Chapter 2

A New Prophet

BACK IN VIENNA in my early teens, I began loafing and dreaming, trying to understand myself. Who am I? Is the body which I possess me? Is it all of me? Is it all matter? Or is there any part of my body, or some other manifestation of me, that could be called *soul*?

I was moody and disrespectful of everything. Whenever I heard from my parents or visited them, my mother, whose view of me had changed, expressed the opinion that I was mentally *kaput*. I experienced a considerable loss of sexual appetite and decided to be celibate.

I was considered a handsome young man. One day a young married woman who found out that I was out of circulation came to me. "You know," she said, "my husband is away on business one night a week. Would you like to come and spend the night with me?" I refused. "Are you married?" she asked me in a mocking tone. "Yes," I replied, "to a higher cause."

Extensive and feverish reading of religious, philosophical, and esthetic literature set the internal, psychic scene for the decisive period to come. The reading of religious books centered around the Old and New Testaments, Saints Paul, Augustine, Origen, Benedict, Francis, Meister Eckhart, Angelus Silesius, Friedrich Novalis, the Apocrypha, the Sohar and Jezirah, Blaise Pascal. Sören Kierkegaard's writings were having great impact throughout Europe at the beginning of the twentieth century, and I, too, fell under his spell. Among the philosophers in whom I was particularly engrossed were Spinoza, Descartes, Leibnitz, Kant, Fichte, Hegel, Marx, Schopenhauer, and Neitzsche. Among the novelists and poets were Dostoievsky, Tolstoi, Walt Whitman, and Goethe. It is obvious from this list that I shared these books with many of my generation, but it was my reaction to them that placed me apart.

My reading was in no way systematic. It was a book here, a book there. I was particularly stirred by the Cabala at one point. The Jewish mystical movement came to the fore during my student days and touched me deeply. The central tenets of Cabalism—that all creation is an emanation from the deity and that the soul exists from eternity—added to my original preoccupation with the book of Genesis. "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth," moved me deeply. . . .

One result of all my reading in theology and philosophy was violent opposition, not so much to the remedies the writers offered, which were excellent and beautifully expressed, but against their *behavior* as individuals and as representatives of the values they preached. They predicted disaster unless a prescribed course of action was followed, but they left it to crafty and opportunistic politicians to run the world. With few exceptions, they did not act themselves. They hid behind profound books and beautiful sermons. They seemed to think that having written their books or having preached their sermons, their jobs were ended. None of them made the jump out of the book into the reality. . . .

I was still in school, making a living as a tutor, living in a furnished room. In Chemnitz, my family's situation was rapidly becoming untenable. My father's business got worse and worse. Due to several small wars in Bulgaria and Turkey, he couldn't collect the money that was owed him. My uncles stepped in with a monthly stipend for my mother. Then my father left the family more or less for good. He moved to Istanbul; my mother moved the rest of the family back to Vienna from Chemnitz.

When they came back to Vienna, I could have moved in with them and completed my education with relative ease now that my uncles were supporting us. But I took sides with my father against my mother and uncles. I resented my mother for years because of the break with my father. There is no question that the amatory alliances that my father established on his trips to the Balkans contributed to the disaffection between my parents. But we children had only hints of the real reasons for the breakup, and the whole family drama is an obscure one, even now.

After my family moved back from Chemnitz, I grew a beard, quit school, and began to lead a roaming life.

Jesus was angry with his mother and indifferent or resentful towards his brothers and sisters, according to the Apocrypha. He was supposed to have left his family early and lived by himself. He, too, like myself, tried to find followers, to create a higher kind of family which gave him a more genuine feeling of belonging. He, too, although poor and of humble origin, tried to do things that were far above his means, helping children, treating the sick, rejecting the lawgivers and the rich of his time. Gautama [Buddha] left his princely home, his wife, his child, and wandered off. St.

Francis of Assisi left his rich parents to live like a beggar. Dozens of lesser prophets had similar fortunes.

That I was to follow the same course was a sign for me. I, too, was a chosen one, on the right track. Instead of thinking or feeling that my conduct was unfair and arrogant, these ancestral tales made me feel proud and righteous.

My mother often cried her eyes out. Indeed, this was the way she had tried to control my behavior since earliest childhood. When I behaved badly, she cried. Naturally, I then felt guilty. My sisters and brothers looked at me with awe and fear. Why did I act like a stranger in the house the rare times I was home? I stayed in my room in seclusion, eating alone, mincing words or not talking at all, preoccupied with things they did not understand. The tension grew. Much later, in 1912, people from Russia, Bulgaria, Rumania, and Turkey, old and young, began to come to our house, often with newspapers in their hands. They had articles about me, sometimes with photographs.

