

THE END OF THE BAUHAUS

TOLD BY LUDWIG MIES VAN DER ROHE, FINAL DIRECTOR OF THE BAUHAUS, TO HIS NORTH CAROLINA DESIGN STUDENTS IN 1952, NEARLY TWENTY YEARS AFTER THE CLOSURE OF THE BAUHAUS.

One morning, I had to come from Berlin in the streetcar and walk a little, and I had to pass over the bridge from which you could see our building. I nearly died. It was so wrong. Our wonderful building was surrounded by Gestapo – black uniforms, with bayonets. It was really surrounded. I ran to be there.

In the end, the Gestapo became so tired and hungry that they called their headquarters and said, “What should we do? Should we work here forever? We are hungry and so on.” And they were told, “Lock it and forget it.”

Then I called up Alfred Rosenberg. He was the party philosopher of the Nazis culture, and he was the head of the movement. It was called the Bund Deutsche Culture. I called him and said, “I want to talk with you.” He said, “I am very busy.”

“I understand that, but even so, at any time you tell me I will be there.”

“Could you be here at eleven o’clock tonight?”

“Certainly.”

My friends, Hilberseimer and Lilly Reich and some other people said, “You will not be so stupid as to go there at eleven o’clock?” They were afraid, you know, that they would just kill me or do something. “I am not afraid. I have nothing. I’d like to talk with this man.”

So I went that night and we really talked, you know, for an hour. And my friends, Hilberseimer and Lilly Reich were sitting across the street in a café window so they could see when I came out, if alone, or under guards, or what.

I told Rosenberg the Gestapo had closed the Bauhaus and I wanted to have it open again. I said, “You know, the Bauhaus has a certain idea and I think that it is important. It has nothing to do with politics or anything. It has something to do with technology.” And then for the first time he told me about himself. He said, “I am a trained architect from the Baltic states, from Riga.” He had a diploma as an architect from Riga. I said, “Then we certainly will understand each other.” And he said, “Never! What do you expect me to do? You know the Bauhaus is supported by forces that are fighting our forces. It is one army against another, only in the spiritual field.” And I said, “No, I really don’t think it is like that.” And he said, “Why didn’t you change the name, for heaven’s sake? When you moved the Bauhaus from Dessau to Berlin?” I said, “Don’t you think the Bauhaus is a wonderful name? You cannot find a better one.”

He said, “I don’t like what the Bauhaus is doing. I know you can suspend, you can cantilever something, but my feeling demands a support.” I said, “Even if it is cantilevered?” And he said, “Yes.” He wanted to know, “What is it you want to do at the Bauhaus?” I said, “Listen, you are sitting here in an important position. And look at your writing table, this shabby writing table. Do you like it? I would throw it out of the window. This is what we want to do. We want to have good objects that we have not to throw out of the window.” And he said, “I will see what I can do for you.” I said, “Don’t wait too long.”

Then from there on I went every second day for three months to the headquarters of the Gestapo. I had the feeling that I had the right. That was my school. And when they closed it I said, "I will not give up that thing." And it took me three months, exactly three months, to get to the head of the Gestapo. He must have had a back door somewhere, you know. And he had a bench in the waiting room not wider than four inches, to make you tired so that you would go home again. But one day I got him. He was young, very young, and he said, "Come in. What do you want?" I said, "I would like to talk to you about the Bauhaus. What is going on? You have closed the Bauhaus. It is my private property, and I want you to know for that reason. We didn't steal anything. We didn't make a revolution. I'd like to know how can that be."

"Oh," he said, "I know you perfectly, and I am very interested in the movement, the Bauhaus movement, and so on, but we don't know what is with Kandinsky." I said, "I make all the guarantee about Kandinsky." He said, "You have to, but be careful. We don't know anything about him, but if you want to have him it is O.K. with us. But if something happens, we pick up you." He was very clear about that. I said, "That is all right. Do that." And then he said, "I will talk with Goering, because I am really interested in this school." And I really believe he was. He was a young man.

That was before Hitler made a clear statement. Hitler made this statement in 1935 at the opening of the House Der Deutschen Kunst, the House of German Art, in his speech about the cultural policy of the Nazi movement. Before, everybody had an idea. Goebbels had an idea; Goering had an idea. You know, nothing was clear. After Hitler's speech the Bauhaus was out. But the head of the Gestapo told me that he would talk with Goering about it and I told him, "Do it soon." We were just living from the money we still got from Dessau. Nothing else came to us.

Finally I got a letter saying we could open the Bauhaus again. When I got this letter I called Lilly Reich. I said, "I got a letter. We can open the school again. Order champagne." She said, "What for? We don't have the money." I said, "Order champagne." I called the faculty together: Albers, Kandinsky . . . they were still around us, you know, and some other people: Hilberseimer, Peterhams, and I said, "Here is the letter from the Gestapo that we open the Bauhaus again." They said, "That is wonderful." I said, "Now, I went there for three months every second day just to get this letter. I was anxious to get this letter. I wanted to have the permission to go ahead. And now I make a proposition, and I hope you will agree with me. I will write them a letter back: "Thank you very much for the permission to open the school again, but the faculty has decided to close it!"

I had worked on it for this moment. It was the reason I ordered champagne. Everybody accepted it, and was delighted. Then we stopped.

That is the real end of the Bauhaus. Nobody else knows it, you know. We know it. Albers knows it. He was there. But the talk about it is absolute nonsense. They don't know. I know.