the young trees, and the sumac redden on the hills, in the place where friends come, and ...children feel at home. [from a letter Dorothy Thompson once wrote to a friend]*

The Danforth Library of Barnard, Vermont, owns two hardcover biographies of Dorothy Thompson: *Dorothy Thompson: A Legend in Her Time* by Marion K. Sanders (published by Houghton Mifflin Company Boston, 1973); and *American Cassandra: The Life of Dorothy Thompson* by Peter Kurth (published by Little, Brown and Company, Boston, 1990). On

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order is a copy of Dorothy Thompson's acclaimed *Let the Record Speak,* a collection of some of her newspaper columns published by Houghton Mifflin in 1939. "Twin Farms" still exists, but now as "a secluded resort with…private cabins and cottages…crafted for a luxury experience."

DANFORTH LIBRARY NEWS

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BEFORE creating a personal account and to guarantee free class registration, please call us at 802-234-9408 or email us at charlesdanforthlibrary@gmail.com

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TAX BILL REMINDER

The second 2022 Barnard Property Tax Payment is due on

February 15th, 2023

LOCAL CRYPTOGRAM

A cryptogram is a code in which one letter is substituted for another. For example, the word "Church" could be written BWMSBW. The letter B would be the letter C and would be so throughout the entire message. In this message I=O. The solution is found by trial and error. The CRYPTOGRAM answer is on the last page.

"ZMPBJ XIIWBCFF SIL ZMC

SQLFZ FBIU, QZ UPF P

LCHQBWCL–BI HPZZCL MIU IGW

TID VCEPHC PBW MIU HDEM

TID'W FCCB, ZMQBXF EIDGW

FZQGG VC BCU QS TID UCLC

UQGGQBX ZI VCGQCNC ZMCT

FZQGG HPZZCLCW."

-EPBWPEC VDFMBCGG

Upcoming National Hollidays
Christmas Day – December 25, 2022
New Years Day–January 1, 2023

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