

Vienna as a Hub of the Occult-Reformist International

Karl Baier



Anonymous photographer
Villa Hohe Warte No. 29, Carl Kellner's
Viennese residence, undated (detail)
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“It is the defining characteristic
of Modernism, after all,
that it isn’t a one-sided monolithic
movement but that it is able to
accommodate the most diverse
and contrary concepts and aspirations.”¹

Around 1900, colonialism and globalized capitalism, along with modern means of transport and communication, made it easier than ever before for cultural currents to emerge within intercultural encounters and to spread across countries and continents. This also applied to the movements subsumed under the umbrella term “occultism”, such as spiritualism, Theosophy, New Thought, masonic and other initiation societies, as well as the “scientific occultism” of parapsychology. They all evolved in the context of international discourses. Metropolises like Vienna occupied key roles in this development, though conditions in the Cisleithanian capital of the Habsburg Empire were less conducive than in other cities. The Catholic Church, the largest denomination which also enjoyed the support of the imperial dynasty, rejected new religious and cultural movements. Moreover, the state’s system of censorship and police control impeded anything that seemed like it could threaten law and order within the Empire.

The entangled history of global occultism has been the subject of intense research over the past decade, and recent writings on the life reform movement have shown that it makes sense to view it in a broader geographical and historical

context than before.² The movement’s typical hallmarks, such as its criticism of industrialization and urbanization, the longing for a closer relationship with nature, vegetarianism, dress reform, a holistic body culture, settlement projects, naturopathy treatments etc., can be observed in various societies at slightly different times and with varying emphases. The different endeavors, in tune with this type of criticism of civilization and nature-oriented, secularized doctrines of salvation, influenced one another across national borders.

Furthermore, there were regular overlaps between occultism and life reform in various countries.³ The protagonists and sympathizers of both movements belonged to the same alternative-cultural milieus. Their themes and reformist objectives were often compatible. It was inevitable that they would enter into contact with one another, learn from each other, and promote their own causes within the others’ associations and journals. Many participated in both movements. Everyday practices fostering wellbeing, alternative medicine and guides to a holistic life hailing from the life reform movement were adopted by many occult movements, just as occult concepts were embraced by life reformists. The best example of

In terms of the networks through which Vienna participated in the Occult-Reformist International, we can distinguish three levels of interaction: 1) the local level: links between groups in Vienna which were in contact with international developments and actively contributed to them; 2) the meso level: connections of the Viennese scene within the Habsburg multinational state and with the German Reich; and 3) the macro level of connections consisting of interactions with groups

Graham Bread. A Culinary Innovation from the New World

Sylvester Graham (1794–1851) was a Presbyterian minister and health reformer from the US who championed abstinence from alcohol, a vegetarian diet and sexual temperance in his books and lectures. In 1829, he invented a distinctive type of bread made from whole wheat



groats, offering an alternative to the conventional white bread. The Graham bread made its way into the German-speaking world in the second half of the 19th century. It was first propagated in Vienna in the late 1860s by the vegetarians and life reformers Johann Koffer and Franz Kubiczek. From the 1870s, it was available in Viennese bakeries.⁶ Likely through relationships on the meso level (German vegetarian and naturopathy circles), an element of the American health reform took root in Vienna, which – in the shape of the Grahamweckerl – is available in Viennese bakeries and supermarkets to this day.

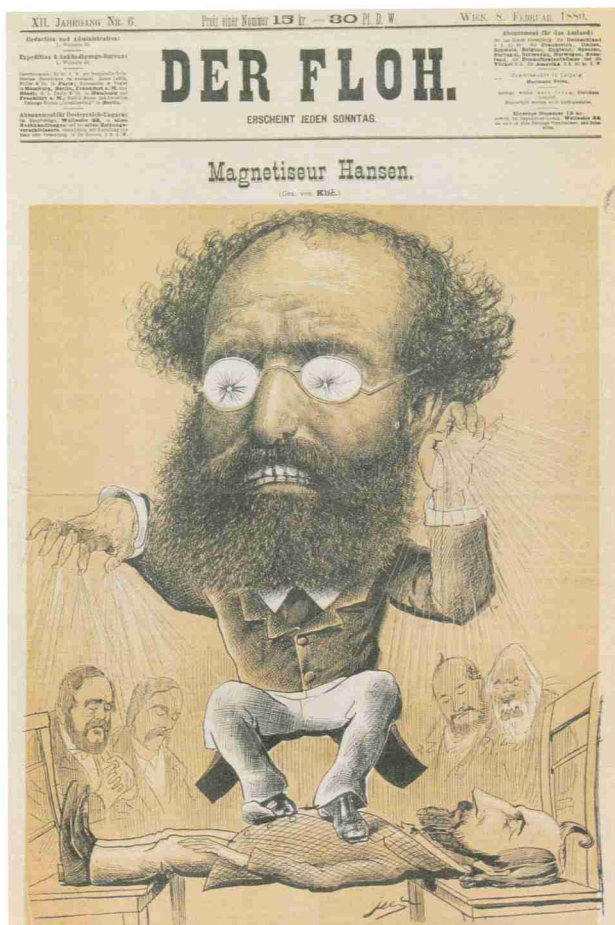
When the Ramharters started to offer the first vegetarian lunch menu in Vienna at their bakery in 1879, they emphasized in their newspaper adverts that they sold “the only genuine Graham bread” in Vienna (Fig. 1). According to historian Birgit Pack, the bread had already helped them make a name for themselves amongst Viennese life reformists.⁷ The first vegetarian restaurant in Vienna, which they opened two years later, as well as those that followed, became meeting places for the local occult-reformist milieu. For, whether socialist, Wagnerian or theosophist: a meatless diet was considered a contribution to the advancement of mankind.

Spirit Messages and Socialist Ideas from France

Spiritualism, which evolved into a mass movement in the 19th century, was rooted in the belief that immaterial intelligent beings – primarily spirits of the deceased, but also nature spirits and angels – exist in an invisible world that permeates our earthly realm. At the heart of it are rituals meant to communicate with the spirit world

via mediums. The enterprising French teacher Constantin Delhez (1807–1879) brought Allan Kardec’s (1804–1869) French version of spiritualism to Vienna (in the English speaking world known as spiritism). Delhez was a reform pedagogue who designed a novel education system.⁸ He founded the first spiritualist association of Austria-Hungary, and between 1866 and 1872 issued the first relevant journal in the Habsburg Empire. His translation of Kardec’s groundbreaking work *Le Livre des Esprits* [The Spirits’ Book] was published as the work’s first German edition in 1868. Not only Delhez and his association but also the most important spiritualist of the Habsburg Monarchy, Adelma Vay de Vaya (1840–1925), were influenced by Kardec.

