

## Introduction

# Journal of a Conscript

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FIRST INDORSEMENT. JOURNAL OF A CONSCRIPT—in 1945, twenty-five-year-old Melvin J. Lasky boldly inscribed these words on the cover of his 250-page typescript.<sup>1</sup> Lasky began his diary on 22 January 1945 in Fort Totten, New York while waiting to be shipped to Europe with the US Army, and concluded it in Frankfurt, Germany almost a year later, on 19 December 1945. He chronicled his time as an American GI en route to, and into Germany, filling page after page with the narrowly spaced text of his Army-issued typewriter. However, what may once have been the ambitious book project of a young aspiring author and intellectual, was left unpublished and soon forgotten. A brief excerpt appeared in the left-leaning intellectual magazine *Common Sense* in June 1945, which seems to have been the only instance of any part of the diary being published at the time. Entitled “Travel Diary in Germany,” the entries from 7 and 11 April 1945 were printed anonymously—presumably because Lasky feared Army reprimands (Anonymous 1945). Asked to comment on what he thought had been Lasky’s plans for the diary, his longtime assistant Marc Svetov replied: “He might’ve thought he would publish [it], but I think events just transpired, and he had other ambitions” (Marc Svetov, email message to Maren Roth, 14 May 2015).

After Lasky left the military in 1946, his career picked up, at first gradually and then, starting in 1947, more quickly as events in Allied-occupied Berlin took him on the path that he is best known for today: He was one of the initiators of the Congress for Cultural Freedom (CCF) and became the editor of two highly acclaimed—albeit partially CIA-funded—literary journals; a transatlanticist, liberal anti-communist of the consensus era, and a cultural cold warrior par excellence. In fact, while Lasky features in quite a few studies of the transatlantic intellectual scene of the Cold War, he tends to be a figure on the sidelines, at best pulling strings in the background.<sup>2</sup> While this might indeed have been the role he thrived in, so far, we know little about his mindset and about what shaped his ideas and his identity.<sup>3</sup> To understand Lasky’s

career, his views on Germany, the United States, and transatlantic relations, reading his war diary is highly instructive. Sociologist Daniel Bell once remarked that his longtime friend Melvin J. Lasky always remained but a “visiting member” among the so-called New York intellectuals. He went to Europe and stayed there—that made all the difference (Bell 2010, 45).

## Content and Themes

Written on the verge of the most politically active phase of his life, Lasky’s 1945 diary illustrates formative moments and reveals personal insights into the mindset of a young man who was convinced of his own intellectual potential, but not quite sure yet how best to put it to use. The diary gives a first glimpse of the political and cultural views he would go on to assert. They emerge from his prewar youth and education, his social milieu, and his political conditioning, mostly in New York City, complemented by the experiences he gathered while serving with the US Army. As Michael Kimmage shows in his contribution to this volume: the diary clearly “bears the New York intellectuals’ stamp,” and a personal “trajectory” to that effect appeared to be already in place when Second Lieutenant Lasky embarked for Europe in 1945: “‘America’ discovering ‘Russia’ was a precious spectacle!” he reports from Berlin to his mentor Dwight Macdonald. At the same time, the experience of the war, specifically the experience of being part of the occupation forces, clearly impacted his commitment to Europe in general, and to Germany in particular. The diary enables us to see this pivotal development unfold. Lasky also filled his journal with literary allusions and remarks, leaving us a record of his personal cultural frame of reference. The everyday encounters, reflections, and emotions Lasky consigned to the page become, as George Blaustein puts it in his chapter, “the precondition for the postwar transatlantic exchanges.”

Beyond the persona the author was to become, Lasky’s diary also speaks to us on a different level. His particular positioning renders his text a multifaceted hybrid, composed by a somewhat reluctant soldier, who, on the one hand was a committed American and on the other hand, self-consciously strove for intellectualism and a transcendent notion of European culture. From this vantage point, Lasky offers unabashed observations of military life, the occupation, and views on victory and defeat that run much deeper than what we find in the average soldier’s ego-documents.<sup>4</sup> Jana Aresin’s chapter places Lasky’s evaluations in the larger context of debates on denazification and early reeducation. She shows how he acutely identified key problems and predicaments.

The curiosity and journalistic ambitions that drove Lasky in his explorations of a world in the last throws of a world war had an official dimension as well. As a trained historian, he had managed to secure a position within the Army's Historical Branch. He thus had the access, the freedom, and the gear (typewriter, camera) necessary for in-depth assessments and investigations of his surroundings. He spoke a good amount of German, which also set him apart from many of his peers. Availing himself of these opportunities to explore and investigate his surroundings, he accompanied his observations with a reflective commentary in his diary on historiography and documentary method.