The word had gone round from mouth to mouth or in letters home. The story was that there was a group of young men in Vienna, led by myself, who would help, had helped them in distress, finding them work or getting money for them so they could continue their voyages to their destinies—New York, Chicago, Montreal, Buenos Aires, Jaffa, or wherever they had to go. The group consisted of myself—the man playing God, who came from Bucharest to Vienna; Chaim Kellmer—Chassid from Czernowitz, Bukowina, doctor of philosophy which he gave up to work the land, a warm, human man with a cherubic face; Jan Feda—from Prague, friend of Thomas Masaryk, overcoming Kant and Hegel, friend of Bezruc, tall, thin, ascetic, the flower of Czechoslovak youth; Hans Brauchbar—Viennese, doctor of medicine, later moved to Russia, disappeared; and Andreas Peto—polygamous man, came from Budapest and later returned there and developed a new method for treating motor-handicapped children. The fame which came from this unexpected source pleased me. It just happened. It was not planned.

But it both distressed and amazed my family. I tried not to show any pleasure in any of this. It would have been at odds with the saintly attitude I tried to maintain. They knew nothing of my efforts or my ideas. Where did I get the influence I had and the money to do what I was doing? To them I was just an unkempt young man with a mysterious air and an irregular life style. They were probably as much, or even more, upset by my lack of openness with them, my unwillingness to share any of my experiences with them.

I was, at that time, so deeply driven towards establishing the exaggerated role of a benefactor to mankind, a saint, that I did not realize how

paradoxical and ridiculous my conduct must have appeared to plain people. It is as if I was deeply pushed forward towards some kind of internal victory which could not have been attained except by doing extraordinary things.

Later in life I realized that there was a fairly normal component in my attitude, not too dissimilar from the conduct of many other adolescents. Every individual, man or woman, goes through three stages in the course of his lifetime. In the first stage, as an infant, he clings to the family. In the second stage, he withdraws from it, often not without a violent battle. In the third phase, he clings again to someone he loves and needs, usually to a family he has formed himself. It is as if he has returned to the beginning again.

At that time and for many of the years that followed, I had the sensation that I was the chief actor, the protagonist, in a drama with great scenes and exits, one act climaxing the other, culminating in a great and final victory. It was drama, but it was not theater. I was my own playwright and producer. The scenes were real, not like those in a theater. But they were not quite as real as in a simple life. They were of a higher reality. They were created by my imagination with the help of actual people and actual objects in the midst of real life. I escaped the fate of the schizophrenic who operates in a vacuum and has to fill the void with hallucinated figures up to the point of making himself believe that these figures interact with him.

In contrast to this, I was able to arouse the people around me to identify themselves with me and to create, with their aid, a supraworld in which I could test my prophetic role in a comparatively safe environment, made to order for me. . . .

The psychodrama of my life preceded psychodrama as a method. I was the first patient of psychodramatic therapy, protagonist and director in one. With the aid of unwitting auxiliary egos, the people around me, I developed a surplus reality, a new world which the actual culture did not, could not, provide. From such experiences and from my success with them came the vitality and drive to apply such techniques to other people. I also realized that I had developed a powerful vehicle for a cultural revolution. I was challenged because, not only did I have to inspire myself to play my part, but I had to inspire the people around me to play with me. At times, it appeared to me as if I was able to convince the grass to be as green, the sky to be as blue, and the trees to be as tall as I wanted them to be. The greater the barriers that I was able to overcome, the more my confidence grew that I could conquer new barriers. I lived in a state of constant suspense.

My becoming a prophet was not sudden. It was a slow, gradual growth whose determinants could be traced to my early childhood. This may ex-

plain the firmness and the stability of my conduct and why it never resulted in mental aberrations of crippling proportions.

I began to play the part. I wanted not only to become a prophet but to look like one. That a first beard grew was unavoidable for an adolescent approaching 18, but that I did not shave it had the mark of an important departure from the norm. By means of the beard, I made the point that one should not interfere with the healthy spontaneity of the body. Nature should be allowed to take its course. My beard was reddish blonde and sparse. In the course of years, it took the form which some medieval painters ascribed to Christ. Unconsciously, I must have approved of its appearance and of the effect the beard would have on people living in a Christological culture. Looking fatherly and wise, anticipating old age, was exactly what a young God would like. Often, however, the opposite effect is produced: How young must one be that he tries to look so old? I worked on the premise that my coming was expected and that I must look the part. Obviously, there are two compulsions operating here, a cultural compulsion and a private compulsion.

