

***The Peace-Pipe Letters, 1931-2021 – Rotary under Nazi Rule***  
***(RC Ames, 27. Sept. 2021)***

**TONY:** The story that we are telling today concerns two of Rotary's essential basic values: mutual understanding among the people of the world and a commitment to supporting world peace. The story begins ninety years ago, 1931.

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The third Rotary Convention outside the United States took place in Vienna, six years after the first Austrian Club had been founded in that city. Rotarians from around the world arrived in the country's capital.

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Among the speakers at the convention were numerous important personalities of that period, among them

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textile manufacturer Max Weinmann, a founding member of the Munich Rotary Club, who was honored by Rotary International for his service. Also,

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Robert Cecil of Britain, one of the architects of The League of Nations, who was granted the Nobel Prize for Peace in 1937.

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Among the 4,300 attendees at the Vienna Conference was thirty-three-year-old American, William Jewett Fulton, a member of the Rotary Club of Keokuk, Iowa.

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This small town of 10,000 inhabitants on the Mississippi River is named after a positive-minded Indian chieftain. Unlike his peers, Chief Keokuk did not go on the warpath against the white Americans, who, in the nineteenth century, had penetrated ever farther into the lands of the indigenous peoples. Instead, he chose a path of negotiation and the quest for peaceful solutions.

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**YOGI:** Following the convention, Fulton and his wife, Louesa, traveled, for several weeks, throughout Europe, where his impressions were impacted by economic, social, and political tensions of that time, in many ways similar to those occurring in the US. Dark clouds were forming in Europe and throughout the world. The global economic crisis of 1929 had entered its third year with no sign of improvement. Nations imposed punitive tariff duties for imported goods as a means of helping the home economy. Banking systems were collapsing. Nationalism was on the rise. When

Fulton returned to Keokuk, he reported to his fellow club members on the disquieting mood he had sensed during his trip, and the Keokuk Club decided to issue a warning about the pervading general unrest of the day.

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And so, the small club from Keokuk set out in December 1931 to send a message by letter to all non-English-speaking Rotary Clubs outside the United States. Over five hundred letters were individually typed, addressed, and sent by mail. (Here is the letter sent to the Rotary Club of Paris)

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**TONY:** Among other things, the letter stated: “Following the old Indian custom, we invite the Rotary Club of Paris to smoke the Pipe of Peace with us in the spirit, as our expression of international good will and fellowship. - We would be most happy to receive a reply from you, as it is our sincere desire to establish and perpetuate Rotary contacts and friendships outside of our country.”

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Of the 504 letters Fulton sent he received a total of 201 responses from 44 different countries. By chance, these neatly filed-away letters were found in a bank safe a few years ago, having almost been disposed of by the bank.

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I rescued this treasure in 2016 and Yogi and I published it in book form in June 2019. It is extremely fascinating to study these letters against the background of their historical context, and at the same time to find a great deal that bears on our own time. It is not possible to do justice to the diversity represented here in twenty minutes, but I would like to share a few selected letters with you in this program.

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**YOGI:** Twenty-nine German Clubs were among those that received the letter from Keokuk in 1931, and of these fifteen sent responses back to Keokuk. Here is the response from the Rotary Club of Munich, signed by its first secretary, Emil Hirsch.

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I quote from the second paragraph: “Your Club’s idea, that we Germans should smoke the peace pipe with you in the spirit, is delightful. When your letter was read to us at our last luncheon, we, unfortunately, did not have a suitable pipe on hand and had to make do with cigars. We hope that this was a worthy replacement.”

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As humorous as these lines may sound, Hirsch’s own membership in Rotary came to an ignoble end. He was expelled from the club as a Jew in April 1933, only one year after this letter. In 1935 he was forced to vacate his successful antiquarian bookstore. Finally, in 1938, he was able to emigrate to the United States, bringing along a large number of

his valuable books. He settled in New York and worked in another well-known antiquarian bookstore on Madison Avenue, owned by German emigrant, Walter Schatzki, from Frankfurt.

At the time of Emil Hirsch's expulsion, club president Wilhelm Arendts wrote the following lines to another member: "You will no doubt have followed the developments in Germany sufficiently to understand that we consider your removal from our list of members unavoidable. Yours faithfully, the President of the Rotary Club of Munich."