For all his critical ruminations and insightful observations, however, Lasky was also a young man, abroad for the first time, in the company of other young men. "We would be tourist-conquerors," he observed poignantly as they entered Heidelberg in April 1945. The men seem constantly caught between the thrill of adventure and the deeply distressing realities of war and destruction. In this respect, the diary presents a much more unmediated account of the experiences and encounters. Moods and tone change throughout the document, sometimes suddenly. Tales of juvenile antics and sexual exploits are followed by melancholy descriptions of cities reduced to rubble or profound reflection about the fate and guilt of the German people. This affective dimension of the document adds a further layer to the diary as a rich source for examining the cultural history of the immediate postwar moment. In that vein, Katharina Gerund's chapter explores the deeply gendered nature of the text. She flags the distinct "male gaze" of the composition and traces the various manifestations of military masculinity both in actual everyday practices as well as on the meta level, where war-torn Europe appears feminized.

Melvin J. Lasky's war diary can be read from many different perspectives and with numerous research interests in mind. From military history to cultural studies, from literary criticism to historiography, it presents the reader with material for a plethora of possible approaches. The accompanying essays open up the most prominent of these dimensions. They invite readers to focus on individual aspects while guiding students towards different methodologies and interpretations. Scholars of both World War II and the Cold War can find cues in the document, as well as historians of cultural diplomacy, reconstruction, or gender, and those studying transatlantic relations and the emergence of the so-called American Empire. Overall, because of Lasky's individual biography, this diary compellingly illustrates the historical moment when World War II slowly transformed into the Cold War. It sheds light on the close ties between the United States' experience of fighting Nazism, the complex occupation policies, and the emerging cultural imaginaries that shaped the second half of the twentieth century.

## Publication History and Editing Process

For almost sixty years no one knew about the war diary. It was discovered only after Lasky's death on 19 May 2004, when his assistant Marc Svetov, while organizing and sorting through Lasky's papers, unexpectedly found it in three neatly stacked ring binders "hidden . . . behind the closed doors of the bookcase" (Marc Svetov, email message to Maren Roth, 22 May 2018). In a report for the family on what he had found, Svetov noted his enthusiasm about this "historical and literary document worth having in print."<sup>5</sup> There were some aspects he felt needed editing and amending, for example, "where Mel generalizes too much in a pompous manner and appears too vain for a reader's comfort."<sup>6</sup> He also pointed out that, to him, Lasky at times presented the German viewpoint almost too apologetically, a position that he did not find very comprehensible for an American Jew who throughout his diary, time and again, emotionally commented on the suffering of the Jews during the Holocaust as well as on their difficult postwar situation. The typescript shows signs of a first editorial process, undertaken by Svetov, who indicated passages to be left out or explanatory information to be added. However, nothing came of it until 2007, when a few short excerpts appeared in the journal of the Berlin-based American Academy (Lasky 2007). Seven years later, a friend of the family, Professor Emeritus of Ancient History Wolfgang Schuller (1935–2020), edited a much-abridged version of the diary to appear in translation for a German readership (Lasky 2014). It was geared towards, and emphatically resonated with, the generation who, like Schuller himself, had lived through the time, growing up as children in the rubble. One of them, born in 1931, penned a moving personal response to Schuller: he had felt "truly touched and comforted" by the way Lasky had "navigated his way through hatred, rubble, war, precondition and personal experience," guided by what the writer of the letter deemed a well-calibrated *Menschlichkeitskompaß* (humanitarian compass) (Letter to Wolfgang Schuller, 23 March 2015 and kindly forwarded to Maren Roth, 2 April 2015). The book was positively reviewed in all major German newspapers.<sup>7</sup> These reactions hint at a further dimension that documents such as this war diary can have—as catalysts of personal and public memory, as they become part of a larger narrative (Sollors 2014).

The task of editing the full original English version of the text for both an academic readership and an interested public fell to the Lasky Center for Transatlantic Studies in Munich. This is where the original diary ended up as part of Lasky's personal papers, which were donated to Ludwig Maximilian University in 2008.

The original typescript was first transcribed and furnished with basic *annotations*, which included identification of names and places as well as deciphered

military language and other colloquialisms and common abbreviations.<sup>8</sup> Information regarding names and contexts directly relevant to the events described in the diary are referenced in the endnotes. The numerous, often casual cultural references, especially from literature, historiography, and art, have been indexed and listed in appendices A and B. The compilation of such a separate collection of cultural references drawn from the text provides an interesting overview and affords added attention to the cultural framework at play.

The diary reflects the many uncertainties and insecurities of the time. This ought to be kept in mind when reading the primary text. Not everything Lasky observed, inferred, or speculated, proved correct later on; a considerable amount of the information he relates is based on hearsay. This incompleteness of knowledge available at the time is an essential and characteristic element of the original text. Thus, in-text annotations have been kept to a minimum. People and historical circumstances directly relevant to the events unfolding in the main text are explained in the endnotes, though hearsay and conjecture remain without comment. The accompanying chapters provide explanations of the larger historical contexts. The decision to keep interspersed foreign language terms and sentences without translation also highlights the aim to retain the original character of the document and the way it captures the polyphone confusion and chaos of that particular historical moment.