My eyes are blue. I was told that they were large and smiling with gentleness and love. Looking into my eyes, people would feel that I could read all that was in their minds. My affectionate bearing and overt kindness seemed to be deeply concerned with the affairs of the person just facing me. I was always most reticent about myself. My pronounced unselfishness would easily have been labeled as hypomanic behavior were it not for the fact that I lived the role, not only in public, but took it to bed with me.

One day a distraught mother came to see me. Deeply concerned about her child, who was a pathological liar and mischief-maker, she poured out her story and pleaded with me to work with her daughter, Liesel. The girl was on the verge of being thrown out of school, where she was always in trouble. She told fantastic lies to her father about her mother, causing terrible scenes in the household. The father, Herr Bergner, was a tailor, and the family was rather poor. Word of my saintly, prophetic mien had passed around the neighborhood. Although I was quite young, people in trouble turned to me.

Liesel prospered under my tutelage. I discovered that she had incredible dramatic talent, and I encouraged her mother to give the girl dramatic training, which she did. Liesel became Elisabeth Bergner, one of the most famous actresses of the German stage in the twentieth century.

There are few recorded observations of my life during that period. One is by Arthur Eloesser, the biographer of Elisabeth Bergner.

> The children were, for a long time, tutored by a Spanish-Jewish student of medicine, an apostolic character who could have been the creation of the fantastic ethic of Jakob Wasserman. He was, first of all a brilliant pedagogue, so

> naive or so much an artist that he was not even able to keep the various disciplines apart. Liesel . . . does not know even today whether she learned them all at the same time. It all came in a natural way. There was no question of homework, results, or exams. He was a strange teacher, all the more strange as he did not accept any compensation from the people who hired him: "Give the money directly to the poor." I do not know whether the poor ever received the money, I know only that the, I would almost say, truly Christian young man, bequeathed his pupil a heavenly fairy tale which is still with her. He taught the three Bergner children—besides the two sisters there was a younger brother—how to pass daily through the eye of a needle and how one can even make this still uncomfortable and unpopular passage entertaining. On their walks the children were induced to give their few pennies to still poorer children, the pennies which had been given to them for milk, fruits, or even for the carousel. The teacher had them fill their cheeks with air and assured them enthusiastically how wonderful the imagined piece of chocolate tasted, or they gave their balls away when playing in the city parks and then they threw chunks of air to one another with empty hands. The young enthusiast who was, notwithstanding, a very well poised and positive man, caused his pupil only two disappointments. One time, in the beginning, Liesel came home for dinner and wanted to see him right away. She was told that he was eating. She looked through the keyhole: he really ate! And then, at the end, the other disappointment, that he still lives. Yes, said I, if the friend were really a character out of Jakob Wasserman's world, he would have received what he justly deserved. The good poet would have taken him back at the right moment by letting him pass away through a noble kind of consumption or through a gentle heart attack. But now, being older, he may have abandoned his adolescent ideals. Oh no, he is a *wunderdoktor* in a suburb of Vienna. He still treats the poor without accepting money . . . but he still lives. (Arthur Eloesser, *Elisabeth Bergner*, Berlin, 1927, pp. 23-25, translated by myself)

I wore a dark green mantle which fell almost to my ankles. Everyone began to identify me with it, "the prophet's mantle." I wore it summer and winter, perhaps with the intention of making myself easily identifiable, like an actor who wears the same costume at every performance. At times, it seemed to me that I was creating a type, a role, which once encountered, could never be forgotten.

I had the *idée fixe* that a single individual had no authority, that he must become the voice of a group. It must be a group, the new word must come from a group. Therefore, I went out to find friends, followers, good people. My new religion was a religion of being, of self-perfection. It was a religion of helping and healing, for helping was more important than talking. It was a religion of silence. It was a religion of doing a thing for its own sake, unrewarded, unrecognized. It was a religion of anonymity.

I felt that, even if my modest effort should remain entirely ineffective and be forgotten, it would have been important from the point of view of eternity that such things were tried and existed, that such things were cultivated, and that such purity was maintained regardless of whether it paid

off. The new religion required a mood of resignation, of just being and having the immediate satisfactions of such a state of being. If love or comradeship should arise, it should be fulfilled and retained in the moment without calculating the possible returns or without expecting any compensation.