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The member who had been excluded was the writer Thomas Mann. When he was granted the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1929 for his novel *Buddenbrooks*,

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the event was elaborately celebrated, and the club prided itself on having such a special founding member. Mann had a Jewish wife, however, and soon was considered to have a "Jewish interrelationship," and in the eyes of the Nazis, had committed "racial defilement." Mann and his family found refuge in Switzerland before immigrating to the US in 1939. He taught at Princeton University before retiring in Los Angeles. In 1952, Mann returned to Switzerland and died a few years later. In 1942, the Rotary Club of West Los Angeles made him an honorary member.

Thomas Mann and Emil Hirsch were not the only ones who were deemed unacceptable; by June 1933, the Rotary Club of Munich had expelled a total of 26, or approximately 40% of its membership.

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Max Weinmann, mentioned earlier as the distinguished speaker at the Vienna Convention, committed suicide, along side of his wife, Rosi, June 23, 1940. They, too, were Jewish. Max was forced to remove himself from his successful business and the couple were now being removed from their home. The Weinmann's decided that death was a better option than hopeless situation they were facing.

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In the following years, six members of his immediate family were murdered by the Nazis at Bergen Belsen and Auschwitz Concentration Camps

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**TONY:** Here is the response from the Rotary Club of Heilbronn, signed by Walter Schilling, an entrepreneur in the coffee business, and a founding member of his club. In his two-page letter he draws a parallel between the "red sons of Manitu" (American Indians) who had to defend themselves and their land against the white man, and the Germans of his time, who were beleaguered by a great wave of refugees.

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Schilling writes: “Once upon a time we too were blessed by a great God above us. But then there came the people of the whole world, and we, too, were struggling for life and nearly annihilated. They were too many for us, and the sunny times faded away.”

Schilling is referring here to the great wave of refugees during the Weimar Republic—eastern Europeans who fled to Germany from the ruins of the collapsed Russian Empire. Many Germans did not welcome the largely Jewish refugees of that time, who were housed in emergency dwellings “at the expense of German taxpayers.” People were afraid of increasing pressure on the already damaged economy, the threat to inner security, and the “Judification” of the western world. The German census of 1925 recorded approximately 108,000 foreign Jews. Protests erupted throughout the country, attacks and riots. Newspapers that had spoken out for democracy and the humane treatment of immigrants were defamed as the “Jewish press.” We know that the National Socialists took advantage of these sentiments for their own purposes. And we now see clear parallels in our present situation . . .

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**YOGI:** At the Rotary Club of Berlin, established in 1929 at the Hotel Kaiserhof, in the presence of several Rotarians from other countries, the leading lights of Berlin society gathered: politicians, industrialists, highly-placed administrative officials, physicians, scholars, artists, architects, and writers. Heinrich F. Albert, a former government minister in the Weimar Republic, served as its first president; among the founding members were the former Weimar Republic chancellor Hans Luther and Adolf Morsbach of the Kaiser Wilhelm Society, who was director of the German Academic Exchange Service and one of two Club secretaries named in this letter. Foreign diplomats were among those who appeared regularly at the Club meetings.

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The response letter to Keokuk is signed by the secretary, Heinrich von Gleichen. Here is what he wrote: “*Precisely in these grave times, in which war is raging in East Asia and conflict prevails almost everywhere in the world, indications of peace such as those expressed in your letter are always welcome! Please extend to your president and all of your Club members our most cordial greetings along with the expression of our friendship, which connects us German Rotarians with all those in America.*”

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*Von Gleichen* was a conservative journalist, the founder and organizer of numerous associations, and the owner of two feudal estates in Thuringia. Following the National Socialists’ rise to power, von Gleichen was one of eighty-eight German writers who signed an oath of faithful allegiance to Reich Chancellor Adolf Hitler, October 1933. As early as 1924, von Gleichen had founded the German Gentlemen’s Club; in 1933 the club launched the Dirksen Foundation, which was intended to further contacts between traditional society elites and National Socialists. Leading Nazis such as Heinrich Himmler and Ernst Röhm sat on the foundation’s board of trustees. Heinrich von Gleichen was arrested by the Russians after World War II and detained for several months. His properties in the Soviet occupation zone were expropriated. Following his release from captivity he fled from the Soviet zone to Göttingen, West Germany, where he died in 1959.

