

Chapter 6

Post-war Vienna: *Daimon* and the Stegreiftheater

WHILE I WAS STILL STATIONED at Mittendorf, I spent much of my free time in Vienna at the Café Museum and the Café Herrenhof. The cafés were gathering places for intellectuals and artists of every description. Each café had a slightly different clientele. At first I knew few of the people at the Café Museum, but soon developed a circle of acquaintances. Acquaintance grew into friendship, and then some of us became co-workers. There was a table reserved for our circle at the Café Museum. This was the usual practice at most cafés; there were other coteries who met at the Museum. We usually met once a week, but spontaneous get-togethers were not uncommon between the weekly meetings. On the whole, the cafés catered to masculine society.

It was in the Café Museum that I met Martin Buber, Arthur Schnitzler, writer of comedies with a philosophical air and regular participant in the Stegreiftheater, Jakob Wasserman, novelist in the style of Dostoievski, Robert Musil, Franz Lehar, and many others who were to become important to me.

It was not long before I thought of publishing a monthly journal of existential philosophy. *Daimon*, named after the Socratic “daimon,” was first published in February 1918. I was editor-in-chief; E. A. Rheinhardt was managing editor. The first issue had articles, stories, and poetry by Otokar Brezina, the Czech poet; Max Brod, intimate friend of Kafka; Francis Jammes; Paul Kornfeld; E. A. Rheinhardt; Friedrich Schnack, a poet who lived in Istanbul; Jakob Wasserman; Ernst Weiss; Franz Werfel; Alfred Wolfenstein; A. P. Gutersloh, the painter and poet from Salzburg; and myself, under the name of Jakob Moreno Levy. We reprinted a brief essay by Blaise Pascal dating from the year 1654, “L’Ammulette Mystique.” Our first publisher was Brüder Suchitzky of Vienna.

In 1919, *Der Neue Daimon* was published by the Genossenschaftsverlag, which also published books by Alfred Adler, Albert Ehrenstein, and Fritz

Lampl. In 1920, we changed the name of the journal to *Die Gefährten*. There was no profound philosophical reason for the change in name. We expanded our circle, and, since *Die Gefährten* means "the associates," we did justice to the whole group. In addition to the authors mentioned above, we published work by Franz Blei; Ernst Bloch, composer and philosopher of music; Martin Buber; Paul Claudel; Nicholas Cusanus, the Italian poet; Otto Stoessl; and Georg Kaiser, a forerunner of Berthold Brecht. Kaiser wrote the famous play *Gas*, which had a profound influence on Brecht's later work.

Every large city has places like the Museum and the Herrenhof. But Vienna in the 1920s was one of the most alive spots on earth for intellectuals and artists. [The interested reader may wish to consult Alan Janik and Stephen Toulmin, *Wittgenstein's Vienna*, New York, Simon and Schuster, 1973.] Many became world-famous in later life. Most of the *Daimon* circle were older than I, and some were already well known.

Although I had hundreds of contacts through the *Daimon* circle, I had few real intimates. Franz Werfel was one of my closest friends then. We shared common ground. His poetry leaned towards the same philosophy I had adopted. The poetry had a religious character which was not in my style, but its rhythm appealed to me. A natural sympathy existed between us. I was far more of an intellectual in my approach to life than he was. My heroic-messianic quality appealed to him. We met, first, in the coffee houses and later worked together in the Stegreiftheater.

Werfel was the son of wealthy parents. He had a good-natured approach to life and was rich in the social graces. He played the violin. I have always been interested in music, but Franz was a fanatic, a connoisseur, a patron of music. He married the widow of Gustave Mahler.

His marriage didn't affect our friendship. Mrs. Werfel was an interesting, brilliant woman who had been deeply involved in the women's rights movement. She had been very much in love with Mahler and was devoted to his memory, but since she was also devoted to Franz, everything was fine. Mrs. Werfel was a devout Catholic and Franz was Jewish.

The book Franz is best known for is *Song of Bernadette*, an odd subject for a Jewish writer, but he was always interested in esoteric themes and in mystical experiences. Franz and I renewed our friendship when he came to Hollywood to work on the screenplay for *Song of Bernadette*. . . .