We present the document as completely as possible, though in order to keep the manuscript to a publishable length, some cuts had to be made. Places in the text where sections have been omitted are indicated by ellipses in square brackets. Any parentheses or ellipses without brackets are part of the historical text. Marc Svetov's original order has helped tremendously in compiling the manuscript. It provided a preliminary pagination and separated diary text from letters that had been mixed in with the material. Some letters remain, though, as occasionally Lasky used his diary to draft letters.

The *parameters for abridging* the text have been determined with readability, relevance, and consistency in mind. They are as follows:

- Lengthy citations from literature or newspapers, copied verbatim from books, some of them in German, have been cut.
- Sections that were clearly drafts for other texts (with the exception of some letters) were cut, along with unclear, mostly incomprehensible notes, jotted down for later use. The subject matter of these notes is generally covered in the text a few pages later.
- Some cuts were made on scenes that proved repetitive when considered in the context of the diary as a whole.
- One larger section describing a tour of the Scandinavian countries between 5 and 11 October has been taken out completely. While it would

have been valuable to keep, it constitutes the largest self-contained section that made sense to cut without losing the coherence of the narrative. Some later references to the trip remain.

In the interest of smoother reading, the following *formatting measures* have been applied:

- Dates are rendered in a uniform format: day month year (+ place where the information was available)
- Abbreviations are standardized and explained in a separate list.
- Any words and sentences in foreign languages (mostly German, some French, Russian, etc.) are left in the original without translation and are italicized. Lasky uses both, anglicized and local spellings for place names. This inconsistency has been maintained on purpose.
- Titles of books, songs, plays, etc., are italicized. As some references are rough or incomplete, full titles and publication dates are listed alphabetically in Appendix A.
- Obvious grammatical errors and typos are corrected tacitly, except for purposefully capitalized words (e.g., War, History, They). These are kept in the original form to allow for the added layer of meaning Lasky implied. Words spelled incorrectly to highlight a certain accent or dialect are also left untouched to preserve the authenticity of the text. For the same reason, racial slurs and curse words have not been expunged.

The complete original typescript as well as a full transcript are available for researchers at the Lasky Center for Transatlantic Studies, Munich.

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## Notes

1. Cf. Melvin J. Lasky, "First Indorsement' Journal of a Conscript," Melvin J. Lasky Papers, Lasky Center for Transatlantic Studies, Munich (subsequently quoted as Lasky Papers), New York Box 1, Folder 1.

2. For a general impression of Lasky's public image see for example his *New York Times* obituary ("Melvin J. Lasky, Cultural Cold Warrior" 2004). See also: Hochgeschwender 1998; Scott-Smith 2002; Scott-Smith and Lerg 2017. For a publication that focuses exclusively on the connections to the CIA, but at times jumps to conclusions, see Saunders 1999. For an overview of the research on the issue see Pullin 2013.

3. Maren Roth is currently working on a biography of Lasky's early life. For a first look see for example, Roth 2014.

4. Among the soldiers' diaries and memoirs of World War II appear military leaders like George Patton (Patton 1947) as well as lesser-known names (e.g., Tomikel 2000). Most examples are edited collections of various shorter accounts (e.g., Wallis and Palmer 2009; Miller and Miller 2016). There is only one other diary comparable to Lasky's in that it was also written by a combat historian (Pogue 2001).

5. Marc Svetov, Comment on "Melvin Lasky's Diary of a Conscript 1945–1946," 23 January 2005, Lasky Papers, New York Box 1, Folder 1.
6. Ibid.
7. Reviews in *Jüdische Allgemeine*, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, *Nürnberger Nachrichten*, *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, *Die Welt*, and *Süddeutsche Zeitung*.
8. Full names and ranks of Lasky's fellow soldiers in the 7th Army Information and Historical Section are taken from the listing in ETOUSA Historical Division Records 1941–46. NARA Record Group 498 File No. 161. See Appendix C for a full list.

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## Chapter 1

# Melvin J. Lasky's Biography and Diary

Maren Roth



I feel that I must, out of a slowly growing inner need,  
write something about the *Life of a Conscript* some day . . .

—Melvin J. Lasky

Melvin J. Lasky was born Matthes Jonah Chernilowsky on 15 January 1920, the son of Polish Jews who had immigrated from Łódź to New York City around 1910. He lived in the Bronx with his parents Samuel and Esther, who were the owners of a small garment factory in lower Manhattan, as well as with his younger sisters Floria and Joyce. In the early 1920s the family decided to change its name from Chernilowsky to the shorter and less complicated Lasky (Joyce Lasky Reed, email message to author, 29 June 2009). Growing up in the 1920s and 1930s, Lasky's childhood and youth were shaped by three influential factors that governed his family's life (author's interviews with Oliver Lasky, 7 May 2009 in Munich and with Vivienne Freeman Lasky, 13 March 2011 in Providence, Rhode Island). The first one was the central role assigned to reading books and various newspapers, most importantly the *New York Times*. Secondly, there were the discussions that the family used to have with members of the extended family, which could become quite heated. During these discussions, the family would debate not only the latest developments in American domestic politics but also political developments overseas, especially in Europe. Thirdly, Lasky's socialization was influenced by the high esteem the family had of the German language and German culture in general. His father kept classical works of German literature in the original language in the family library and was well versed in Goethe's dramas and Wagner's operas. "My father," Lasky's sister Joyce remembered, "was a great lover of German culture . . . was one of the rare Jews that never held naziism [*sic*] against German culture" (author's interview with Joyce Lasky Reed, 18 March 2009 in Chevy Chase, Maryland). These early influences, intellectual stimulation, and the importance his parents placed upon the education and

social advancement of all of their children, suited the character and interests of young Lasky quite well.