The Hungarian-born pioneer of Habsburgian occultism and social reformer Lazar von Hellenbach (1827–1887) headed a smaller spiritualist circle in Vienna, and brought many mediums from abroad to the city. The numerous publications issued by Hellenbach (who for several years was a member of the Croatian parliament) not only address topics like the ethereal body, which he called “meta-organism”, or astrology but also day-to-day politics and fundamental socio-political questions. In his utopian novel *Die Insel Mellonta* [The Island Mellonta] (1883), published by the leading spiritualist publishing house in Germany (Oswald Mutze), he outlined an egalitarian social order, inspired by the French early socialist Charles Fourier (1772–1837), an order which, as he explained elsewhere, was able to do “without the excesses of capital and the limits of property”.⁹ In it, the bourgeois monogamous marriage was just one of several other, equally valid forms of partnership between men and women. Fourier’s ideas also influenced American spiritualists, for instance Andrew Jackson Davis (1826–1910).



The Trail of Stage Occultists

Performers showcasing their “occult powers” on stage went on tours across national and continental borders. These appearances of hypnotists, mediums and fakirs resembled the stage acts shown at cabarets, which, in turn, often also included occultist performances. While their goal was to entertain, they also imparted certain worldviews, psychological theories and a sense of wonder about the enigmatic dimensions of reality. Scientific circles and newspaper articles discussed how these ostensibly supernatural powers were to be understood. Public opinion and science were divided into three camps: the skeptics, who

were convinced that trickery was at the root of all these phenomena, the “animists”, who believed that they were the result of latent unconscious abilities, and the “spiritualists” who thought that assistance from the beyond was at play.

In Vienna, stage occultism regularly led to police interventions, which often resulted in the prohibition of these spectacles. The Swedish magnetizer Carl Hansen (1833–1897), who made Mesmerism and hypnosis the talk of the day across several countries, came to Vienna in 1880 as part of his European tour. During his performance at the Ringtheater, opponents loudly accusing him of swindling caused a commotion. Hansen brought a libel action against one of these critics, but to no avail.¹⁰ In an expert opinion, the Vienna Faculty of Medicine classified his practices as potentially harmful to the test persons’ health, causing further performances to be banned by the police. Hansen nevertheless won over large segments of the Viennese population. For example, a young medical student by the name of Sigmund Freud attended one of his performances and became convinced of the authenticity of the demonstrated hypnotic phenomena.¹¹ The interest in hypnosis Hansen instilled in him led to Freud frequently employing hypnotic suggestion in his early medical work (Fig. 2).

In 1904, the Parisian “dream dancer” Magdeleine Guipet (1874–1915) and her hypnotist, the magnetizer Emile Magnin, first performed at a venue of the Munich Psychological Society, and later, owing to the huge crowds they attracted, at the city’s main theater, the Munich Schauspielhaus. Guipet, in a state of hypnosis, would dance to music with her eyes closed and accompany recitations of poems with mimes. Her appearances resulted in a public dispute about the scientific and artistic relevance of her “dream dances”.¹²



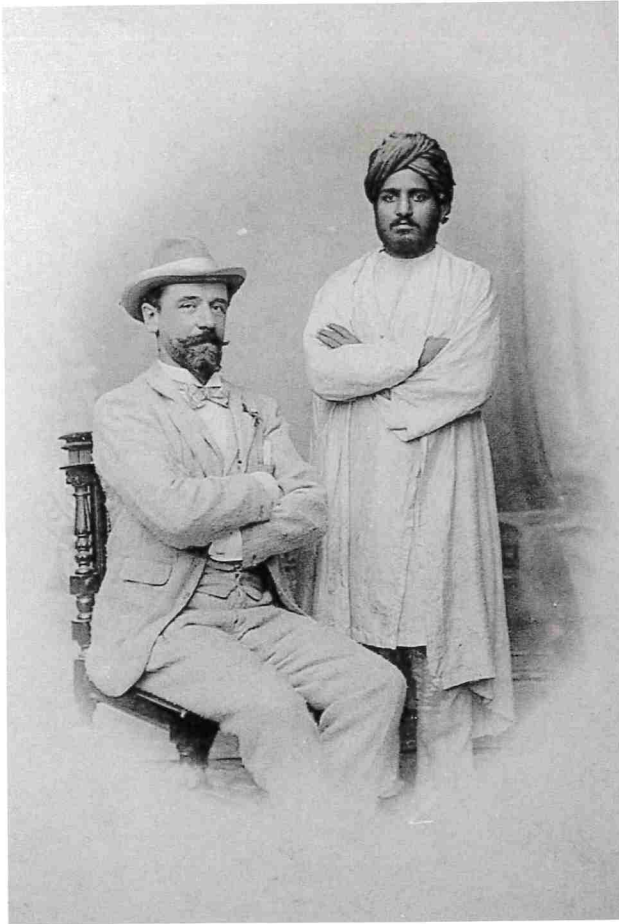
The Psychological Society, a melting pot of spiritualists, parapsychologists and theosophists, included members from Viennese occult-reformist circles, making it an institution for networking on the meso level. Latest since the announcement of Guipet's engagement with the Psychological Society, the dream dancer was also known in occult Vienna, while the subsequent debate about her art captured the interest of the Austrian press and a wider audience.¹³

Guipet soon drew emulators. In the spring of 1905, the Ronacher, a leading Viennese operetta, dance and cabaret venue, announced performances of a dream dancer by the name of Madeleine alongside the psychologist Schmidt-Esto acting

as magnetizer/hypnotist. Madeleine had already performed in German cities, as well as in Prague and Teplice. Even before her first appearance in Vienna, the city's police decided to ban her performances, and in order to do so, dug up a decree from 1845 prohibiting public demonstrations of somnambulism and hypnosis. The director of the Ronacher responded by requesting the Ministry of the Interior to allow a private show before a panel of doctors so that they might convince themselves of the harmlessness of her performances.