Perhaps the most popular political philosophy among the intellectuals and artists was Marxism. Gustave Landauer wrote a well-known book about history and politics. The Nazis killed him. Hugo Sonnenschein, the poet, became a communist and went to Russia. Ernst Toller, a poet and playwright, was also a communist. He did not die as so many of the other prominent communists of that era did—purged by Stalin or killed by the

Nazis. Toller was a highly visible leader who ran the communist putsch in Munich which preceded Hitler's famous beer-hall putsch. Toller was about 30 when I met him. He was an emotional, handsome man. He finally came to New York in the late 1930s, where he fell in love with a girl of 16 and followed her around almost everywhere she went. He was literally crazy about her, although she wanted nothing to do with him. He talked about suicide sometimes, but no one believed that he had the courage to do away with himself. Mutual friends advised him to come to me in Beacon [New York] for treatment, but the day that I expected him at my sanitarium, I learned he had jumped out a window instead.

Max Brod was at the center of a large group of Czech literati which included Robert Musil and Otokar Brezina. The most famous of his friends was Franz Kafka, who was part of our larger circle through his friendship with Brod. . . .

We had a bit of a scandal with Franz Blei, a theological writer from Berlin. Blei manufactured a new gospel, supposedly written by a Greek Christian, Apollonius. When we published it, there was a sensation over it. I was quite angry at Blei for hoaxing us. By then he was angry at me because he thought I was in love with his sweetheart.

Peter Altenberg was much older than I. I looked up to him. His poems are still among my favorites. I keep his *Collected Works* close to me so that I can read them when I am in the mood. Altenberg was a famous figure in Vienna. He loved women and children—not sexually. Of all the people I knew then, he was among the most gifted. He died in an alcoholic stupor.

Martin Buber was another highly gifted member of our circle. His book about Chassidism, *Baal Shem*, won the Goethe Prize. Buber was an assistant editor of *Daimon* for a while. His most famous book, *I and Thou*, was published in 1923, 9 years after my *Invitation to an Encounter*. Buber has often been given credit for the concept of the encounter as a focal point for the study of interpersonal relations. Buber, however, clearly got the idea of the encounter from me and elaborated on it in his book. Since he was about 12 years older than myself and had a tremendous literary following, *I and Thou* pushed *Invitation to an Encounter* out of the limelight. But I do not want to imply that Buber and I had any conflicts over what happened. Buber was a great gentleman with a very warm and cordial manner. In 1938, he went to live in Jerusalem, where he died in 1965. . . .

At the same time as my books were being published, I was involved with the establishment of the Stegreiftheater, the Theater of Spontaneity, in Vienna. . . .

Back in 1911, we entered a theater in Vienna one evening just as a play was beginning. We made our way to the first row and sat down. The rest of the audience was already into the hypnotic spell of the play, *Also*

Sprach Zarathustra. It was our notion to awaken the actors and the spectators from their "histrionic sleep." We accused the actor who played Zarathustra of misrepresenting himself. We wanted to draw attention to the conflict between Zarathustra, the spectator, and Zarathustra, the actor. My companion posed as the real Zarathustra, sitting in the audience, aghast at the violence done to his character by the actor and the playwright. The "real" Zarathustra ordered the actor to play himself, not Zarathustra. After my friend confronted the actor and the playwright, I went up on the stage and presented my radical philosophy. I called for the tearing down of the institution of the theater in order to create a new theater which would not just "mirror the sufferings of foreign things . . . but play our own woe." I wanted to create a theater of genius, of total imagination, the theater of spontaneity, in line with the work I was doing with the children in the parks of Vienna.

A scandalous situation! The actors were upset; the audience angry. Fiction had given way to reality. We were evicted from the theater by police and taken to jail, where we spent the night. The following morning we went before a magistrate. Luckily we were dismissed after we submitted to a scolding and after we promised to refrain from [doing] anything like that again. We were a tough-looking pair, and public outcry was serious. Our actions were seen as a serious threat to the peace. It could have been much worse for us than spending the night in jail. . . .

The first official psychodramatic session took place at the Komödienhaus, a famous Vienna theater, in 1921. Anna Höllering, the actress, was a good friend of mine, and her father, who owned the Komödienhaus, let me use it for a night without paying him rent.