As Lasky was curious, eager for knowledge, and ambitious from an early age, he was fascinated by books and people alike. His interests were numerous and manifold, ranging from history, politics, and literature to theatre, classical music, and movies as well as various sports. Judging from the diaries that he started to keep in May 1939, Lasky spent a vast amount of time reading through a wide range of both American and European literature. He was extremely driven in his reading; at one point in his diary, for example, he jotted down: “must read like a machine.”<sup>1</sup> He also commented on many of the books by way of one to three line mini reviews, where he could be merciless in his criticism or full of praise. In addition to books, he also had the habit of reading various newspapers, sometimes even a German newspaper. Trotskyist-leaning magazines such as the *Socialist Appeal*, *Labor Action*, and the *New Internationalist* as well as literary intellectual magazines such as *Partisan Review* and the *New Republic* rounded off his extensive reading. What Lasky liked to do when he was not reading, writing, or going to the movies was meeting people and having intensive discussions. He often attended lectures by intellectuals and academics such as John Dewey, Sidney Hook, and Lionel Trilling. In the subsequent discussions, Lasky would make critical comments and try to meet these renowned people. On occasions like these, but also at numerous parties hosted by his friends, his fellow students, or people associated with the magazine *Partisan Review* like Dwight Macdonald or James T. Farrell, Lasky began to form a network of contacts that he would expand over time and fall back on, especially during his early years living in Berlin. As his own writings and interviews with family members and other contemporary witnesses show, Lasky appears to be a socially active and caring person, hardworking, knowledgeable, keen to debate, outspoken, and of an independent mind. At the same time, he seems to have been very sure of himself, dominating, opinionated, and incredibly ambitious.

While Lasky always wanted to write, review, and thereby participate in intellectual discussions, for a long time he felt torn between the idea of doing this as a historian or as a journalist for an intellectual magazine. Even though he eventually opted for the latter, his deep-rooted interest in history never dwindled. His first experiences as a journalist date back to his time as a student at DeWitt Clinton High School in New York, where he wrote for the school newspaper and, as he later remembered, was “equipped with the elementary journalistic rules of how to write a lead . . . , and where to cut a story” (Lasky 2002, xix). After obtaining his high school diploma in June 1935, he enrolled as a student at the City College of New York, a renowned tuition-free university and very popular among the sons of Jewish immigrants. During his four years as an undergraduate student in the social sciences he continued his

German language training and took quite a few classes in German literature. In addition to his academic studies, he actively participated in heated political discussions and fights that took place between the famous Alcoves One and Two, little niches in the university cafeteria. While the Stalinist students met in Alcove Two, a much smaller number of supporters of anti-Stalinist groups such as the Social Democrats or the Trotskyists that Lasky strongly sympathized with gathered in Alcove One (author's interview with Nathan Glick, 16 March 2009 in Arlington, Virginia and with Daniel Bell, 10 November 2009 in Cambridge, Massachusetts). It was in this atmosphere that Lasky became acquainted with the anti-Stalinist New York intellectuals. Not only was he invited to their parties, but starting in 1938, he also wrote his first reviews and articles for *Partisan Review*, the intellectual organ of the anti-Stalinist left. The social critic, author, and editor Dwight Macdonald, at the time the editor of *Partisan Review*, became a role model and mentor for Lasky, who would write long, emotional, and very personal letters to Macdonald describing his plans for the future as well as his personal experiences as a graduate student and later as a soldier in World War II.

In September 1939, Lasky enrolled in the master's program in American History at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor and thus left New York and his family for the first time in his life. He continued to be politically active, regularly participated in student discussions, and even displayed a certain missionary zeal in trying to, as he himself put it, "bring them [Stalinist fellow travelers] around" and win them over to the Trotskyist camp.<sup>2</sup> Returning to New York in the summer of 1940, Lasky resumed the immensely dynamic social and intellectual life he had led before he left for Ann Arbor. He started to submit reviews and articles not only to *Partisan Review* but also to magazines such as the *New Republic* and the *American Sociological Review*. Every time a piece was accepted or his name was mentioned anywhere, he enthusiastically noted it in his diary. With a mounting restlessness, he wondered when his career would eventually start. At one point he wrote despairingly: "What's to become of me? My own 'wave of the future' has turned into an 'ebb-tide.'" <sup>3</sup> And a couple of weeks later, when a publisher reacted positively to a book project, he euphorically jotted down: "Can this be it? Is this the 'break?'" <sup>4</sup> With a prospective teaching position at City College and registered as a PhD student at Columbia University, Lasky most likely was aiming at a university career. However, economic circumstances forced him to take up a job as "Junior Historical Archivist" at the Statue of Liberty. Hating the work routine that prevented him from pursuing his own research, writing, and, most of all, fulfilling his dream of publishing his own "cultural review," he was more than delighted when in late 1942 Daniel Bell offered him a job as an editor at the *New Leader*, a Socialist democratic weekly.<sup>5</sup>

