

## Chapter 3

# Chaim Kellmer and the Religion of the Encounter

EARLY IN MY UNIVERSITY YEARS, I met a man who was to become the closest friend and companion I had as a youth. I was stopped by a stranger one cold winter morning while crossing the street from the Votivkirche to the university. He came close to me and said in a deep, melodious voice, "I've seen and heard you many times and I've wanted to speak with you, so here I am." We shook hands. From that moment on, until his death, Chaim Kellmer was my steady companion.

Chaim had a powerful physique. He was taller and broader than I was, quite a few years older. He flung words out of his mouth with great rapidity. He explained to me that he was about to receive his doctorate of philosophy. He was on his way to a seminar that morning, but felt that meeting me was more important. Chaim had come from Czernowitz in the Bukowina, now part of Russia, then a Rumanian district. He had been exposed to Chassidic teachings and came to Vienna to find answers to the many riddles brooding in his mind and soul. But the riddles were unanswerable, he said with sarcasm.

He looked at me with his deep-set eyes and said, "I know that you and I together have the answers and that is why I want to speak with you and know you. There are three things that plague me," he continued. "Should I go and teach philosophy? I have not found anything worthwhile here to teach. The second thing is, should I work with my hands instead of teaching, since all these intellectual things are useless and vain?" I looked at his large, powerful arms and hands. "I was planning to pack my belongings and go to Palestine to work in one of the colonies there." Suddenly he looked at me and said, "But why go so far away?" Chaim had a vigorous

face with an overly healthy-looking, ruddy complexion. It was almost as if he was burning from the heat of his inner passions. I thought his appearance quite curious on that freezing morning. Later I learned that Chaim Kellmer was a sick man and that the ruddiness was the flush from a tuberculous's low-grade fever that rises throughout the day. His zest for action arose from a deep anxiety to fill his short life with abundance.

"The third and most important thing," he said, "I want to live a good life. Goodness comes first." Then we both stopped, leaning on one of the columns that lined the university facade. "Tell me how to live and tell me what to do." It was as if he was putting his whole life into my hands. It was such a dramatic, deep experience for me. It had never happened to me before that a man greeted me and showed me so much respect. I felt humble. Who was I to deserve it? I remained silent. We walked. He stopped talking, and the silence we shared seemed to create a lasting bond between us.

My silence said this to him, "I do not want to speak words in vain. You know that you must make your decisions yourself, and you *will* make them."

I was the model of his glowing dream to meet a superior being, a messianic soul whom he could follow, and he was the victim of my craving for omnipotence. We were both swept by a wave of religious contagion. . . .

Like me, Chaim made his living by tutoring. One day, following my example, he stopped charging for his work. The families he had been with for several years were embarrassed. They invited him for extra meals. They kept a bed for him so he could stay overnight any time he wanted to. They gave him clothing and showered him with gifts. He was such a wonderful teacher and friend to those families that they did not want to lose him. In the end he was the best-dressed and best-fed tutor I knew. He laughed when I teased him about it. "If you give love to people, they give it back to you," he replied.

Chaim also visited people and gave them his counsel, trying to help them solve their problems. People would call on him whenever they needed help. Often they insisted on giving him money for his help, but he always refused, saying, "There is only one thing I can accept. We have a fund for renting a home in the city for people who need shelter. Give the money to the fund."

Thus the religion of the encounter came to life in the years between 1908 and 1914. My group of followers and I numbered five young men. We were all committed to the sharing of anonymity, of loving and giving, living a direct and concrete life in the community with all we met. We left our homes and families and took to the streets. We were nameless but were easily recognized by our beards and our warm, human, and gay approach to all comers. None of us would accept any money for the services we ren-

dered to others, but we received many gifts from anonymous donors. All the gifts received went into the fund for the House of the Encounter. A Catholic relief organization also donated funds for the house.

In the years before World War I, the turmoil and political instability of the Austro-Hungarian Empire expressed itself in the vast numbers of people who were seeking new homes, either in the Americas or in Palestine. They poured into Vienna, as refugees still do, and they often had a long wait before they could get passage, sometimes as long as a year. Frequently during the long wait, they exhausted their meager savings. Transients or refugees could not get work permits. Someone in our group had a connection in city hall and was able to get work permits without any delay; that was a tremendous accomplishment. We found jobs for people on farms, as helpers in homes, as laborers of all sorts, as bricklayers, anything we could get for them. They were not particular. When they were ill, we got medical care for them.

We found a house in one of the central districts of Vienna. Whoever came was welcome and could stay without paying. So they came from all over. They did not know our names, but they carried pictures or descriptions, often quite bizarre, of the founder of the house and of his helpers. They heard of us through letters from relatives and friends and from newspaper accounts of our work. Some came alone, some with wives and children. They rarely came by prearrangement, but just showed up at the house holding the much-handled letters or clippings.