At the same time, I was aware that enormous inner forces, the desire for recognition and power, pushed me towards overt expression. I felt a pressure towards trying to create a religion of the masses. These forces were difficult to channel, and I had a difficult time just being satisfied with the world of immediate meetings. Had I wanted to, and had I been less given to perfectionism, I could have summoned the strength to create a religion involving large masses of people. But a strong daimon held me back from too much organization. The daimon assured me that I might be able to pull through to victory even by such a naive level of conduct. The daimon tried to kindle in me the hope that the apparently impossible can be achieved, even if it should take a thousand years. It lulled me into believing that I was strong and powerful enough to wait, and I could not resist the dream of the romantic new universe within me. My love for that universe was so deep that I could not see how I could ever depart from it. I made the error of underestimating the growing impact of the technological world around me and clinging too closely to the antiquated models of the Middle Ages. Many of my predecessors in religious experimentation may have had to face similar challenges. There are recurrent cultural patterns in which every religious innovator becomes involved. *The crux of the problem was how to create a religion without being caught in the wheels of an organization, how to lead a religious life without becoming a business prophet* [Moreno's italics].

By 1908, I was back in school, this time at the University of Vienna. I never received a diploma from the gymnasium but was able to take the entrance examinations for the university and become a matriculated student. My intense religious life did not prevent me from continuing with my studies.

It is hard to recapture the mystic mood which enveloped our group during that summer of 1908. Chaim Kellmer, Hans Brauchbar, Hans Feda, Andreas Petö, and I walked through the night for hours at a time. No one spoke. We expected Christ to be born again. His arrival was imminent.

Adolescent men are nearer to Christ than are mature or old men. Christ is a symbol of youth. He came for children and young people. We looked with curiosity and suspicion at every man who walked by. Then we looked at our own reflections, at our own shadows. Who could tell? It could be one of us. Once when we were speculating on the coming of Christ, Kellmer and Feda suddenly looked at me with an expression of awe and rever-

ence. They expected it from me. They pushed me forward to the great deed, the transformation. The questions that preoccupied us were: How would He look and act? By what signs could we recognize Him? We stopped at the bridge across the Danube. There was no one there. One of us muttered, almost inaudibly, "He will be naked." One by one we all joined in, "Not a stitch of clothes on." "Long hair and long beard, not because they are necessary to His appearance, but because hair and beard grow." Thus we amplified upon one another's fantasies. And no fantasy was too absurd or crazy to be exchanged with the others. We were free in one another's company to share our inmost thoughts.

Christ would be naked, we decided, not because He was a primitive being, but because nakedness is the dynamic, external gesture of excluding and rejecting all cultural paraphernalia. It was not Adam who was to return, but Christ. Our returning Christ would need a dramatic way of announcing His nonacceptance of our technological culture. He would not be an exhibitionist, but a man who had reverence for the natural state of His body. By contrast, it is modern "culture" which "exhibits" clothing, shirts, hats, underwear, shoes, and socks. Christ would have His body nude as it came from His mother's womb. Thus Christ had to be nude. We tried to envision His conduct in our time. He would come walking. He could not come riding on a white horse, in a chariot, or in an automobile. He would not go into theaters or motion picture houses. He would not go into temples or churches. He would go into people's homes, into their workshops, into their stores, into hospitals. He would be out on the streets, wherever there were people.

Since the greatest crime in our culture is to be pathological, to behave in a pathological manner, He would appear in the manner of the pathological man and exhibit, humorously, all the paraphernalia of insanity. He would say, "I am a mental patient; look at me; let all the mentally sick come to me." We really warmed up to the part. . . .

Christ heard voices. We all hear voices. Anyone who does not hear voices is not normal. "This time Christ will be naked. He will hear voices and the voices will tell Him what to do, and He will hear the voices which we hear within us."

Such was the dream we had of Christ. . . .

The first encounter I tried to have was with the child. I turned to the offspring, the babes, the children. I moved into places where children played, where they were left by their parents when mothers and fathers had to go to work. Instead of talking to the children in plain language, I told them fairy tales. I discovered that I could never repeat the same fairy time, that I felt an obligation to myself and to the children to maintain their sense of wonderment even when the plot was the same, to maintain myself on a

level of spontaneity and creativity in order to live up to the rigorous demands of my creative ego, which did not give me the "prophetic license" for less. I watched with astonishment my transformation from a humdrum student into an adventurous prophet. I was aroused to greater deeds every day by the imaginative pleas of the children.