It was around this time that Lasky started to break away from Trotskyism, a development that can be traced both in his contemporary and in his later autobiographical writings. The war in Europe, the development of which Lasky followed very closely, had a major influence on his political thinking and beliefs. The dramatic events unfolding in Europe and especially the fate of the Jews eventually led him to gradually abandon his radical beliefs and to give up his adamant opposition to the US's entry into the war in favor of a position of "critical support" of the American government. After the United States actually entered into the war in December 1941, he increasingly distanced himself from his prior Trotskyist sympathies.<sup>6</sup> So when a year later his first and long-awaited career move was imminent, two major turning points in his life coincided, an ideological reorientation and a new professional beginning: "As something of a Social Democrat I joined Danny Bell on *The New Leader*, and never looked back."<sup>7</sup> But as the war had already started and not only his predecessor at the *New Leader* but also many of his friends had already been drafted, he was quite aware that he might not have too much time to learn the ropes of this business.<sup>8</sup>

On 30 November 1943, he was in fact drafted. For over a year he was trained in various US Army camps and prepared for his eventual position as a combat historian in Europe. Starting on the day of his induction, Lasky used a new notebook for his diary entries. Most likely, he did this for pragmatic reasons and not with the intention of marking the beginning of a new period in his life. It is striking, though, how this third diary clearly differs from the two previous ones. While he had very regularly recorded the events in his daily life and his thoughts in short sentences or in note form in the diaries he had kept in New York and Ann Arbor, the entries in his third diary were very irregular and mostly lacked a date. Since the tight schedule at the training camp apparently did not allow for much free time, the entries he eventually composed were much longer and more elaborate. In full sentences, he reflected on and described his daily routine and—with a mixture of indifference, disgust, and amusement—commented on army life. Far away from his family and his usual intellectual circles, he suffered immensely. To escape, in his view, the "endless, unutterable, incomprehensible stupidity," the dehumanization, and what he perceived as a lack of intellectuality in the army, he tried to read as much as he could and next to his recordings of the daily routine also composed little stories about his superiors and his fellow GIs.<sup>9</sup> This diary can be seen as the precursor of the war diary, not only because it covered the period until right before he was sent overseas, but especially due to its content, format, and writing style.

At Camp Lee in Virginia, Lasky managed to qualify for a course at the Quartermaster Corps Officer Candidate School and was subsequently pro-

moted to second lieutenant.<sup>10</sup> Thanks to recommendations by renowned professors, he was then transferred to the Historical Branch, G-2 in the War Department in Washington, DC. Thus, on 27 October 1944, he took up his new assignment as a combat historian in the research department of the Historical Section of the Seventh US Army. Three months later, Lasky was shipped overseas and on 7 February 1945, arrived at the European headquarters of the Seventh Army in Lunéville, a small town thirty kilometers southwest of Nancy. His unit was “attached to the Seventh Army for the purpose of compiling the historical data for the Army and writing the After Action Report of the operation” (Army of the United States 1946, preface). Lasky later described his work assignment as “Historical Officer” as follows: “I was issued a Leica camera and a Smith-Corona portable typewriter . . . ; and we were instructed to prepare for the final offensive against Hitler which would liberate Strasbourg and therewith the whole of France. The subsequent crossing of the Rhine was to initiate the last offensive against the Nazis’ so-called Third Reich and begin the victorious occupation of post-Hitler Germany” (Lasky 2005, 273). To write his own reports, Lasky had to read the combat reports of the various units that had participated in a battle, visit the scenes of combat and, most importantly, interview the troops and officers involved. Because combat historians could move around with more liberty and had to plan and coordinate their work themselves, they had—at least in contrast to the fighting troops—a great measure of freedom in the respective theater of operations (Pogue 2001, 102). This kind of leeway enabled Lasky to explore the area he was based in, to visit neighboring cities, and also to talk to the civilians he would encounter. These little ventures allowed him to pursue his personal interests while at the same time fulfilling his duties as a combat historian. In addition, he apparently also found enough spare time to resume a habit that he had suspended for eight months during his course at the Quartermaster Corps and the subsequent service in the G-2 Historical Branch: the keeping of a diary.