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Oskar Sempell, the Club president, sat on the board of United Steelworks Ltd. During the Nazi period this kaserne played a significant role in German rearmament, using forced labor along with regular workers. In the last years of the war, at the concentration camp in Buchenwald, he ran a subcamp at the United Steelworks plant in Dortmund, where 745 women lived in a building that was connected by an underground tunnel to an ammunition factory. The building had barred windows and the outer doors were sealed.

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Berthold Manasse, who was Jewish, held the office of treasurer from 1929 to 1933. Following temporary detention in the just-mentioned concentration camp in Buchenwald, he emigrated to Shanghai and later returned to Berlin, where he died in the 1980s.

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Paris 1940: Albert Speer, Adolf Hitler, and Arno Breker, Hitler’s favorite artist, who joined the RC Berlin in 1935.

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**TONY:** Here is the response of the Rotary Club of Darmstadt, signed by its secretary, Walter Trier.

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Together with his cousin Ernst—also a member of the club—ran the Trier Furniture Factory, which supplied European royal houses with its products. Both men were Jewish. Ernst committed suicide, while in jail, following the forced sale of the business in 1938. Walter was able to flee to England in 1936, but for reasons unknown, his wife and only child ended up in the Lodz Ghetto, Lodz, Poland. There they both died May 8, 1945.

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In the upper left-hand corner of the letter is the name of the president at that time, Dr. Karl Merck. In 1932 he became chairman of the executive board of the Merck family business (E.Merck Pharmaceuticals) .

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In the Nazi period he also held several public offices associated with the National Socialist Party. During the war, Merck’s factory used a great number of forced laborers. In the context of denazification, however, Karl Merck was not classified in the group of active participants. He had to only make payment of 2,000 Reichmarks as a fellow traveler. It becomes clear that the lives of the various Rotarians inevitably developed in different directions.

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The website [memorial.d-1800.org](http://memorial.d-1800.org) and the highly commendable book, **Rotary under Nazi Rule** point out that between 1932 and 1933 a total of 500 names disappeared from Rotary membership lists—almost one-third of all Rotarians in Germany at that time. Jews, Freemasons, Marxists, Social Democrats, and other “unwanted” members were removed. Rotary International did scarcely anything to intervene, and in fact, from the 1920’s on, had no concerns about member

contact with fascist, authoritarian dictatorships. The survival of the Club was apparently more important to the international organization than its commitment to basic Rotarian values.

Only a small number of clubs showed solidarity with their Jewish members and preempted their dismissal by dissolving their clubs themselves. Finally, in 1937, all German and Austrian clubs were banned and dissolved. At the end of the 1940's, new clubs were founded or re-established, in part with individuals who had held important positions during the Nazi dictatorship.

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By the way, the photograph on the book cover is of a Rotary district meeting in Wiesbaden from the year 1935. The original was retouched for a postwar publication . . .

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. . . and the swastika replaced by the Rotarian wheel. As if it were possible to whitewash history after the fact . . .

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Here is another letter response, this time from the Rotary Club di Novara, Italy, located 30 miles west of Milan. It was written when “Dolce” Benito Mussolini had almost reached the peak of his dictatorship – tolerated by the Italian King. Its president Alfredo Pariani writes: – quote

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“We feel much honored that Italy’s flag has been so well received by your Club and we are particularly grateful to the giver of it who has remembered our country, which, by means also of the Rotarian Clubs, shows vital strength and eternal youth which has its foundation in Rome. Youth made new again by our Risorgimento and Fascismo – resurrection and fascism.”

I do not know why the type face seems to be kind of washed-out. Maybe this was caused by the tears of other nations in Europe, suffering from depression and militant threats. Of the eight responding Italian clubs, four give full-throated support to Mussolini and the Fascist movement.

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**YOGI:** This three-page-letter shows the other side of the coin. It was written by Arthur Regnier from the Rotary Club of Charleroi in Belgium, a country bordering Germany. After thanking the Club in Keokuk for its initiative, the club president states: – Quote

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“No need to tell you that our district is greatly affected by present conditions of trade, we have thousands and thousands of unemployed and it is with a certain amount of anxiety that we see next winter season approach, when so many will suffer from the fact that there will not be much money left in the house to buy the necessary food ...”