When I look at a child I see "yes, yes, yes, yes." They do not have to learn to say yes. *Being born is yes.* You see spontaneity in its living form. It is written all over the child, in his act-hunger, as he looks at things, as he listens to things, as he rushes into time, as he moves into space, as he grabs for objects, as he smiles and cries. In the very beginning, he sees no barriers in objects, no limits of distance, no resistances or prohibitions. But as objects hinder his locomotions and people respond to him with "no, no, no," he starts on his reactive phase, still reaching out, but with growing anxiety, fear, tension, and caution.

I found a deep meaning in children's Godplaying. As a student, I used to walk through the gardens of Vienna, gathering children and forming groups for impromptu play. I knew, of course, about Rousseau, Pestalozzi, and Froebel. But this was a new slant. It was a kindergarten on a cosmic scale, a creative revolution among children. It was not a philanthropic crusade of adults for children, but a crusade of children for themselves, for a society of their own age and their own rights. I wanted to give the children the capacity to fight against social stereotypes, against robots, *for* spontaneity and creativity.

It was in my work with the children that my theories of spontaneity and creativity crystallized. Inevitably, the older the child the less spontaneous and the less creative he was. The two factors, spontaneity and creativity, went together. Also, I found that whenever a child repeated himself in the playing out of an idea or a dramatic sketch, his portrayals became more and more rigid.

I myself took to anonymity, spontaneity, and creativity like wood takes to fire. This is how my Godplaying in the gardens and the streets of Vienna began. One day I walked through the Augarten, a park near the archduke's palace, where I saw a group of children loafing. I stopped and began to tell them a story. To my astonishment, other children dropped their games and joined in. So did the nursemaids with their carriages, the mothers and fathers, the policemen on horseback.

From then on, one of my favorite pastimes was to sit at the foot of a large tree and let the children come and listen to a fairy tale. The most important part of the story is that I sat at the foot of a tree, like a being out of a fairy tale, and that the children were drawn to me as if by a magic flute. It seemed to me that they were bodily removed from their drab surroundings and brought into a fairy land. It was not so much what I told them,

the tales themselves, but it was the act, the atmosphere of mystery, the paradox, the becoming real of the unreal.

I was in the center of the group. Often I moved up from the foot of the tree and sat higher, on a branch. The children formed a circle around me, then a second circle would form behind the first, a third behind the second. Many concentric circles. The sky was the limit.

Why I chose the course of the theater instead of founding a religious sect, joining a monastery, or developing a system of theology (although none of these alternatives excludes any of the other) can be understood by taking a look into the setting from which my ideas arose. I suffered from an *idée fixe*, or from what might have been called an affectation then, but which could be called today, now that the harvest is coming in, the grace of God. The *idée fixe* became my constant source of productivity. It proclaimed that there is a sort of primordial nature which is immortal and returns afresh with every new generation, a first universe which contains all beings and in which all events are sacred. I liked that enchanting realm which was disclosed to me in the godplaying of children, and I have kept myself tied to it. I did not plan to leave it ever. . . .

Gradually the mood came over me that I should leave the realm of the children and move into the world, the larger world, but, of course, always retaining the vision which my work with the children had given me. I decided that the *idée fixe* should remain my guide. Therefore, whenever I entered a new dimension of life, the forms I had seen with my own eyes in the virginal world stood before me. They were my models whenever I tried to envision a new order of things or to create a new form. I was extremely sure of these visions. They seemed to endow me with a science of life even before experience verified their accuracy. When I entered a family, a school, a church, a parliament building, or any other social institution, I rebelled. I knew how distorted our institutions had become, and I had a new model ready to replace the old.

Behind the screen of telling fairy tales to children, I was trying to plant the seeds of a diminutive creative revolution. This carried double significance. It was a test of the living God idea *within* the framework of our modern civilization, not in comparative safety outside of it, as in the deserts of Africa or on the plains of India. It was my intent to be a fighting saint, not a recluse. I also intended my work to be a demonstration against the psychoanalytic theory of heroes and geniuses then rampant in Vienna, which said that they were all mental patients, more or less, or at least touched by insanity. Therefore, I wanted to show that a man who showed all the signs of paranoia, megalomania, exhibitionism, and other forms of social and private maladjustment could still be fairly well controlled and healthy. Indeed, such a man could be more productive by acting out his

symptoms than he would be if he tried to constrain and resolve them. I was the living antithesis of psychoanalytic doctrine, foretelling, in my own life, the protagonist of psychodrama.

The only way to get rid of the God syndrome is to act it out [Moreno's italics].