### **The Diary: “First Indorsement’ Journal of a Conscript”**

A few months before Lasky began to keep his war diary, he had already deeply felt the need to put down his thoughts in writing once again to cope with his situation and, most of all, to compensate for the intellectual frustration he felt about being in the army. In a letter to his former mentor, Columbia University professor and historian, Merle Curti, which he mailed just a few days after he had been transferred to Washington, DC, he explained his diary project as follows: “I’ve done almost no writing . . . and only a little notetaking. I feel

that I must, out of a slowly growing inner need, write something about the Life of a Conscript some day—but what its form or controlling intention will be I'm yet in no position to say."<sup>11</sup> It was only because of the specific circumstances of Lasky's assignment in Europe that he was able to actually realize this ambitious project. First of all, combat historians could move around and plan their activities comparatively freely. Second, Lasky could plan his official duties in a way that would leave him enough spare time for regularly composing his diary entries. And, third, with the typewriter he had been given for typing his official reports, Lasky was perfectly equipped for his private writing and notetaking. He would regularly send carbon copies of these entries to his family, friends, and intellectual contacts back home in the US. Since he did not always have sufficient time to write individual letters, he—as he explained to Dwight Macdonald in April 1945—considered “the journal [as] my substitute for correspondence.”<sup>12</sup>

The first 250 pages of Lasky's journal dating from 26 January 1945 to 19 December 1945, form a diary in a narrow sense. They contain dated and very regular entries of several pages each and at times also drafts of letters and copies of letters that are inserted in chronological order. Some of the single-spaced pages of the typescript include corrections in Lasky's handwriting; in some cases, more than one carbon copy of a particular page has been preserved. After these 250 pages of “real” diary follow ninety-eight pages that include observations and comments on the political, economic, and cultural developments in occupied Germany and other European countries. These were compiled after Lasky had been demobilized in July 1946. The entries after 19 December 1945 were mostly in the form of jotted notes, letters, interview notes, travel reports, drafts, and final versions of articles. Only rarely can a dated diary entry be found. The very last entry is dated 21 November 1946 and was written by Lasky in London where he was waiting for his transatlantic passage back to New York. At this point, he did not know that only a few months later he would come back to Berlin and eventually spend the rest of his life in Europe. Therefore, his journal, i.e., both the diary and the subsequent collection of notes and materials, completely covers—as he himself called it in a letter to Hannah Arendt—the “unbelievable unreal adventure” that he experienced in Europe during the war as well as some time after.<sup>13</sup>

The diary entries during the war follow the movements of his unit in the Seventh Army. After the end of the war, the entries correspond with the respective changes of location that his subsequent job as a combat historian required. On the cover page of the journal, Lasky put down all the major cities and places he had passed through or visited on his way to and while in Europe. These were in the following order: Washington, New York, New Foundland [*sic*], Azores, Scotland, Paris, Lunéville, Alsace, Strasbourg, Nancy, Kaisers-

lautern, Darmstadt, Frankfurt, Heidelberg, Munich, Salzburg, Innsbruck, Constance, Berne, Geneva, Zurich, Vienna, Rome, Copenhagen, Stockholm, Berlin, and London. Again, his official duty as a combat historian was to write reports that were to be part of the official history of the Seventh US Army. This three-volume history entitled *The Seventh Army in France and Germany 1944–1945: Report of Operations* was published in May 1946. From the start of the occupation, as a historical officer in the United States Forces European Theater Historical Division based in Frankfurt, Lasky was charged with researching and writing a “History of the Occupation.”<sup>14</sup> In contrast to his official work assignments, which he viewed very critically and fulfilled unenthusiastically, he put a lot of effort into keeping his private records. In a letter, Lasky summed up his general approach and his journal’s contents as follows:

I have tried to keep a daily journal, and for the last period I’ve been quite happy about it. It has no “tone,” or “style” or “theme” or anything of that character, has nothing in fact except a fantastic variety of impressions and information—everything from American brothels, to battlefield scenes, to university libraries and ancient cathedrals and castles, to a number of rather “delicate” military-political situations, which unfortunately will remain censorable for a long time to come.<sup>15</sup>

His detailed notes provide a very good overview of Lasky’s activities and daily life as a soldier and indeed include a great variety of topics. He reports on his work, his fellow GIs, and his superiors. He is often quite critical about the activities of the US Army and later the American occupational authorities. He describes the cities he passes through, the ruins, and the people he meets on the streets. Often, he would talk to civilians about their experiences during and after the war and would try to capture their views and moods. In the devastated city centers, he intuitively would head for the historic sites as well as to libraries and bookstores. By documenting his impressions with the Leica camera that he had been provided with, he essentially created illustrations for his diary entries. These reportage-style entries clearly show Lasky’s experience with journalistic writing. They reveal not only his views on the events transpiring around him but also his moods and emotions. He wrote at one point that he sometimes could hardly put down his experiences in writing, and considering what he had seen and experienced raises the question of what effect his war experience might eventually have had on his personal development.