I stood alone on the stage that night. I had no cast of actors and no play. I was entirely unprepared before an audience of more than 1,000 people. When the curtain went up, the stage was bare except for a red plush armchair which had a gilded frame and a high back, like the throne of a king. There was a gilded crown on the seat of the chair. Most of the audience was composed of curiosity seekers, with a few scandal seekers as well. But there were a number of politicians, religious leaders, and cultural leaders. There was also a sprinkling of foreign dignitaries. As I look back on that night, I am amazed at my boldness. I was trying to cure or purge that audience of a disease, a pathological cultural syndrome which was shared by all who were in the theater that night. Postwar Vienna was seething with revolt. There was no stable government, no emperor, no king, no leader. The last Hapsburg monarch had fled to Italy. And, like the other nations of the earth, Austria was restless, in search of a new soul.

But, psychodramatically speaking, I had a cast and I had a play. The audience was my cast. The people in the audience were like a thousand un-

conscious playwrights. The play was the situation into which they were thrown by historical events in which each of them had a real part to play. It was my aim, as we would say today, to tap sociodrama in *statu nascendi* and to analyze the production which emerged. If I could only succeed in turning the audience into actors, actors in their own collective drama, the collective drama of social conflict in which they were actually involved every day of their lives, then my boldness would be redeemed, and the session would have accomplished something.

The natural theme was the search for a new order of things, the testing of anyone in the audience who aspired to leadership, and, perhaps, to find a savior. Each according to his role, politicians, ministers, writers, soldiers, physicians, and lawyers, all were invited by me to step onto the stage, to sit on the throne, and to act like a king. No one was prepared ahead of time. Unprepared characters acted in an unprepared play before an unprepared audience. The audience played the role of the jury. But the test must have been too difficult. No one passed it. When the show was over, no one was judged worthy of being a king and the world remained leaderless. The Viennese press was disturbed by the incident, we found out next morning. Our most "favorable" review was in the *Wiener Mittagszeitung* of April 2, 1921: "The dramatist introduces himself to the audience as the king's jester, who is in search of the king of the world, of that king who cannot be chosen, but who must be recognized because he exists as an idea and has his true habitat in the heart of mankind. The presentation was received by the public with ironic applause which, at times, hindered the production. But there were also some people who belong to the following of Werfel and who strongly took the part of the mysterious poet."

I lost many friends but registered calmly, "*Nemo profeta in sui patria*," and continued to give sessions before audiences in European countries and, later, in the United States.

Our Stegreiftheater group met at the Café Museum. After the Komödienhaus debut, we were confident that Stegreiftheater was a viable art form and could be sustained in Vienna. Our group at that time consisted of Anna Höllering, Elisabeth Bergner, whenever she could be with us in Vienna, Hans Rodenberg, and Robert Blum. Peter Lorre was also involved with the setting up of the Stegreiftheater.

I first met Peter Lorre around 1918 when he was about 17 years old. He was from Budapest, the son of a well-to-do family. . . . When I met him, his name was Ladislaus Lowenstein, and he was begging for money and food in the cafés. He was cross-eyed and had a dimple in his cheek. There was something very appealing about him, so I hired him to help us out with the setting up of the Stegreiftheater. I changed his name to Peter Lorre.

After more than a year of searching, we found a place for our theater at Maysedergasse, Number 2. It was the top floor of a commercial building not far from the Vienna Opera. The Kärntnerstrasse, which corresponds most closely to New York's Fifth Avenue, was the nearest intersection. We couldn't have had a more convenient or more central location for the theater. When, in 1959, Zerka and I were in Vienna, I wanted to show her the original Stegreiftheater. It was visible from the window of our room in the Hotel Sacher. The building was still there. It now houses a restaurant. . . .

Robert Müller, a young Czech journalist, wrote the following review of the Stegreiftheater for the *Prague Presse*:

Dr. Moreno, the well-known writer and psychiatrist, has founded an impromptu theater for the intellectuals of Vienna. Concerning its analytical basis, he has published a book with which the press has occupied itself sufficiently. One must say that the Impromptu Theater, which we really get to see, is the very opposite of the high intellectual tension apparent in the book. It starts from the very bottom, with primitive, and often, with the very simplest of techniques. . . .

