

Habana, Cuba, May 31, 1940.

Personal and Confidential.

Dear Dr. Gruening:

I have received your letter of May 25 which I read with interest and appreciation. I have noted what you say concerning your cousin, Mr. Fritz Wittenberg, and I am taking this up with our Consul General here who is under our law solely responsible for the issuance of visas. I will write you again as soon as I have any definite information concerning the status of your cousin's application. You may be sure in the meantime that his application is receiving as rapid and as sympathetic consideration as the law and the circumstances permit. I hope that the circumstances may be such that in accordance with our law a visa may be issued in the near future.

I have so far had a very interesting time here but it is impossible for me yet to judge the degree of success which my efforts may have had. There are so many things to be done that even an energetic person like myself finds the days too short and at times accomplishments seem very slow. So far as the elections are concerned they are scheduled for July 14 and I see no reason why they should not be held. The chances are that the elections will pass off quietly and without the intervention of the army. I think all concerned would like very much to see a normal and proper election. As to the outcome of the elections it is of course generally believed that because of the political arrangements between Batista and Menecal Batista will be elected. You know that here in Cuba it is the unexpected which always may be expected and I am inclined to think that the election will be

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The Honorable Ernest Gruening,  
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Division of Territories and Island Possessions,  
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Washington, D.C.

a close one and that it is not entirely possible to foretell what the result will be. Grau has strengthened his position by taking a very reasonable attitude on some very fundamental matters.

The work of the Constitution Assembly is progressing slowly but there is reason to believe that it will be completed by June 8 which is the final date. Personal interests of course are played here in Cuba to an extraordinary degree and these are making themselves felt in the making of this Constitution. It is difficult in any country to make a Constitution during an election campaign and I need not tell you that it is more difficult in Cuba than in some other places. As a consequence the Constitution is taking the form more of a code of laws than of a Constitution but there is reasonable hope that in the Constitution those parts dealing with the rights of foreigners, the protection of property, the reestablishment of credit and the doing away with retroactivity of laws will be accomplished. While I fear that the Constitution which they will finally adopt will serve to be somewhat of a straitjacket for future legislative Assemblies, there is reason to believe that the provisions which will be placed therein with respect to fundamental matters of concern to us will provide for the stable basis of relations which there must be with us if Cuba is to prosper. I have tried to point out to our Cuban friends how extremely important this has always been in the past and how even more important it is in the years to come, and while they recognize this situation it is extremely difficult to get anything but lip service. On the whole, however, I look forward to the reestablishment of a proper basis for relationships even if it may take the pressure of developing situations in the rest of the world to bring it about.

The people here are friendly and understanding of their dependence on us, but we have bad friends who do what they can to upset these relationships. There is evidence that our friends in Mexico are doing what they can to raise trouble here and they are undoubtedly using the Communists as their spearhead. The Germans, Italians and Japanese are particularly active and are working together with some of these Mexican elements and in fact giving the Mexicans encouragement. All of them are using the Communists and are raising the extremely difficult racial question. I would not be

surprised

surprised to see the Communist vote on July 14 very much exceed the 90,000 of the last elections, not because the negroes are Communists but because this racial issue has been raised by the Communists.

There are not many Italians or Japanese on the island and they have not been particularly active, at least in no sense as have the Germans. There are a good many Germans most of whom are supposed to be refugees, but I have no doubts about a good many of them. There is reason to believe that during the last year a good many Germans have been planted among these refugees in various countries of Central and South America. We have evidence of the work of some of them here. Whatever is done in the way of controls eventually will have to be done in such a way as to do the least possible injury to the bona fide refugees. We have here to concern ourselves also with a certain part of the Spanish element which is inclined to be friendly to Germany and distinctly unfriendly to England and France, largely as a result of the Civil War in Spain. Some of these people are not anti-American and are wise enough to realize that German penetration here would mean the same things for them as it has meant in Europe. We are giving very close attention to this problem in Cuba but it is a very small part of the picture and I agree with you that Fifth Column activities in the American Republics will have to have our careful attention. I have had a good deal of experience in matters of this kind and I am trying to make available the benefit of my experience and observations to our Government.

I am, however, equally concerned with regard to Fifth Column activities in our own country. I may tell you that in my opinion moral sabotage by Germany in Europe has had as much to do with the success of her arms recently as her military power. I will not go into this but I could write a book on it from my own observations in more than one country. Just as other countries felt themselves immune to this and were complacent with what was happening and what they knew to be happening in their midst, so we are inclined to the same complacency. I am therefore of the opinion that just as important as our physical rearmament which must be rapid, thorough and complete, is our moral rearmament which means the putting down of

defeatism

defeatism in every form and the forms that it can take are many and insidious.