Princess Marie von Thurn und Taxis (1855–1934), who was a member of the British Society for Psychological Research, and several years later would conduct spiritualist séances with the poet Rainer Maria Rilke (1875–1926) at Duino Castle, took advantage of the time while the matter was under review of the authorities and arranged for Madeleine to perform at a soiree in her palace. The audience, a distinguished crowd made up of aristocrats, artists, international diplomats and politicians, was first informed by the hypnotist about the principles of hypnosis and suggestion, before being mesmerized by Madeleine's improvised trance dances and pantomimes.¹⁴ Several days later, the public health and police authorities granted approval for public performances. For a month, Madeleine performed at the sold-out Ronacher and continued to dance for exclusive circles of the high society (Fig. 3).

The original, Magdeleine Guipet, only performed in Vienna in 1909 for several weeks – without any trouble from the authorities and attracting less public interest. The dream-dance hype she had caused was already subsiding. Her hypnotist, Magnin, proclaimed during the performances that the hypnosis he practiced, rooted in the Nancy School (Liébeault, Bernheim), surpassed that of Charcot's School, as it had the ability to unleash the positive powers dormant within the



unconscious mind of the hypnotized.¹⁵ The stage occultism of the dream dancer thus served as a battleground for the rivalries among medical-psychiatric schools and their differing perspectives on hypnosis. In the eyes of his critics, the pathologization of hypnosis positioned Charcot as an advocate of the prevailing materialistic paradigm in science, especially within the field of medicine.

Performers from the Near East and India also circulated on the trail of the stage occultists. In 1896, a remarkable collaboration on the meso level took place, when three “Indian fakirs” captivated audiences in Budapest by entering a state of “yoga sleep”. Reportedly, they spent eight days in a glass coffin, completely unresponsive to external

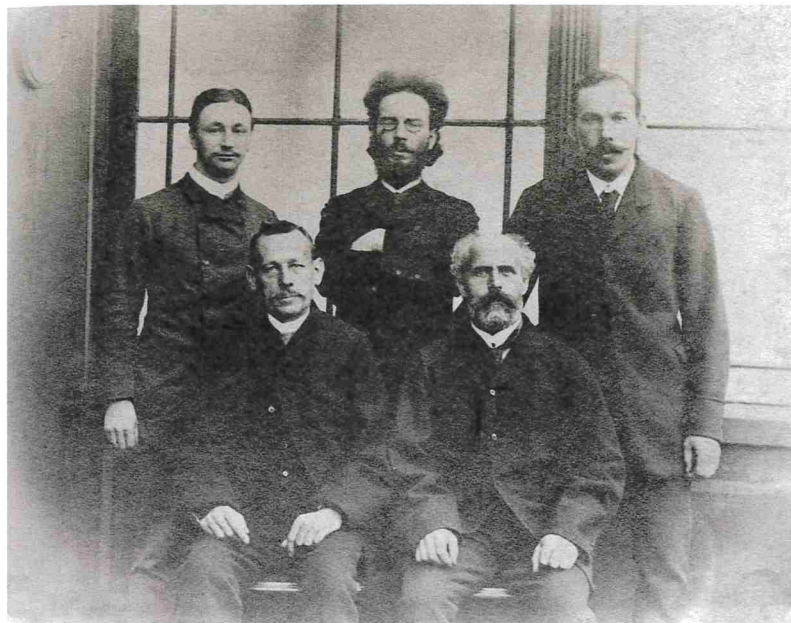
stimuli and without awakening. Allegations that they interrupted their sleep at night to eat, drink and play cards, caused a scandal. In response, the Viennese occultist, chemist, inventor and industrial magnate Carl Kellner (1850–1905) invited one of them, Bheema Sena Pratapa (dates of birth and death unknown) (Fig. 4), to his villa in Hallein, where he investigated Pratapa’s paranormal abilities with the help of two theosophists, the physician Franz Hartmann (1838–1912) and the Munich industrialist Ludwig Deinhard (a founding member of the Psychological Society).¹⁶ They found that his yoga sleep was real and that in it, he achieved the highest level of meditation taught in yoga. They then accompanied him to the Third International Congress of Psychology in Munich, to present the practice of yoga sleep to the expert community and to rehabilitate Pratapa’s reputation. Many conference attendees sought the yogi, who, during the four days of the event, immersed himself in a state of deep enrapturement from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Any attempts to wake him from his “sleep” failed. Moreover, Kellner’s brochure *Yoga: Eine Skizze über den psycho-physiologischen Teil der alten indischen Yogalehre* was distributed at the congress. It was later lauded and cited by William James in his famous work *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902).¹⁷ In his brochure, Kellner interpreted yoga in the light of Liébeault’s theory of suggestibility. Hypnosis and suggestion were central themes of the congress. Hartmann informed the English-speaking occultist world of Pratapa’s successful performance in Munich via an article published in the London spiritualist journal *The Borderland*.¹⁸

Kellner and Hartmann, who traveled extensively, epitomized the roaming networker, playing a crucial role in forging connections on both the meso and, particularly, the macro levels. For

5 | Anonymous photographer

Gustav Gebhard, Friedrich Eckstein, Nikolaus Gabele (Standing From Left to Right) and Alois Mailänder (Seated, Left), 25th March 1890

Private collection



the Viennese scene, such figures were just as vital as the locally rooted organizers who built and sustained communities within the city. In 1902, the two of them, together with Theodor Reuß (1855–1923), founded an association of two high-degree Masonic rites in Germany, something which would have been impossible in Austria, where freemasonry was outlawed. In this association, Carl Kellner headed the Occult Inner Circle, which in all likelihood explored phallicist doctrines and ritual sexual practices, which were being developed especially in US occultism at the time.¹⁹ His yoga brochure and the favorable footnote in James' *Varieties* alone would hardly have spared Kellner from being forgotten. However, Reuß praised him in 1912 as the “spiritual father” of the order of sex magic O.T.O. (Ordo Templi Orientis) that Reuß had organized together with Aleister Crowley and that later gained iconic status within alternative religious milieus. Though it cannot be historically proven, it is probable that the teachings of Kellner's Occult Inner Circle served as

a role model to the O.T.O. during its beginnings. If we are to believe Reuß, the concept of establishing an order of this name also originates from Kellner.

