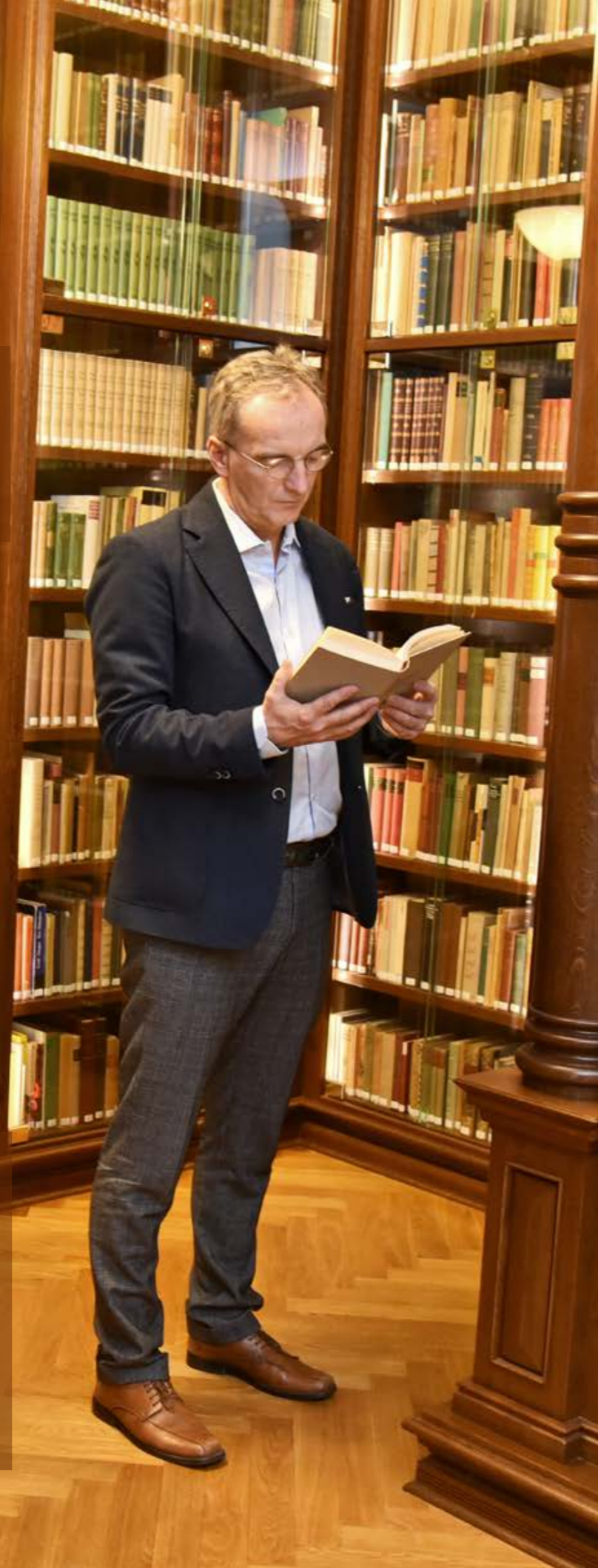


Disenchanted World

As a philosopher and Jaspers expert Matthias Bormuth considers it his mission to give people food for thought. His new collection of Karl Jaspers' letters – published on the fiftieth anniversary of the great thinker's death – does just that. The book guides us through Jaspers' life and work, shining a light on intellectual luminaries and philosophical ideas of the twentieth century



It is the awareness of truth, that is not tangible, a bright room that opens to us. It is there in what the tradition has handed down to us, and it is present when the kind words of a friend reach us.“ These are the words of one of the great German thinkers of the twentieth century, Karl Jaspers, written in December 1945 to his former student Hannah Arendt, who as a Jew had fled from Germany and the National Socialism in 1933 and later emigrated to the US.