On the walls of the house were colorfully drawn inscriptions with the following pronouncement, "Come to us from all nations. We will give you shelter."

It still amazes me that so many people crowded into that house and shared with one another whatever they had, without fighting or rancor. We tried to keep families together, but there was little privacy. Nonetheless, there were several babies conceived and born during the long wait for passage. We held nightly sessions after supper in which problems were brought forth and grievances were settled. These early "encounter groups" were the model for the encounter groups now spreading throughout the world. But the nightly meetings were not just discussion sessions. After we shared our feelings, we sang and danced and played games. Participating in the encounters was a religious experience, a joyful one. . . .

Soon Chaim received his degree, doctor of philosophy. "I've finished," he said, "here is the diploma," and he tore it up before my eyes. "I won't go to Palestine. I've been reading your mind and I know you don't think I should go. I don't know why I should go so far. The world is here just as well as it is there. There is land here that needs hands to till it. The idea of

going to Palestine as a Chalmutz was a dream from my early days. I thought then that, since I was a Jew, I belonged there, and that I belonged to the Jewish people. But now I have lost the sense of what a Jew is. I try to find the Jew in myself and I cannot find it. Maybe some people can do that. I think that Palestine is right here." He hit the ground violently with his foot. "I have taken a job as a farmhand in Kagan. I have found a fine old farmer to work for. I start tomorrow." . . .

Kellmer had visionary ideas about the spontaneous power of the body to cure every ailment. He had no respect for doctors or for potions, and refused to bow to the imperatives of his body. He refused to give his body sleep or food or rest, in the childish notion that his body would follow his will. But the body would not. At certain moments he said he knew that he was going to die young. At other times when he was lying in bed with a high fever, full of dreams, really delirious states, he feared the nearness of his death. He was convinced that he would not see the next day when he was in such states. He feared the dreadful spells of coughing that came upon him. His great breast heaved with pain, trying to throw off the mucus. He felt that he might be choked by the expectorant some day, or that his heart would stop beating from the strain of coughing.

Paradoxically, the patent nearness of his death gave him enormous strength to live more and more carelessly. He squandered his energy and was more determined than ever to hone his ideas to the sharpest point, to test them, to prove them to the world. Thanks to his innate strength, fierce will, and boundless energy, he lived 7 more years. But in those 7 years, he lived with greater intensity than many others might live in a century. Chaim's relationship to his death was a sensuous one.

Chaim also had a sensuous and passionate love of women, although he had never slept with one. He was always tempted to do it. He resisted. He also resisted all the women who wanted him. But one day he came to me with a glowing expression in his eyes. He put his hand on my shoulder and looked into my eyes. There was a long, intense silence. He always wanted to think that I knew what he was thinking. Then he burst out into laughter. "Well, it happened last night. For the first time, I was with a woman for whom I have felt great love from the moment I met her. We waited for years for the moment. It was a glorious experience, and I am still trembling in ecstasy. I have been fasting today. I felt like a bridegroom who has met his bride, but I've had to struggle with my conscience all day. The question is, should I continue the affair? Is a great experience like a sexual act with a woman you love not desecrated by repetition? The sexual act was so unique and complete from both sides that it seems to have consumed all of my sexual hunger. Repetition could turn a wonderful thing into a habit. There's nothing new I could learn from a second time."

Chaim kept his faith. Never again did he have intercourse with a woman as long as he lived. However, that young, lovely woman became the hostess of the home we had started for refugees. They were always close to one another and continued to love one another until his death.

Kellmer's life was symbolic of a new religious outlook that tried to integrate sex and love into a bigger framework of life. He lived with unique devotion to the daily tasks and callings he met with until the outbreak of the First World War. To the surprise of everyone who knew him, he volunteered to serve as a hospital aide in the Austro-Hungarian army. He knew that a regular medical examination would bar him from service, so he found some way of circumventing the requirements. All his friends warned him that military life would probably kill him, but he resisted all of our well-meant advice. To his misfortune, and against all of his calculations, the military authorities insisted that he go through the regular period of basic training. All this was an enormous shock to his sick body, but he endured heroically, always maintaining that he expected to attend the wounded and console the sick. Finally he was assigned to a Lazarett. His friends saw him in the hospital uniform, going from bed to bed, giving the soldiers a lift here, a word there. A few weeks later, he was taken to the hospital in a high fever. He never recovered from that attack. I was able to see him again when he was transferred to a hospital in Vienna shortly before his death. He was buried somewhere near Kagran in a country cemetery. No one knows where his last remains rest. He died as he lived, anonymously.