International Theosophical Meeting Places

Before Madame Blavatsky (1831–1891) and Colonel Olcott (1832–1907) founded the Theosophical Society (TS) in 1875 in New York, they moved in US spiritualist circles. With the TS, they established an association that competed with spiritualism and intended to overcome its shortcomings by drawing upon the knowledge of ancient occult traditions. While the theosophists believed that spiritualism had succeeded in refuting the materialistic zeitgeist and had laid the groundwork for the recognition of the spirit world, they insisted it was now time to explore the old wisdom-religion at the heart of all religions and secret doctrines, to link it with modern science and to promote it. This was an enticing project for educated and semi-educated people interested in occultism. The founder and president of the first theosophical lodge in Vienna, Friedrich Eckstein (1861–1939) is a notable example in this context. The industrialist and independent scholar was on the verge of abandoning occultism entirely, as he was swayed by his growing skepticism towards spiritualism. However, his perspective shifted when the esteemed physicist Lord Rayleigh (1842–1919) recommended Theosophy to him as a respectable alternative.

While the teachings of the TS increasingly looked like a new religion, its program was deliberately open. It advocated the formation of a brotherhood of mankind irrespective of race, religion, gender or social background; the study of

The “Bellevue” at Am Himmel in Vienna, 1911

Austrian Archives/brandstaetter images/picturedesk.com



world religions, particularly ancient Asian traditions; the exploration of the secrets of nature, and man’s latent paranormal and spiritual powers. This program, and the relocation of the society’s headquarters to India, which went hand in hand with a new focus on yoga as well as Hinduist and Buddhist “secret doctrines”, made it attractive to many searchers who, fascinated by “Eastern mysticism”, were looking for alternatives to conventional religions and a materialistic faith in science.

By the turn of the century, the TS had become a global player. The networks on the macro, meso and local levels necessary for a movement of this size to survive are tied to specific meeting places. In the following, I would like to name just a few, which were vital especially for the meso relations of Viennese Theosophy.

Eckstein and an executive member of his Vienna lodge, Carl Polykarp zu Leiningen-Billigheim jun. (1860–1899), founded the lodge “Zum blauen Stern”

in 1891 in the apartment of the famous occultist writer Gustav Meyrink (1868–1932) in Prague. The latter was named the lodge’s president, while another eminent occultist, Karel Weinfurter (1867–1942), was appointed secretary. This marked the beginning of an animated exchange between Prague and Vienna through letters, visits and lectures.

Furthermore, the Vienna TS maintained close ties with occultists and theosophers from Germany. Meeting places that provided a stable foundation for these encounters – aside from the afore-mentioned Psychological Society in Munich – included the residence of the Gebhard family in Elberfeld and the Covenant of Promise (Bund der Verheißung). The Gebhards’ domicile, a villa that could accommodate many visitors, was home to the first theosophical lodge in Germany, which opened in 1884. Not only Marie Gebhard (1832–1892), who was a pupil and friend of the famous French occultist Éliphas Lévi (1810–1875),

Werfenstein on the Danube, Seat of the Austrian Order of the New Templars (Picture Postcard), c. 1900

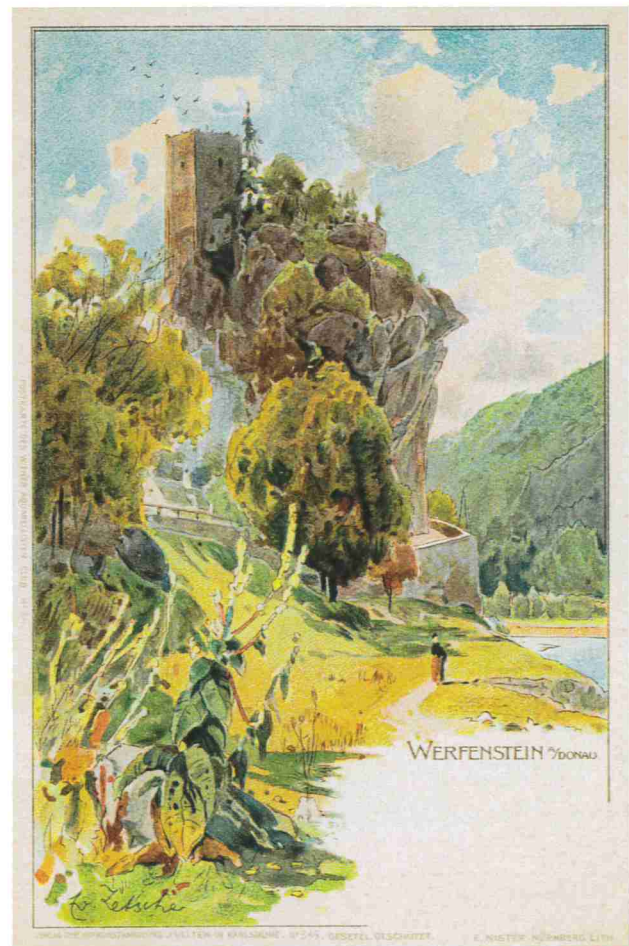
Leopold Museum, Vienna

and her husband, the industrialist and banker Gustav Gebhard (1828–1900), joined the TS but also three of their sons. Their home soon became more than a mere gathering place of German-speaking Theosophy. Eckstein enjoyed meeting international celebrities there. He was particularly eager to talk with the Indians from Blavatsky's entourage, among them the Bengali attorney Mohini Mohun Chatterji (1858–1936), who impressed the Wagnerian Eckstein with a detailed Hinduist interpretation of *Der Ring der Nibelungen*, culminating in proof that the opera cycle represented a paraphrase of the mantra OM.²⁰ Eckstein noticed that the anti-colonial attitude of Theosophy reached its limits when it came to Blavatsky's behavior towards Babaji Dharbagiri Nath (dates of birth and death unknown), who had fallen into disfavor: "When she called him, he approached her with a submissive stance, his arms crossed over his chest. But she treated him harshly, like a slave."²¹