Without discussing the diary’s contents in detail, one aspect must be mentioned, because in a way, it can serve as a link between Lasky’s interest in German history and culture before he went overseas and his later activities in postwar Germany. In his diary, Lasky not only commented elaborately on the

devastated German cities and the general political and economic situation during and after the war, he was also very eager to substantiate his impressions by talking directly to local people. It is striking that as an American Jew who had lost members of his extended family in Łódź during the Holocaust and who had passed through various liberated concentration camps when entering Germany, Lasky had a fundamentally positive and open attitude toward Germans. Despite the strict military order of absolute nonfraternization with the German people, i.e., no shaking of hands and no talking, he had long conversations with Germans of all age groups and social classes, meticulously recording what they told him about their experience during the war and their current situation. How moved he was by these conversations and also how hopeful and optimistic he still felt about Germany's future is documented in a letter to Dwight Macdonald written just a few days before the war ended:

There was a doctor in Frankfurt who helped me find the old museum at Goethe's birthplace . . . ; for an hour on the rubble we talked, and his earnestness and passion (and broken heart) touched me more than perhaps anything I have ever known. But then he was something of a political or developed person. There were two simple fellows in Darmstadt who understood little beyond the outline and substance of the events which had rained in on them; but the events themselves had been instructive and tragic enough. Even they, non-Nazi and petty-bourgeois, left me full of hope—not perhaps for a new Germany or a healthier European order, but for something much more practical and even immediate: a returning sense of the dignity of people, of the independence and honesty and character of a human being.<sup>16</sup>

In addition to Goethe's birthplace and museum, he visited—equipped with a *Baedeker* guide and almost as if on a “Grand Tour”—a multitude of historic and cultural monuments and sites such as the festival theater in Oberammergau, the Fugger houses in Augsburg, and Linderhof Palace. While traveling throughout Germany, Lasky also tried to get in touch and meet with German writers, intellectuals, and other renowned individuals whose works he partly had already read in New York (Jaesrich 1985, 17). These endeavors are proof of Lasky's strong desire to expand the number of contacts he had and thus to grow his personal and intellectual network from the US to Europe. These transatlantic networks formed the basis for Lasky's later activities in the context of the cultural Cold War, at first in Berlin as the founder of the intellectual magazine *Der Monat* and the cofounder of the anti-communist Congress for Cultural Freedom (CCF), and then in London starting in 1958 as editor of the CCF-financed intellectual magazine *Encounter* (Lerg and Roth 2010).



## Comments on the War Diary as a Source

Lasky's war diary as a stand-alone source turns out to be a truly fascinating historic document. Due to its mix of both sober descriptions and emotional comments, the reader learns a great deal about the daily life of an American GI, including the work routine of a combat historian and historical officer both during and after World War II. Some of the content, such as the description of conflicts with and between fellow GIs and their superiors, as well as the accounts of encounters and affairs with local women, might be typical for a diary of this genre. But since Lasky—even when he at times sounds quite precocious and schoolmasterly—was a very well-read, curious, critical, and, most of all, eloquent observer, the diary moreover offers very interesting and new insights into German postwar life. His in part harsh criticism of the American and Soviet military governments, the detailed retelling of his conversations with local people of all ages and walks of life, and the description of his meetings with intellectuals such as Karl Jaspers can serve as good examples for the specific approach Lasky took in writing his diary. This approach is one of the main differences between Lasky's diary and that of Forrest Pogue, who also served as a combat historian with the Third US Army and recorded his experiences from his shipment overseas in March 1944 until the end of the war in May 1945. Pogue, born in 1912 and in his civilian life a professor of history at Murray State Teacher College in Kentucky, saw himself primarily as an accurate chronicler of events taking place around him (Pogue 2001). In a very sober style, Pogue wrote about his experiences at or near the front line, which sometimes included combat operations, but mostly detailed the processes and challenges of his work as a combat historian. Even though there was occasionally a personal note to his records, Pogue was clearly focused on chronicling the events in his immediate environment and the direct context of the war (Pogue 2001, 51, 147, 216). Lasky at no point in his diary aimed at being this type of accurate chronicler. While he does write about his work and daily routine, he—diametrically opposed to Pogue—always put forward his personal view and opinion on whatever he saw and experienced. Hence, he seems to have been emotionally affected and involved to a much higher degree.

Another dimension of Lasky's diary grows clear when viewing it not just as a standalone historic document, but when analyzing it in the context of his personal development from before he was sent overseas to his activities in Europe after the end of the war. From this perspective, the diary appears as a kind of hinge that documents the transitional phase between his life in New York and the one in Berlin and in a sense also explains—at least in retrospect—his decision in favor of a transatlantic move. As a combat historian, Lasky was

able to combine his interests in history and journalism, interests that he had already pursued long before he was drafted. Even if he eventually opted for a career in journalism, his fundamental interest in history in general as well as his interest in people's specific personal histories can be noticed in all of his notes and publications. The war diary, therefore, is much more than—to quote Lasky once more—a “substitute for correspondence”; it is rather a very extensive exercise in writing or even a raw version of a full-scale manuscript.<sup>17</sup>

Because of the great degree of mobility he was granted for his official research and interviewing, he was able to pursue his private interests along the way. He could satisfy his intellectual curiosity by incessantly establishing contacts with all kinds of people, a habit he had already developed in New York. This way he could gain firsthand insight into the general mood and cultural life in postwar Germany. His basic knowledge of German and his familiarity with German cultural and intellectual history proved to be very helpful in this endeavor. When he, for example, personally explained the current state of the humanities in the US to Karl Jaspers, or in long letters described the situation of cultural life in bombed-out German cities to his friends among the New York intellectuals, he fostered a transatlantic intellectual exchange and acted as an early mediator between the two worlds. To some extent, he was essentially pushed into this role, which can be seen in a letter he wrote to Dwight Macdonald, urgently asking him for help only three months after the end of the war:

There are no German books, there are no foreign books. What US editions there are over here are all valueless, which means that I spend embarrassing days and nights trying to give overall reviews of the political, literary, philosophical, academic situation in the 30s and 40s, in a stuttering inadequate German. . . . But the point is, if you can send any materials over whatsoever, they will be very welcome. Old issues of PR [*Partisan Review*] and *Politics*, all kinds of scholarly reviews, what books there may be available. I want of course to write to Meyer Schapiro and/or Sidney Hook and see what organized relations can be set up with respect to the German intelligentsia and American (students) writers.<sup>18</sup>

The war experience represented a very decisive and formative period in Lasky's life on his transatlantic route from New York to Berlin. For Lasky, who already had the habit both of writing and keeping a diary, the war diary became a document of transition. On the one hand it was a vehicle to escape—at least in thought—the intellectually uninspiring military environment, and on the other hand, it served to record his experiences and strong impressions, thus his coming to terms with his emotions. How fundamental and far-reaching these experiences really were is documented in a letter Lasky wrote to Hannah Arendt while recuperating from minor lesions in a Berlin hospital:

Lying in a bed day after day I finally got a glimpse of a perspective of my life this last year. What an unbelievable unreal adventure! I wished so hard I could find powers within me some time to come to terms with my own experience, my own past. And I wondered whether changes in me—really: the way I talk and walk and think and read, the tone of one's ambition, the range of one's confidence and sensitivity—were as deep, as I sometimes, in a fit of autobiographical terror, suspect.<sup>19</sup>

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## Notes

1. Lasky New York Diary I (8 May 1939–Sept. 1941), 24, Lasky Papers, New York Box 1, Folder 1.
2. Letter from Melvin Lasky to his parents, undated [December 1939?], Lasky Papers, Correspondence before 1945, Samuel and Esther Lasky, Folder 2.
3. Lasky New York Diary I (8 May 1939–Sept. 1941), 73, Lasky Papers, New York Box 1, Folder 1.
4. Lasky New York Diary II (10 October 1941–October 1943), 6, Lasky Papers, New York Box 1, Folder 1.
5. Lasky New York Diary I (8 May 1939–Sept. 1941), 106, Lasky Papers, New York Box 1, Folder 1.
6. Cf. Memo to Michael Allen from Melvin Lasky, 18 May 2004, 16–17, Lasky Papers, Memoirs Box 1, Folder 31.
7. Letter from Melvin Lasky to Alan Wald, 2 December 1982, Lasky Papers, Correspondence Box 10, Folder 20.
8. Lasky New York Diary II (10 October 1941–October 1943), 80, Lasky Papers, New York Box 1, Folder 1.
9. Lasky New York Diary III (30 November 1943–13/14 May 1944), 44, Lasky Papers, New York Box 1, Folder 1.

10. Cf. Diploma of the Quartermaster School at Camp Lee, Virginia for Melvin J. Lasky [undated], Lasky Papers, New York Box 1, Folder 8.
11. Letter from Melvin Lasky to Merle Curti, 31 October 1944, Wisconsin Historical Society, Merle E. Curti Papers, Box 23, Folder 25.
12. Letter from Melvin Lasky to Dwight Macdonald, 8 April 1945, Yale University, Macdonald Papers, MS 730 Box 27, Folder 706.
13. Letter from Melvin Lasky to Hannah Arendt, 30 October 1945, in: Melvin J. Lasky, "First Indorsement' Journal of a Conscript," 225, Lasky Papers, New York Box 1, Folder 1.
14. Cf. Manuscript dated 11 February 1946 for Lasky's lecture on "Your Sources of Information," held at the "Conference of Historians" of the Historical Division, United States Forces European Theater, 15 February 1946, Lasky Papers, New York Box 1, Folder 11; Letter from Melvin Lasky to Charles A. Pearce, 11 November 1945, in Lasky, "First Indorsement' Journal of a Conscript." 228.
15. Letter from Melvin Lasky to Dwight Macdonald, 8 April 1945, Yale University, Macdonald Papers, MS 730 Box 27, Folder 706.
16. Letter from Melvin Lasky to Dwight Macdonald, 20 April 1945, in: Melvin J. Lasky, "First Indorsement' Journal of a Conscript," Lasky Papers, New York Box 1, Folder 1.
17. Letter from Melvin Lasky to Dwight Macdonald, 8 April 1945, Yale University, Macdonald Papers, MS 730 Box 27, Folder 706.
18. Letter from Melvin Lasky to Dwight Macdonald, 31 July 1945, Hannah Arendt Archive, University of Oldenburg (Original in Hannah Arendt Papers, Box 13, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC). Meyer Shapiro (1904–1996) was a renowned art historian and professor at Columbia University in New York.
19. Letter from Melvin Lasky to Hannah Arendt, 30 October 1945, also part of the diary. See p. 271.

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