Unlike Arendt Jaspers decided to remain in Germany, hoping that he would be able to exert some influence there. It was a decision for which he would pay dearly: because of his wife's Jewish ancestry Jaspers was forced to leave his teaching position at Heidelberg University in 1937. He spent seven years in internal emigration – shunned by former colleagues and the public. After this dark time “Jaspers was overwhelmed by the revival of his friendship with Arendt through their correspondence,” says the director of the Karl Jaspers-Haus in Oldenburg, Prof. Dr. Matthias Bormuth.

The correspondence brought the philosopher into first contact with the ideas of American thinkers who knew Arendt and who were officers in Allied-occupied Germany. This was how he discovered that academics in the US were researching the work of sociologist Max Weber, Jaspers' friend and role model. “It meant Jaspers was one of the first people after the war to understand that liberal America also represented a new political opportunity,” Bormuth explains. As such he is a key figure in the academic and philosophical history of the young German Federal Republic.

This was reason enough to include the post-war letter to Arendt in the collection, which was published in 2019 on the fiftieth anniversary of the philosopher's death. “Life as a Limit Situation” is the name of the book, in which Bormuth uses Jaspers' letters to trace his biographical and intellectual

path from psychiatrist to existential philosopher to political philosopher, scrutinising all the while the social and political life of the Federal Republic.

The volume brings together sixty-eight letters to psychiatrists, philosophers and writers. His correspondence partners include Martin Heidegger, Golo Mann and Albert Schweitzer – as well as fellow psychiatrists and his own parents. Then there are his diary entries. Brief introductions provide a context for the letters and notes. In total Bormuth has drawn from a pool of some 3,000 pages of already published critical editions of Jaspers' letters to compose a biographical outline that aims to synthesise key moments in his life.

Philosophical ideas are relevant to every person's life

Told this way, Bormuth says, the Jaspers biography is also a form of historiography. “The book is like a model of the philosopher's reality and thinking – as shaped by the time he lived in, his conversation partners and his own personality,” he says. As a professor for Intellectual History Bormuth wants to place the philosopher and his world of ideas within history and the history of science.

It is here that the diary entries included in the volume from Jaspers' youth and the early 1940s are particularly fascinating, says Malte Unverzagt, research associate at the Karl Jaspers-Haus: “They show Jaspers' self doubt and his attempts to think clearly about how to behave in extreme situations.” This also entailed the idea of suicide, which Jaspers and his wife were considering in the midst of World War II in case they would be deported by the Nazis.

It is extreme situations like these that shaped the philosopher's thinking. Jaspers coined the term “limit

situation” in his 1919 book “Psychologie der Weltanschauungen“ (The Psychology of World Views). “This is one of his fundamental concerns: how can one possibly find a sense of purpose for oneself in a disenchanted world,” Bormuth says. These personal and societal limit situations, such as Jaspers' early diagnosis of lung disease or his experiences under the Nazi regime and the question of guilt after 1945, run like a red thread through the letters.

With the concept of limit situations, Jaspers addressed the mental and spiritual climate of his time, which for him entailed reflection on human existence and how it orientates itself towards a higher truth. It is only in crisis situations that human beings seek a greater meaning to carry them through, Bormuth explains. The engagement with the ideas that Jaspers grappled with necessarily led Bormuth to other intellectuals who had either found themselves in limit situations or actively sought them out.

“Drawing up a comparative history of ideas means comparing the lives of intellectuals in their respective situations and from their own personal perspectives and asking what the various views and truths mean for us today,” Bormuth explains. This is the motivation for the collection of essays he is currently working on about “casualties”, people like Ingeborg Bachmann, Uwe Johnson, Jean Améry and Ulrike Meinhof who, like Jaspers, represented a critical element in a self-satisfied and restorative post-war society, but were unable to find a liveable way out of the situation.

Bormuth is aware that his books and essays only show excerpts of history. But this limited form of history writing provides an opportunity to achieve something very different, he says: “Much of what these writers and artists think seems unusual to us, even extreme. But by retracing these extreme ideas and giving them context one can prompt people to reflect on their own lives.” (cb)