The Covenant of Promise, first located in Kempten, then in the Hessian small town Dreieichenhain, had a very different social background. The religious home group was led by the weaver Alois Mailänder (1843–1905) and his brother-in-law Nikolaus Gabele (Fig. 5), who were both employed in a factory in Kempten. The group consisted of family members, fellow factory workmen and their wives, until Gabele and Mailänder were recognized as spiritual teachers by the leaders of German Theosophy in 1884. The Covenant then became a gathering place for theosophists from Vienna, Prague and Germany. Thanks to their wealthy theosophical patrons, Mailänder and Gabele were able to stop working in the factory and to relocate with their families in 1890 to a comfortable estate in Dreieichenhain, where they now received their students. Mailänder was appreciated especially as a meditation guide and leader on the

path to an inner rebirth. The Covenant, influenced by pietism, alchemy and Rosicrucianism, was likely a relic of the Allgäu Protestant revival.²²

A reputable meeting place in Vienna were the "summer colonies" held by the Lang family at Bellevue Castle on the edge of the Vienna Woods (Fig. 6). Participants included international guests who not only met members of early Viennese Theosophy there but also other illustrious friends of the Langs, including the composer Hugo Wolf and the writer and feminist Rosa Mayreder. Franz Hartmann, who welcomed numerous visitors from all around the globe during his stay, significantly enhanced the international flair of these meetings.²³ The magazine *Wiener Rundschau*





perfectly illustrated the interests of this circle, keeping readers abreast of international developments in arts and literature, and at the same time providing a forum for occultism with articles by Franz Hartmann, Ludwig Deinhard, Carl du Prel (1839–1899), another founding member of the Munich Psychological Society, and many others.²⁴

Exporting Constructs of Aryan Religion and Rune Esotericism

Around 1900, Vienna was a breeding ground for far-right, anti-Semitic groups, some of which

were informed by occultism and the life reform movement. Prime examples are the teachings and organizations of Guido List (1848–1919) and Adolf Joseph Lanz (1874–1954). These were later subsumed under the term “Ariosophy” (coined by Lanz for his religion). However, the two movements differed significantly from one another. What they agreed on was that the cradle of culture and religion can be traced back to Aryans from the North, and that the mixture of this race with “inferior” races, especially Jews, represented the root of all the evils of the time. A cleansing of the race was therefore considered vital for the desired re-establishment of the “natural” Aryan order.

The Ordo Novi Templi (ONT, Order of the New Templars), founded by the former Cistercian monk Lanz, espoused a concept of Ario-Christianity based on the Bible and other ancient scriptures, which were reinterpreted in a racist and sexist manner. While the structure of the ONT, its rituals and vestments were inspired by Catholicism, Lanz and his proponents integrated occult theories and practices into their order, such as Carl von Reichenbach’s theory of Odic force²⁵, the use of pendulums and divining rods, spiritualist communication with the dead, and astrology. They endorsed the Mazdaznan movement, which also presented itself as based on the superior Aryan religion and was strongly influenced by the life reform.²⁶ Apart from its seat at Werfenstein castle on the Danube in Upper Austria (Fig. 7), the ONT interacted on a meso level by establishing branches in Germany and also Hungary, where Lanz lived after World War I and moved in ultra-conservative, nationalist circles.

The journalist and writer List had his roots in the right-wing extremist Austrian German-nationalist movement.²⁷ According to his vision of the original Ario-Germanic society, the priests, called Armans,

Performance of the Mystery Play *Der Tempel* at the Theosophical House in Vienna, 1924

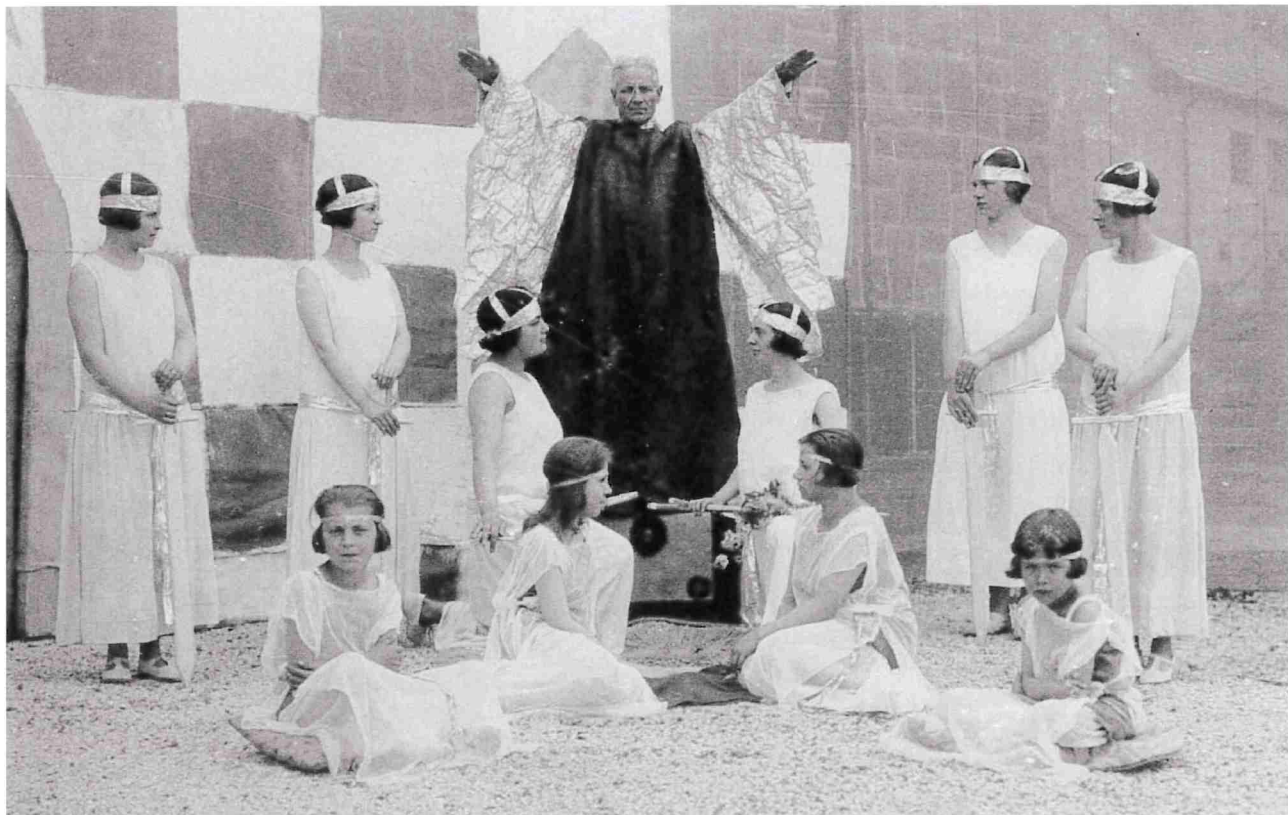
Library of the Theosophical Society Adyar (Edith Lauppert Collection),
Quellenbibliothek of the Department of Religious Studies, Vienna University