With Moreno, we can see in Impromptu a fine therapeutic means for the curative process of civilization—and that is the chief point, the kernel idea in the revolutionary gospel of Moreno in his attempt to give continuity and to restore vitality to our culture. He is certainly a driving force. . . .

The theater was always crowded. Up to 40 people could fit in the room. The Stegreiftheater rapidly became a well-known gathering place for artists and intellectuals. Many people from out of town made sure to come to the Stegreiftheater whenever they were in Vienna.

Dramatic material was suggested by the audience or arose from the actors' own ideas. Sometimes there were themes that actors enjoyed working out. Peter Lorre had such a bit of business, "How to Catch a Louse." This was a favorite of the audiences, as well as his favorite, although he did many other things in the theater. I think this routine had some special significance to Peter because the German word for "louse" is "*Laus*," the same as the last syllable of Peter's real given name, *Ladislaus*. So I think the origins of this sketch were buried deep in Peter's personality. He used to go into the audience and look for lice infesting the heads of affluent Viennese intellectuals. He made all sorts of grabbing motions, to the delight of everyone. It was a big drama. Suddenly he would get his louse! . . .

The Stegreiftheater, with its goal of 100 percent spontaneity, faced enormous difficulties. The first difficulty came from the audiences. They had been brought up to use and rely on cultural conserves in every area of life and to mistrust their own spontaneity. The only spontaneity they had learned to appreciate was what came out of the "animated conserve." Therefore, when true spontaneity was presented to them in the Stegreiftheater, they either suspected it was well rehearsed and an attempt to fool

them, or, if a scene was poorly played, they considered it a sign that spontaneity would not work.

In order to get around the disbelief of the audiences, we turned to the technique of the "living newspaper." Since the performances were based on the day's current events, no one could doubt that they were spontaneous and unrehearsed. The "living newspaper" became a popular diversion for the people of Vienna. It was the first modern alternative to the written news.

We did more, however, than reenact scenes from the papers. The company tried to go into the conflicts that caused the events, feel out the motivations of the people involved, and try to project the final resolutions of the stories dramatized. My book, *The Theater of Spontaneity*, has a description of what took place when we dramatized a spectacular murder which took place in Vienna. . . .

The worst difficulty I had was that I saw my best pupils flirting with the cliché even when acting extemporaneously. Finally, they turned away from the theater of spontaneity and went to the legitimate stage or became movie actors. Peter Lorre was one of them, though he had a remarkable gift for spontaneous acting.

Faced with this dilemma, I turned "temporarily" to the therapeutic theater, a strategic decision which probably saved the movement of the Stegreiftheater from oblivion. It was easier to advocate 100 percent spontaneity in a therapeutic theater. The esthetic imperfections of an actor on the stage could not be forgiven by his audience, but the imperfections and incongruities a mental patient shows on the psychodrama stage are not only more easily tolerated, but expected, and, often, warmly welcomed. The actors become true "auxiliary egos" with the advent of the therapeutic theater. They, too, in their therapeutic function, were accepted in the nudity of their natural talent without the borrowed perfectionism of the theater. . . .

At times, my path crossed the paths of some of the psychoanalytic circle around Freud. Theodore Reik was a frequent visitor to the Stegreiftheater. He was then Freud's secretary and was in love with my friend Brauchbar's sister, who was staying in Vienna at the time. Since Reik was at the theater often, he was among the first to read my book *Das Stegreiftheater*. He showed the book to Freud. When I asked Reik what Freud's reaction to the book was, Reik said, "I don't remember."

"What do you mean, you don't remember?" I asked him.

"I am sure it was not favorable," Reik continued. "I just remember that Freud returned the book to me and I made a note in my mind that I should ask him directly what he thought of the book. Either I don't remember because I was jealous of Freud's reaction, or I was jealous be-

cause Freud never paid any attention to my book which was published at the same time as yours."

