

HANNAH SASSE

1899 - 1944

The life of Hannah Sasse was out of its peak, an eminence already well in sight. Superficially considered, it was not spectacular. Born in Toledo, Ohio, a city very different in flavor from the picturesque Hannoverian village of Hille from which Dr. Otto Sasse brought his bride, Maria Siveke, to America in 1898, Hannah Sasse called Toledo her home during her entire lifetime. On Put-in-Bay Island, famous for Commodore Perry's victory as for his words, Dr. Sasse bought a second house for summer relaxation, one that was to become increasingly dear to his family. There it was natural to revert to the simpler ways of Hille tradition, especially since the majority of the island inhabitants were also German, at least by descent. German was the language of the house, and so foreign was its atmosphere that one autumn, when the time came to return to Toledo, Hannah Sasse's sister was heard to complain: "Do we have to go back to America?" In Put-in-Bay Hannah Sasse learned to feel at home in and on the water, and surrounded herself with a veritable menagerie of animal friends.

From kindergarten to College one school, the Smead School of Toledo took charge of her formal education, a happy choice that brought contact with teachers who allowed her to find wholehearted enjoyment in learning. Mrs. Sasse, herself a child at heart, carefully supervised the play time of her daughters. Her home became the gathering place for the children of the neighborhood.

Hannah Sasse entered Vassar College when the first World War was still in eruption. It was characteristic of her that she did not permit antagonism and prejudice to distort her appreciation of whatever she found good in the country of her ancestry as in the country of her birth. Appropriately the subjects upon which her interest crystallized were English and German literature and language. She read with avidity and also wrote. Some of her poems were published in the Vassar Miscellany. Courses with Miss Wylie, Miss Peebles, and Miss Struck intensified her desire to become a teacher. She never forgot that it was Vassar College which pointed out the way in which she could best expand and be of use in the teaching profession.

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The invaluable experience of assisting Miss Peebles as research secretary in London and Oxford the year after graduation from College in 1921 was followed by two years of teaching Latin and English at the

Colonial School for Girls in Washington, D.C. In preparation for a more rewarding career further study was indicated. Accordingly Hannah Sasse enrolled in the Graduate School of Radcliffe College under Professor John Livingston Lowes, earning her Master's degree in 1925 in the field of English. Before entering upon several years of teaching at the school of her childhood in Toledo she spent two absorbing terms as Miss Wylie's assistant in the Summer School for Workers in Industry at Bryn Mawr College. At this time it became apparent to Professor Marian P. Whitney, then head of the Department of German at Vassar College, that a person of Hannah Sasse's worth and bilingual background would be assured of a successful career in the field of College German. It was she who persuaded her to study for a Doctorate with this change of focus.

Not long after matriculating at the University of Munich she encountered her first enemy in the form of an illness serious enough to have discouraged all thought of a professional career. Returning to her home she seconded her father's efforts by devoting herself to the battle for health under his wise direction. Not until the fall of 1930 was she able to accept an appointment as instructor in the German Department at Vassar College on a half time basis. She had to learn to husband her strength with the help of her alter ego, the car. Some of this faculty will remember a succession of them from the ragged roadster with the flapping side curtains, affectionately called "Der Taugenichts", to the super-deluxe convertible Ford coupe, with dachshund Loki, her horizontal shadow, barking from the window, ears flapping in the Windo

For four good years Hannah Sasse forged ahead with all enthusiasm. In 1934 a new and more threatening illness beset her. This too was faced, and consigned to the past. Again, Hannah Sasse could make plans for acquiring the higher degree demanded by her ambition. In 1936 a special grant for research from the Board of Trustees and later a Faculty Fellowship prepared the HANNAH SASSE (Continued)

way for two thoroughly happy years spent at the University of Freiburg. She returned to America with the title of Doctor of Philosophy and that of Assistant Professor at Vassar College, also with her published thesis on Friedericke Caroline Neuber, Versuch einer Neuwertung. It was her intention one day to write a Biography in English of this important actress and writer of the late Baroque period.

From Europe she brought back memories of quiet work in the little apartment facing the Schwarzwald, of long walks through the fields, of the pleasures of the road as she chugged along in her German car from Freiburg northward to the ocean – and of threatening tremors of war.

maturing rapidly as a scholar and a teacher, Hannah Sasse's joy in the subjects she taught was contagious. Enthusiasm and wide interests made her instruction a living experience for her students and her influence a constructive element in their lives. More and more her opinion began to count not only in Department matters but in the College at large. She was a definite person, liking forceful language. While she was at all times ready to consider many sides of a question, she was never reluctant to take an unpopular stand. In recognition of her qualities as a leader she was appointed Chairman of the Committee on Publications at the time of the Seventy-Fifth Anniversary of the founding of Vassar College, in 1940. This meant assuming the responsibility of choosing and publishing in time for the celebration a group of works, including books, music, and the reproduction of a painting, and all this under the unpropitious conditions of wartime.

In 1941 Hannah Sasse was promoted to the rank of Associate Professor. A second onslaught of illness in 1943 necessitated an operation from which recovery was temporary. In spite of increasing weakness and discomfort she carried on at her post until within a few weeks of her death on June fifteenth 1944, and with such success and self-forgetfulness that few of her students were aware that she was critically ill. In Hannah Sasse's death Vassar College has lost one whom it will be difficult to replace. She will be
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generally missed for her outgoing friendliness and helpfulness, her exuberant vitality, her unfailing effort to promote understanding between countries, and her constructive dissatisfaction in striving for the best interests of Vassar College.

Her life, though truncated, had completion through the way in which it was lived. With clarity and detachment she faced facts and dealt with them. Never admitting the possibility of defeat, she was able to look forward to the future with optimism to the end and beyond it. Hers was a personality in good equilibrium. Of necessity, and often against her inclination, she was obliged to observe the law of measure. Strength as well as finances had to be care-

fully budgeted. She was efficient but not too meticulous; her scholarship was solid yet not pedantic; although thoroughly artistic she was no visionary; her strongly intellectual leanings did not lack the vitalizing human touch. Already in early years she had discarded fear as a factor in her life. This enabled her to enjoy the present with undivided zest, to live freely and wholly. Therefore, it is only temporally considered that Hannah Sasse's life can be said to lack completion. The words of that other hero of Put-in-Bay might well be hers: "We have met the enemy and they are ours."

Ruth J. Hofrichter

Marta Milinowski

Ada M. Klett

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