were the keepers of Armanism, an esoteric religion, which List sought to reconstruct and revive. He designed the hierarchy within the Arman priesthood in accordance with Masonic initiation degrees. List also adopted ideas from Theosophy, which helped him to find new audiences after his break with the Austrian German-nationalists.²⁸

In 1908, his followers were organized in the Guido von List Society, which, with the financial support of List's sponsor, the Brno-born industrialist Friedrich Wannieck (1838–1919), also published his writings. The Society counted Karl Lueger (1844–1910), the mayor of Vienna, among its prominent members. Although headquartered in Vienna, it was nevertheless an organization positioned within the meso level of the Occult-Reformist International. Half of the members of this radical right-wing association were Germans.

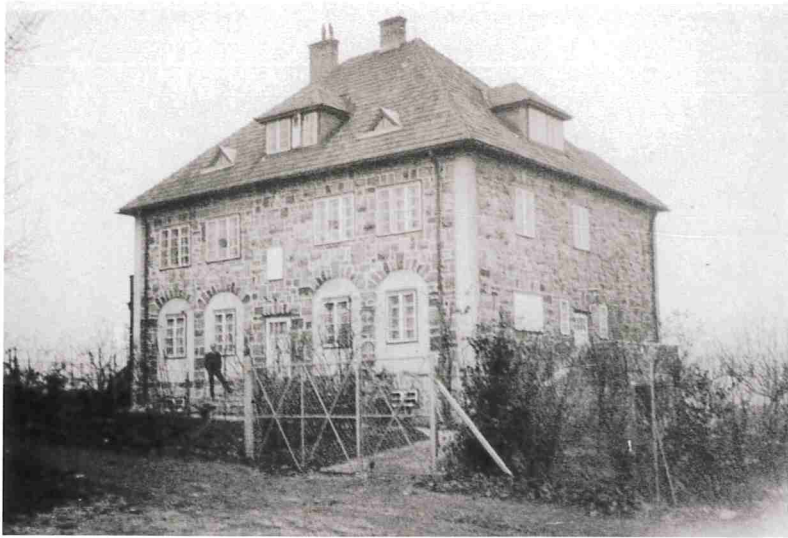
Some of them founded groups influenced by List's ideas in Germany, including the Reichshammerbund [Reich Hammer League] and its sister organization, the secret society Germanenorden [Germanic or Teutonic Order], as well as the Thule Society as a public political arm of the Bavarian branch of the Germanenorden. These organizations all played a part in the emergence of the NSDAP, and shaped the party's early years.

List's most influential work, *Das Geheimnis der Runen* [The Secret of the Runes] (1907), is being re-issued to this day (Fig. 8). It was translated into several European languages and formed the basis of later esoteric runology.²⁹ In the interwar period, this led to the emergence of rune gymnastics – a kind of “Germanic” yoga. After World War II, the occultist Karl Spiesberger (1904–1992) adopted the interpretation of runes by List and



The Theosophical House in the Vienna Reform Settlement Eden, 1929

Library of the Theosophical Society Adyar (Edith Lauppert Collection),
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his epigones in books on runic magic and runic exercises, but explicitly distanced himself from the racist ideology that had been associated with it. He thus became a “key figure in the non-völkisch [neither nationalist nor racist] reception of List”,³⁰ for instance in more recent neopaganism, among modern witches and magicians.

The Theosophical Congress

Perhaps the largest Viennese manifestation of the macro level occurred in 1923. Between 21st and 26th July, the eighth congress of the European Federation of the Theosophical Society Adyar (TS-Adyar) was held in the main hall of the Vienna Konzerthaus. Immediately afterwards, the Order of the Star in the East, an organization which differed from the TS-Adyar only on paper, convened a two-day congress at the same venue. On 29th July, the joint closing celebrations of both congresses took place, during which the Viennese theosophical youth association performed the mystery play *Der Tempel* [The Temple]. A year later,

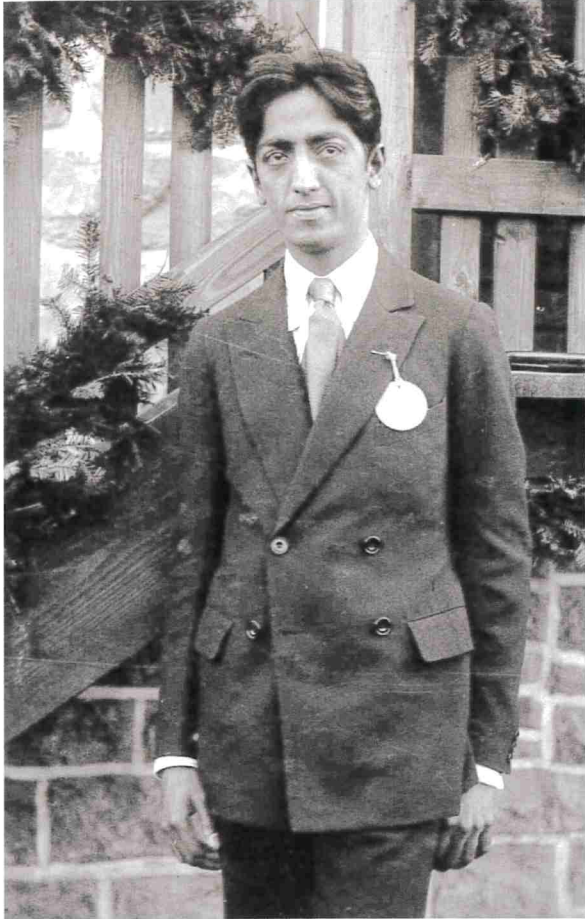
the play was re-enacted in a revised version at the reform settlement Eden on the outskirts of Vienna – established by the anarchistic Bund herrschaftsloser Sozialisten (BhS) [Federation of Libertarian Socialists] – where the Viennese TS-Adyar owned a building (Figs. 9, 10).³¹