Alfred Adler moved freely in our circle of philosophers and artists at the Café Herrenhof and the Café Museum. He had just read *Das Stegreiftheater*. One day he brought that book to the café and opened it to page 70, where he pointed at the word "*Gottähnlichkeit*," which means Godlikeness. He read the following paragraph:

Flying like a bird is one of the oldest dreams of man—if not with his own wings, then through the use of technical wings. Also, man wants to live like a God, if not in reality, through the theater in fantasy. These are, perhaps, the two oldest dreams of man. They have a common origin. It is the desire to prove by magic that the striving after Godlikeness is well founded.

Then Adler said, with a twinkle in his eye, taking the habitual cigar out of his mouth, "We agree?"

"We disagree," I replied. "I am trying to *produce* the God. You are trying to *understand* Him. Actually, we are on the same track, but at two opposite ends." . . .

In 1924, an International Festival of New Theater Techniques was held in Vienna. One of my students, Friedrich (Fred) Kiesler, was the artistic director of the festival committee. Kiesler was an architect who had become interested in the Stegreiftheater and in its potential for a new kind of theatrical architecture. I am no architect, but I had a clear idea of the kind of theater which should be built to house the Stegreiftheater. I wanted to see the kind of building that would, in itself, foster the development of spontaneity in those who saw it and those who used it. Now we are all accustomed to this kind of theatrical architecture, but in 1924, my ideas had the potential to revolutionize the building of, not only theaters, but all architecture. Indeed, Xanti Schwawainski, a director of the Bauhaus in Munich, believed that I had considerable influence on the development of that school of architecture.

I shared my visions of a new kind of theater building freely. Since I did not have the technical skill to implement my ideal Stegreiftheater, I turned to my students. Rudolph Hönigsfelt made sketches according to my instructions and translated them into a model. Unknown to us, Kiesler built a model which was almost identical to ours and then took credit for the creation of a revolutionary new style of theatrical architecture. The model Kiesler built was made at the expense of the city of Vienna.

I was taken aback when, on October 3, 1924, I went to the opening of the International Theater Exhibition. I had received an invitation to the ceremony and had been asked to participate as an official delegate. Many internationally famous theatrical people had been invited to take part in the festival—Fernand Legere, Meierhold, Tairoff, etc. There, on the stage

of the Vienna Konzerthaus, all of the public dignitaries, the president of Austria, the Bürgermeister of Vienna, the participating artists, were assembled. One delegate after another passed the president and was introduced by Mayor Carl Seitz. When Fred was called upon and the mayor stretched out his hand to shake Fred's, I stopped the proceedings. I spoke out, calling him a thief. The mayor stopped the ceremony and everyone, delegates and spectators, rose to their feet, astounded at my action. The police entered and I left the auditorium.

The next morning, the papers were full of the scandal. Fred felt compelled to sue me for libel in order to clear his name. That is how it came about that my ideal of anonymity, the nature of the Stegreiftheater, and the "*Raubbühne*" were brought to trial before the Supreme Court of Austria on January 19, 1925.

At the end of the trial, I made a long speech before the court in order to state my position *vis-à-vis* anonymity and my contribution to the theater and to man's existential problems. Since all of my books had been published anonymously, and since my ideas had been given freely, without any patent or copyright protection, I had no legal claims on any of my work. This, however, was the core of my argument before the court:

I have given away my ideas to the community, to all its parts, for free perusal; with this I have given the privilege to all, and have given everyone the right to consider my ideas common property, to take them over to the letter, and to use and distribute them in any manner, in printed form, or by mouth, provided it is accomplished *without* reference to their names, or any other name. But it was not my idea to leave my contributions to a single individual for the purpose of bringing to that person a proprietary relationship towards my ideas, of linking my contributions to someone's family name for the purpose of enriching him. . . .

The subject of the dispute is a stage with emphasis upon all the dimensions of space; it has three properties: central position, vertical structure, and a circular auditorium. And because this stage is a symbol of the hidden whole, no one will be able to discover it, to visualize it, or to demand it unless he carries the whole within himself. Whoever demands such a stage will also know its true function, the new theater for it. And whoever demands for it the theater, the theater of spontaneity, will also know of the society that requires it. So it is that even the lowliest object, the most modest manipulation can appropriately be required only from the center. Only from there can the true position be obtained. The pretender who offers a part becomes a traitor even in that. Only out of the whole, do the parts come forth. Only out of the mother can the child come forth. . . .