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The responses from all over the world were mostly typed, though a few were hand-written, sometimes with beautifully designed letterheads. On the left is an example from the Rotary Club in Gefle, Sweden, and on the right are the typed weekly minutes of the Rotary Club in Turin. Below that is the stylish letterhead of the Rotary Club of Johannesburg.

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On the left is the response from the Rotary Club of Kolin in the Czech Republic. The text says, “At our last meeting we smoked the peace pipe with you—only symbolically, of course, since we did not have a pipe of that sort on hand; instead, we drank a glass of Pilsener to your health.”

On the right is the response from the Rotary Club of Oroshaza in Hungary, with a suitable illustration.

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**TONY:** We enjoy a close friendship with the Rotary Club of Jerusalem, the only English-language Club in Israel. This Club, too, sent a letter of response to Keokuk, on the day before Christmas 1931. The Rotarian spirit is very well expressed here.

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The Club President writes as follows:

“We have all sorts in our Club, about ten nationalities, at least five different languages represented, and we all find, in Rotary, a common meeting ground in spite of differences of Race, Religion, and Tongue. We have strong Zionists and equally strong Anti Zionistic Arabs in the Club. Britishers, Americans, and Germans etc. And they all meet amicably as Rotarians, although acutely disagreeing on most other points.” He continues: “One of my warmest friends is a German surgeon who, as a combatant officer, faced the trenches at La Bassee – in which I was serving. So, you will see that we are ourselves, a sort of living Pipe of Peace always being smoked.”

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As has already been mentioned, 201 responses from all over the world arrived in Keokuk, which means that approximately 40% of the clubs that received letters responded to the suggestion to symbolically smoke the peace pipe together. Letters came from Copenhagen and Calcutta, Kyoto and Keijo (today known as Seoul), Wellington and Winnipeg, Montevideo and Madras, as well as from Hawaii and Alaska, which at the time were not yet part of the United States. Letters from Cuba and China arrived as well—countries in which Rotary no longer has a role to play. It is extremely interesting to study these letters, to consider the make-up of the world in 1931, and to follow the fascinating lives of the Rotarians of that period.

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In conclusion, we strongly recommend to you a publication titled “The Peace Pipe Letters,” a truly stimulating book. All of letters from 1931-32 project are pictured in its 330 pages. The book is available through myself. Cost is \$30. Profits fund Rotary peace projects.

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We have now reached the end of our peace pipe story and our presentation. But before we return you to your president, we would like to give you a brief update—because the story that began ninety years ago is continuing today:

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**YOGI:** In 2019, the Rotary Club of Keokuk wrote yet another letter to every club that received the original 1931 letter from Iowa. We wanted - once again—specifically at the Rotary Convention in Hamburg—to smoke the peace pipe in common. And so, the Peace Pipe letters brought together in that city 135 Rotarians from 68 clubs in 21 countries.

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All these new Rotarian friends traveled two hours in two large buses to my spacious German apartment in Flensburg – bordertown to Denmark.

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In this picture I welcome our international guests in the front garden of our dwelling in the Old City at four o'clock with their first highball (bourbon and Schweppes ginger ale). The book party for “The Peace-Pipe – Letters to Friends, 1931-2021” could begin! Our enthusiastic Rotary festival lasted until well into the night.

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With the Peace Pipe Letters & Rotary under Nazi Rule as background, Tony and I are organizing an international Rotary work conference on the subject of “Dealing with the Past.” The conference will take place as a hybrid event (attendance/video) in May 2022 in Northfield, Minnesota (forty miles south of Minneapolis). Members of the Rotary Club of Ames are invited to attend. Discussion points at the conference will concern how to find appropriate ways of dealing with the dark chapters of history. Four hundred years of slavery in the New World will be discussed, as well as Germany's confrontation with the Holocaust.

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**TONY:** Today we sense, once again, that fundamental values of our communal life are under threat. The commitment to peace and mutual understanding among differing people of the world, within this country, and even in our neighborhoods, remains a constant challenge—and a perpetual task for Rotarians. We are glad to take any questions as time permits, if time is short, we will remain after the meeting.