It was the first pan-European theosophical congress after the War. The reported numbers of delegates, who had come not only from European countries but also from overseas, ranged between 700 and over 1,000. At the time, the TS-Adyar was at the height of its global expansion. Amidst the turmoil following World War I, the advertised appearance of the promised future world teacher Maitreya, in the guise of the young Indian Jiddu Krishnamurti (1895–1986), drew large crowds (Fig. 11). The Order of the Star in the East, presided over by Krishnamurti, served to support his public endeavors and organize his following.

The newspapers reported on the program of the congress, reviewed the public lectures, and featured articles on individual participants as well as an interview with Krishnamurti. Critical and neutral articles about Theosophy and the Order completed the picture painted by the press of this major theosophical event. The four public lectures, conducted over the course of the week, cost between 6,000 and 30,000 crowns to attend, and attracted particular attention. The chairman of the congress and vice-president of the TS-Adyar, Curuppumullage Jinarajadasa (1875–1953), discussed world problems in the light of Theosophy and addressed the relationship between Theosophy and science. The lecture delivered by the well-known Berlin reform pedagogue and pacifist Elisabeth Rotten (1882–1964) on creative education brought large crowds of life reformists to the Konzerthaus. To conclude the event, Krishnamurti spoke about the necessity of spirituality in the world.

Jiddu Krishnamurti Visiting the Theosophical House in Vienna for the 1923 Theosophical Congress

Library of the Theosophical Society Adyar (Edith Lauppert Collection),
Quellenbibliothek of the Department of Religious Studies, Vienna University



The many “exotic guests” underscored the cultural diversity within the theosophical movement and impressed the Viennese public. In an article about the reception hosted on the opening night of the congress, a journalist remarked: “The ladies’ multicolored national dresses gave the event an attractive flair.”³²

In the reports, based on interviews with individual participants, a certain Mr. Padwardan (dates of birth and death unknown), who was introduced as an eminent journalist, readily shared insights about Mahatma Gandhi and his own (more British-friendly) views on Indian politics.³³ The “Arabian scholar” Sheik Mehmud Abdul Bihab (dates of birth and death unknown), head of an institute for

“sciences divines universelles” in Istanbul, appeared with turban, headband and a burnous draped around his shoulders. He told the reporter about his institute’s research into the relations between Sufism and Theosophy, adding that he provided physical, moral and spiritual training to his predominantly European and American students.³⁴ The Hawaii-born engineer and high-ranking theosopher Augustus Francis Knudsen (1869–1944) declared that he had been gifted with clairvoyance from childhood, and had become a conscious clairvoyant after a visit to the theosophical headquarters in Adyar. He also recounted his involvement in the queen’s dethronement and the establishment of the republic in Hawaii, before founding the Krotona Institute for Theosophical Studies in Los Angeles, along with summer academies for boys.³⁵

The reviewer of the congress’ first public lecture ironically described the various social groups that had gathered at the Konzerthaus: “Girls with a preference for naturalness, Wandervögel [members of the youth movement of that time] with a hint of rapture, clad in flowing robes, with sandals on their tanned feet, wearing the page-boy hairstyle which is both fashionable and rustic; small bank clerks, bookshop assistants, lyrical souls in Schiller collars [the German counterpart of Byron collars], elderly couples, the wives representing the instigating and the husbands the suffering part; gray-haired ladies of the feminist type [...]. The further we look towards the stage, the better the suits and robes.”³⁶ The spectrum of the occult-reformist scene had become significantly broader compared to twenty years before, when the artistic and theosophical elite had gathered to summer at Bellevue Castle.

The examples provided above, of which many more could be added, were meant to demonstrate how the interconnections within and

between the local scene, the meso and macro levels transformed Vienna into a hub of the Occult-Reformist International. They were meant to give an impression of the wide range of this alternative culture, and to introduce several of its main currents and protagonists. The final word

will be left to Eckstein. This master of conversation, overflowing with ideas and ever chatty, possessed an equally great talent for terse statements. He summed up more than his experiences at the Gebhards' estate when he remarked: "In short, it was a colorful world!"³⁷

1 | Friedrich Michael Fels: "Die Moderne" [lecture on the occasion of the opening of the independent theater association Freie Bühne, 28th Oct. 1891], quoted from: *Die Wiener Moderne. Literatur, Kunst und Musik zwischen 1890 und 1910*, ed. by Gotthart Wunberg, assisted by Johannes J. Braakenburg, edition with an added bibliography, Stuttgart 2000, p. 194.

2 | *Occultism in a Global Perspective*, ed. by Henrik Bogdan/Gordan Djurdjevic, Durham 2013; Julian Strube: "Towards the Study of Esotericism Without the 'Western': Esotericism from the Perspective of a Global Religious History", in: *New Approaches to the Study of Western Esotericism*, ed. by Egil Asprem/Julian Strube, Leiden/Boston 2021, pp. 45–66; Steven Sutcliffe: "Religion and the 'Simple Life': Dugald Semple and Translocal 'Life Reform' Networks", in: *Translocal Lives and Religion. Connections between Asia and Europe in the Late Modern World*, ed. by Philippe Bornet, Sheffield 2012, pp. 123–148; *Lebensreform um 1900 und Alternativmilieu um 1980. Kontinuitäten und Brüche in Milieus der gesellschaftlichen Selbstreflexion im frühen und späten 20. Jahrhundert*, ed. by Detlef Siegfried/Martin Templin, Göttingen 2019; *Transnational, Kolonial, Aktuell: Neue Perspektiven auf die Geschichte der Lebensreform*, ed. by Stefan Rindlisbacher/Eva Locher/Damir Skenderovic, Göttingen 2025.