One thing we shall have to do is to put into effect immediately alien controls. These are now being studied and the machinery for them must be established effectively and in certain cases we must act even ruthlessly. We have, after all, four million aliens in our midst and should Germany gain the advantage in this war, even though it may be temporarily, there will be thousands who will wish to crawl on the band wagon and the fanaticism of thousands will be excited to a degree that they will become willing agents of other Governments and against the one which is giving them hospitality. I am one of those who believe that these controls of aliens must be thoroughgoing and that we may be obliged to extend them to certain of our own native born and naturalized citizens. After all it is our way of living and what we choose to call our democratic system which we wish to maintain. One principle of democracy is that the majority shall rule. Certainly, 98 percent of our people in the United States want to maintain our way of living and perhaps an even greater percentage. Shall we let, as other countries have done, this small remaining percentage undermine the morale of the rest of the country and weaken its power of defense? I think there is only one answer to this question.

I think you and I call ourselves liberals, but I am not one of those liberals who is blind to the extreme consequences which may come from giving too great freedom of action to undesirable elements. I have often told some of my liberal friends at home, principally among the lawyers, that they are so much interested in preserving the freedom of action of those who are trying to undermine our institutions that they are the worst enemies which our institutions have. In times such as the ones in which we are living we must meet fire with fire and we must be prepared to act ruthlessly and rapidly and effectively. It may be necessary for some of us to restrict our civil liberties for the time being in order that we may be able to preserve them for the future. Restricting our civil liberties after all will not mean a restraint on the overwhelming majority of our people, but will

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merely mean restraints on those who would destroy all that we cherish. For that reason it is my definite conviction that we must do many things which we would under other circumstances prefer not to do and that we must take immediate steps to control moral sabotage in any of the hundred insidious ways it can show itself. We have hundreds of anti-Semitic societies in our country which have no reason for existence whatever and most of which are rackets or which are supported by foreign Governments. We have a number of so-called peace societies which are no more than Communistic spearheads which should be suppressed. We have all kinds of burial and benevolent societies among our alien population which are being used in improper ways. What I am afraid of is not the fibre of the American people or our ability to protect ourselves in this hemisphere. What I am afraid of is that we will not act sufficiently quickly to prevent moral sabotage. We will be governed by old restraints which we have placed upon ourselves and these I am convinced that we must throw off.

It is useless of course for me to write these things to you who are so well aware of them all, but I am sure that you can do a great deal in order to make some of our friends understand that this is no time to talk about the maintenance of civil liberties when it merely means the right of a small minority to indulge in activities exceedingly dangerous to the majority. There are some of our very good friends whom we must convince in their own interest and in the general interest.

So far as the Americas are concerned, there is a tremendous amount of work to be done for they are practically defenseless. Their whole defense falls on us and it is not going to be an easy task. I am convinced that even though Germany should be able to dictate a peace to England and France - and what at peace it would be - she would not win the war for we cannot permit her to do it. The task involved for us is really stupendous and under the very best of circumstances we have got to look ahead to long and difficult years. The defense of the Americas, because of the wide reaches of the Continent, is difficult enough, but when I realize that the production machinery of a good part of Europe may fall into the hands of the Germans, then I appreciate how our own resources and ingenuity will be put to test. We have got to face the possibility

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that the production machinery of Europe and the peoples of a good many countries in Europe will be put to work by the Germans, forging their own chains and the arms which not only will keep them in bondage but which may be used against us. When I think of the possibility that a good many of the merchant vessels of the dispossessed countries in Europe may fall into the hands of the Germans it becomes more apparent that the oceans which separate our country will become small lakes and that it will be relatively easy to transfer large bodies of men and great quantities of military material to certain parts of this hemisphere. So far as the fleets of England and France are concerned, if there should be a dictated peace, there are only two safe places, either at the bottom of the sea or in our hands. If Germany had these fleets, she would be, together with Italy and Japan, in a position to be a real menace to our own shores and we would not have the time to build up to those fleets and you may be sure that we would not be given the time. All these are things which we must consider and they mean that we have to arm ourselves for the struggle, not only physically but morally. It means that lots of things which we would ordinarily do slowly we must do immediately. The sooner we recognize that it is the greatest emergency which our country has had to meet in our history, the more secure we will be able to make ourselves. This means that we can no longer maintain the reserve that we have maintained with respect to our people. We have to take them completely into our confidence. We have to make it clear that we know that the Germans, Italians and Japanese are working on a combination aimed at our destruction and reducing us to impotence. If we now do what we should do, there is no question as to the outcome.

There are so many things which I would like to write about that I cannot even begin, but I am glad to have had this opportunity today to write you these lines and I hope that you will keep in touch with me. If there is any way in which you see I can be useful or if you have any suggestions to make, I hope you will let me have them. This is a time when the burden falls not only on the younger generation, but on the older generation as well.

My wife joins me in very good wishes to you and Mrs. Gruening.

Faithfully yours,

GSM/hp

George S. Messersmith.