I am before the judge. The public should be here instead. The public is accused. As it is not present I ask to be considered its witness. . . .

As a private person, I cannot reproach the plaintiff. He has not taken anything away from *me*. He has deprived the public of a good in a manner that violates the moral law. It is not in the nature of a law court to contest the right of all in favor of one individual. If the court approves his suit, then the public

is condemned. Then I must suffer the fine as its representative. In that event plagiarism is cleared, and anonymity a wish of the devil.

I was vindicated.

The German reaction to *The Words of the Father* was unsatisfactory to me. The Stegreiftheater movement, although it had begun to take root in Bavarian and Prussian cities, in addition to its popularity in Vienna, moved too slowly for my expectancy. I saw a long and difficult struggle ahead. The question was where I ought to go in order to secure a less difficult passage for my ideas. East or West? The East of Europe was dominated by Soviet communism which was, by 1924, firmly entrenched. It offered little hope for any new ideas unless I was willing to accept the given structure of Soviet society and bore from within. I decided against Soviet Russia in favor of the United States.

All my inspirations for my methods and techniques have come directly or indirectly from my idea of the Godhead and from the principle of His genesis. My God hypothesis has made me enormously productive. All the conclusions I drew from it and translated into scientific terms have been correct. *I had no reason to assume that the original hypothesis itself was false just because it was not popular with scientists* [Moreno's italics]. My God idea, out of which the idea of the sociometric system grew, was, therefore, the greatest barrier to my going to Russia, accepting the Soviet doctrine, and, so to speak, not [letting] my left hand know what my right hand [was doing]. I was aiming for a mankind modeled after the God of the first day of Creation. I preferred to be midwife to an incoherent, confused, democratic way of life [rather] than . . . commissar of a tightly organized world. My God book turned me to the United States. . . .

We are not really conscious that the role of the objective scientist was modeled after the idea of the impartial Godhead of Spinoza. As God's pronouncements are expected to have superpersonal validity, the scientist's pronouncements are expected to have superpersonal validity. He must not wish the sun to gravitate around the earth, nor the earth around the moon. He must not wish the universe to last forever or to perish by sundown. He must not wish that only kind and just people be born. He must not wish that only ugly and stupid people be born. He must not wish that some races will multiply themselves and live in comfort while others live in distress and perish. He is objective, neutral, uninvolved. He is the impartial recorder of events as they emerge.

This all-embracing and impartial Godhead, the God of Spinoza, has stood as a model for the physical scientist and stood well, but He has not been adequate for the needs of the social scientist, at least not entirely. As long as the social scientist was a pedantic actuary and demographer, a vital statistician, and naive economist, the model passed as appropriate. But as

soon as he became concerned with the “We,” the collectivities of actors, the model needed an extension. . . .

It was this new model of an “operational” Godhead announced in *The Words of the Father* which was my stairway to the sociometric system, developed for an apparently entirely different objective—the search for a model of scientific objectivity in the social sciences.

The greatest model of “objectivity” man has ever conceived was the idea of the Godhead, a being who knows and feels with the universe because He created it, a being unlimited in His ability to penetrate all facets of the universe and still be entirely free of bias [Moreno’s italics].

Only in New York, the melting pot of the nations, the vast metropolis, with all its freedom from all preconceived notions, could I be free to pursue sociometric group research in the grand style I had envisioned.

By 1925, I was ready to leave Europe. In the northern railway station of Vienna, in September of 1925, my mother came to say goodbye to me. She joked and laughed as if I were going to Salzburg and would be returning the next day. Someone said to her, “A few months ago it was a similar scene, but it was your son, William, who was to make the voyage. But then you cried and could not tear yourself away from him. Now, when your son, Jacques, leaves you don’t seem to care.”

“Well,” she said, in deep thought, “When William left I was worried. Willie is such a good boy. God knows what might happen to him there. People might hurt him. But with Jacques it is different. He can take care of himself. First, he knows why he goes, and then, if nothing else, his ideas will take care of him.”

And that is how it was.