

The Attempted Murder of Hugo Bettauer

Max Nettlau

1925

Dear Dr. Nettlau and Comrade:

I am sorry not to be able to use your latest and unexpected correspondence, as my magazine is suspended and as I do not know when it will reappear. I have tried to publish it in *The Nation*—had no time to ask your permission fearing the article would lose its actuality—but, although they found it interesting, they were overcrowded with material.—As to the other article, on the duty of libertarians, etc., I cannot follow your advice and give it to the Jewish Anarchist paper, as I have been persecuted by it for my opinions on our duty toward Soviet Russia (even if we disagree with the principles and conduct of the latter) and I really do not feel like rendering it any service just at present. Therefore, I am returning you both articles.

Very sincerely,

B. Liber

Vienna, March 15. 1925

Has the recent fact that a young man of 21 lodged four bullets into the body of the Vienna journalist Hugo Bettauer who now lies at death's door, been noticed outside of Vienna? Bettauer's life was attempted at an perhaps taken, because, in the opinion of his assaulter, he corrupted the morals of the young generation and the assaulter poses as the champion of outraged morals and the principle capitalist paper, *Neue Freie Presse*, entirely condones the deed in a leader. To others the victim is the hero. The cruel case is another symptom of Vienna and Austrian misery; nothing can thrive here, since the normal conditions of life have been taken away, first by the war, as affecting the mentality of most men, second by the privations and famine 1915 to 1918 sapping the physique and unnerving the minds of the greater part of the remaining population, third by the harassing sufferings of all in the years 1918 to 1922 when mutilated Austria was exposed again to famine and this time also to final despair and hopelessness, fourth by the uncertainty prevailing since 1923 which is gradually changing to absolute certainty that the downward evolution continues, that things go from bad to worse and that there is no hope.

Indeed, when an organism brought to inanition by three years of progressive famine, at the end of the war when so many countries resume an almost normal life, had to undergo three other years of new and similar privations, this time with not a shred of hope before it, what can

have become of it and who can believe that the few millions of the international loan which just helped to keep the State bureaucratic machinery in working order, can have cured any of the innumerable wounds, restored the undermined health and mental and moral balance of millions and reconciled this people with their [p.2] present and intended to be permanent condition as the pariahs and outcasts of Europe? The progress of the decay can be measured by many groups of symptoms. The profiteers even have lost a great deal of their loot since 1924, industry is in great straits, the number of unemployed increases and suicides were never so frequent. As the country is doomed to stand alone and cannot recover less abnormal conditions by joining a larger organism, it is now exposed to inner decomposition, the diverse units composing (Vienna, Lower Austria, Upper Austria, Salzburg, Vorarlberg and what is left of Tyrol, Styria, Carinthia and the part of Western Hungary), all these units striving to be almost States by themselves with no responsibility for the rest of Austria. This may look as a sound craving for federation and autonomy when seen from a wide distance; seen here it illustrates only the stampede, the *saue qui peut*, the selfish wish of one who is just a little bit better off, to have nothing to do with this poorer and weaker neighbor. It reminds of that splitting up of Austria into little towns and villages almost, seen at the height of the postwar famine when most localities would not let a bit of food leave their boundaries and travelers were stripped, ransacked, plundered semi-officially or quite officially every few miles of their journey. This was done under the frantic feeling of local panic; now, six years later, a similar feeling induces the provincial units to take care of themselves first and let the others go to the dogs.

I have noticed through all these years that a certain, still tolerable quantity of stress, pressure, suffering creates solidarity, but if the pressure becomes unbearable, then the result is the opposite of solidarity—selfishness in the most brutal forms. This settled in my opinion the discussion on Mutual Aid and the Struggle for Life between Kropotkin and the Darwinians: up to a certain point there is Mutual Aid; beyond that point there is the terrible Struggle for Life. How could it be otherwise? In inorganic bodies also a certain amount of pressure may strengthen and solidify a substance, overpressure destroys the existing cohesion unflinchingly. [p.3]

It would be strange indeed, if the moral and sexual life of the Vienna and Austrian population had remained unchanged, when every normal condition of life was changed, perverted, reduced or taken away from them. No doubt there are exceptions, but no one here has to look far to see signs and samples of that change. Vienna was a very comfortable, very free city in such matters, not prudish at all, but withal settling these matters in a large and good-natured spirit; there was room and abundance for all, much personal freedom and little theory about it. The war brought the necessity to keep millions of soldiers in tolerable humor and women had to pay for this heavily. There was no pornography then that I remember, but there was a certain paper very widely spread (*Der Erzähler*) where many pages of advertisements constituted a regular sexual market of unheard dimension and variety. As this helped to amuse the soldiers, it was tolerated and took roots. After the end of the war, in 1919, a year or so and then became extinct again; it may not have paid them. Meanwhile the years of increasing misery passed over Vienna, the adolescent boys and girls had live through the war and they knew the pre-war normal life gone forever. They saw the native and foreign profiteers at work, laying hand on whatever they wanted for what in good money was a trifling price. This gentry left in the fall of 1922 and now the local conditions of life and work became gradually harder for the young people with no prospects, no career, very often unemployment before them. They strayed in all possible directions, some as

nationalists, antisemites, others as occultists, others find relief in dabbling in sexual matters and pornography flourished again, this time under a somewhat social disguise.