3 | On the occult-reformist hub Leipzig, see the detailed study by Bernadett Bigalke: *Lebensreform und Esoterik um 1900. Die Leipziger alternativ-religiöse Szene am Beispiel der Internationalen Theosophischen Verbrüderung*, Würzburg 2016.

4 | The connection between Theosophy, Anthroposophy and the life reform movement has been explored by Helmut Zander: *Anthroposophie in Deutschland*, vol. 1, 2nd revised edition, Göttingen 2007, pp. 376–379; on anthroposophical companies, see Michael Lüthmann: "Das anthroposophische Warenhaus. Über die bürgerliche Sehnsucht nach einer anderen Moderne", in: *INDES*, 2013, number 2, pp. 80–89.

5 | Occultism in Vienna's lower classes is much less documented than its aristocratic and bourgeois variants, and is still largely unresearched. It was undoubtedly far more prominent than we realize today.

6 | Cf. Birgit Pack: "Die ersten Wiener Vegetarier", 2016, <https://veggie.hypotheses.org/44> (accessed on 26th March 2025).

7 | Birgit Pack: "140 Jahre vegetarische Gastronomie", 2017, <https://veggie.hypotheses.org/212> (accessed on 24th March 2025).

8 | Constantin Delhez: *Gymnastik der Sinne. Ein neues Erziehungssystem*, Vienna 1878.

9 | Lazar von Hellenbach: *Das neunzehnte und zwanzigste Jahrhundert. Kritik der Gegenwart und Ausblicke in die Zukunft*, ed. by Karl du Prel, Leipzig 1893.

10 | Cf. *Neue Freie Presse*, 19th Feb. 1880, p. 11. All cited newspaper articles are accessible online through the ANNO database of the Austrian National Library.

11 | Sigmund Freud: "Selbstdarstellung", in: idem: *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. XIV, Frankfurt am Main 1999, p. 40. On Hansen and the "Hansen phase of hypnosis", cf. Alan Gauld: *A History of Hypnotism*, Cambridge 1992, pp. 302–306.

12 | See Laura Feurle's essay, pp. 86–97.

13 | *Neue Freie Presse*, 1st April 1904, p. 5.

14 | Cf. *Illustriertes Wiener Extrablatt*, 22nd March 1905, p. 8.

15 | *Neues Wiener Journal*, 3rd Feb. 1909, p. 4.

16 | Hartmann was a member of Madame Blavatsky's inner circle. He had only returned in the spring of 1885 from the headquarters of the Theosophical Society in Adyar near Madras (now Chennai) to Europe, and had lived several months with Friedrich Eckstein in Vienna.

17 | On the episode with Pratapa and Kellner's yoga brochure, cf. Karl Baier: "Yoga Within Viennese Occultism: Carl Kellner und Co.", in: *Yoga in Transformation. Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. by idem/Philipp Maas et al. 2018, pp. 410–421. As a member of the organizing committee, James was informed about the congress and had easy access to Kellner's brochure.

18 | Franz Hartmann: "A Yogi in Europe", in: *Borderland*, vol. 3, no. 4, October 1896, pp. 461f.

19 | Cf. Baier 2018 (see fn 17), pp. 421–431 and idem: “Phallizismus, Ehereform und ritualisierter Sex. Eine alternativreligiöse Konstellation des 19. Jahrhunderts”, in: *Taking Seriously, Not Taking Sides: Challenges and Perspectives in the Study of Religions*, ed. by Lukas K. Pokorny/Astrid Mattes, Paderborn 2024, pp. 207–245, esp. pp. 229–237.

20 | Ludwig Hevesi: *Mac Eck's sonderbare Reisen zwischen Konstantinopel und San Franzisko*, Stuttgart 1901, pp. 55f.

21 | Ibid., p. 55.

22 | Cf. Samuel Robinson: *Alois Mailänder. A Rosicrucian Remembered*, Oberstdorf 2021; Erik Dilloo-Heidger: *Alois Mailänder aus der Sicht seiner Schüler*, Norderstedt 2024.

23 | Friedrich Eckstein: “Alte unnennbare Tage”. *Erinnerungen aus siebenzig Lehr- und Wanderjahren [1936]*, Vienna 1988, p. 185.

24 | Cf. Brigitte Holzweber: *Die okkulten Wege der Wiener Moderne. Eine religionswissenschaftliche Analyse der “Wiener Rundschau”*, Vienna, University of Vienna, 2019 (master thesis).

25 | Carl von Reichenbach (1788–1869) was an industrialist and naturalist who lived and experimented at Cobenzl Castle near Vienna. He claimed he could furnish empirical evidence for an unknown natural force flowing through the universe, which he called Od or Odic force (from the Germanic god Odin), which could allegedly be perceived by sensitive people as impressions of warmth or cold, or as aura-like color apparitions.

26 | For more on Lanz, cf. Walther Paape: *Im Wahn des Auserwähltheits. Die Rassereligion des Lanz von Liebenfels, der Neutemplerorden und das Erzpriorat Staufeu in Dietfurt – Eine österreichisch-deutsche Geschichte*, 3rd, extended edition, Meßkirch 2018.

27 | For more on List, cf. Robert Suckro: *Guido List. Ein völkisch-religiöser Weltanschauungsproduzent um 1900*, Berlin 2024.

28 | Ibid., p. 31.

29 | Cf. ibid., pp. 33–35.

30 | Ibid., p. 34.

31 | For more on this, see Johannes Endler: “Norbert Lauppert (1906–1991) and Theosophy in Twentieth-Century Austria”, in: *Religion in Austria*, vol. 10, ed. by Lukas K. Pokorny, Vienna 2025.

32 | *Neue Freie Presse*, 22nd July 1923, p. 9.

33 | *Neues Wiener Journal*, 21st July 1923, pp. 4f.

34 | *Neue Freie Presse*, 22nd July 1923, p. 8.

35 | *Die Stunde*, 17th July 1923, p. 4.

36 | *Neues Acht Uhr Blatt*, 23rd July 1923, p. 2.

37 | Hevesi 1901 (see fn 20), p. 58.

HIDDEN MODERNISM

The Fascination
with the Occult
Around 1900

Editors

Matthias Dusini

Ivan Ristić

Hans-Peter Wipplinger

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Leopold Museum, Vienna

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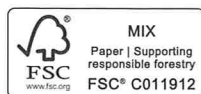
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