I am the last who would throw a stone at pornography. I have seen what could be seen in this respect in Paris before the war and for many years backward and I saw some of the graceful eighteenth century literature of this kind and earlier products too: I have also formerly followed with great interest the American publications for sexual freedom and sexual problems, from the time of the *Word* and of *Lucifer*. I know the neomalthusian literature in its English and French forms and I am aware of the birth control movements everywhere which in present Vienna take the form of a large popular desire to delete the cruel §144 of the old Austrian Penal Code. [p.4] I am not unacquainted with the historical and controversial literature on prostitution. I have also watched the socialist literature on female labor, the socialist and anarchist wishes for the emancipation of women and though the suffragette literature never attracted me, it has also been my lot to see some of it.

I understand that under present Vienna circumstances, when the people's senses are sharpened for social sufferings, all sexual problems, connected on one side with the inmost fibers of individualities, on the other side with every form of social life and the many plans for its thorough reform, must attract the attention of young people infinitely more than they did in normal times. Then everyone soon found a convenient solution for his or her needs or tried again. But now so very many individual problems are insoluble from inexorable collective reasons; young people cannot live together, finding no room to let; they cannot or will not begin life in common with unemployment staring in the face of one or both of them and they will not beget children with no room to love or only the unemployed's dole before them. What are they to do? If they go to a political party, the reply will be: vote for the social democrats; work with us, the communists, and Moscow will help; the anarchist would tell them the right thing,—to do and dare, to use direct action, to solve practical questions in a practical way, as common sense decrees and not an old must or a newfangled law or regulation, but few have that courage and initiative. Other parties would tell them to pray in church for the monarchy to be reestablished, to do some fascist, jewbaiting bragging and hole and corner conspiracy mongering. Many are left to whom all this means but little and these gather round the local sexuality journalists of whom Hugo Bettauer is the most prominent type.

He published the paper *Er und sie* (He and She) which was tried and acquitted, but is no longer issue, and Bettauer's *Wochenschrift* (Bettauer's Weekly. Problems of Life.) Looking over a bundle of the last two papers I find that they contain a regular *mixtum compositum* of many varieties of pornography, historiography of prostitution, description of all the shady sides of life in great cities, together with advice for the repair of damaged matrimonial and other relations and medical quackery, the whole adorned with many social, [] social democratic reflexions, some inklings of real sexual discussion and strictures [p.5] at sexual and social wrongs. But the huge advertisement parts make a terrific impression; here very many poor girls whose last hope such advertisements may be can be found side by side with colle males who seek to ensnare or swindle these girls and with male prostitutes or blackmailers, young “[men(?)]” who offer themselves explicitly to old women. These features cannot be unknown to the persons who produce these papers and they confirm the obvious impression that the social mask is put on to cover business and business alone.

The only interesting part of these papers are the letters by many correspondents who really co-operate to describe their social needs which are in so many cases indissolubly linked together

with present social misery here. These are human documents and from these and many other signs one can see that there is a public here wishing to learn, to think, to behave free and fair, to shape free lives for themselves, but they are dreadfully hampered by the absence of really free, intelligent, disinterested and humane information. They cannot get that in Vienna now in this domain as on no other field, as everywhere for the masses there is under-income, under-feeding, surrogates (Ersatz) or starvation; a few may find their way to libertarian ideas and their literature—the masses are in the hand of the Ersatz speculators, as they were during and since the war. There is a popular evening paper producing any quantity of Ersatz-communism and Ersatz-socialism, the papers discussed here supply Ersatz-erotics and Ersatz-sex question, other Ersatz-occultism and so on. It is a pity to see people doomed to be underfed and misfed on empty surrogates.

And then a young man of 21 puts of Ersatz heroism and fires four shots in the body of Bettauer, piercing the stomach, lung, shoulder and arm, declaring expressly that he hit the arm that he should no more be able to write. What a sad product of some variety of present-day fanaticism this young man who shoots this man, because he supplied some moments of happiness and amusement to many people, young and old: I cannot imagine a case of meaner, shabbier envy. He runs no great risk; he is almost sure to be acquitted on the strength of conventional moral indignation against sexual freedom and, of course, there is no capital punishment in Austria sine 1918.

The case may be of small importance, but it illuminates the Vienna nervousness and distress increasing; an unremitting disease undermines the whole organism since the wrong beginning enforced in 1918–19 and its symptoms take every form of death, from the quiet dropping away of so many children and old people to increasing numbers of deaths by suicide and murder.

M. Nettelau

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