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HUGO BETTAUER'S DIE STADT OHNE JUDEN: A PROPHETIC NOVEL OF AUSTRIA'S INTERWAR YEARS

Henry A. Lea

In 1922 the Austrian journalist and author Hugo Bettauer published a novel entitled *Die Stadt ohne Juden. Ein Roman von übermorgen*.^{*} In this book the Austrian government expels all Jewish citizens, but recalls them at the end of the novel because the country cannot get along without them. This theme and the circumstances of the author justify a closer look at this relatively unknown book.

Hugo Bettauer lived a stormy life. He was born near Vienna in 1872, the son of a Jewish father who had migrated from the Eastern provinces. For two years he was a classmate of Karl Kraus but apparently did not know him well. At sixteen he ran off to Alexandria but was caught and sent back to Vienna. Shortly before he turned eighteen he converted to Protestantism—unusual for Austrian Jews, who usually became Catholic. He enlisted in the army but deserted five months later and went to Zürich, where he studied for one semester and got married. With his wife he went to the United States, where he lost his entire inheritance through a bad investment. His marriage was almost as short-lived as his inheritance. Returning to Europe in 1899 he became an editor of the *Berliner Morgenpost*, but was forced to resign because of his attacks on the Berlin police, mainly against their purported corruption. He was actually expelled from Prussia as an undesirable alien in 1901.¹

In 1904 he again sailed for the United States, accompanied by a sixteen-year-old girl whom he married on board ship. He worked for several German-language newspapers in New York and wrote installment novels about German and Austrian immigrants. In 1908 he returned to Vienna, where he worked for various newspapers and was European correspondent for the *New York American*. He began to publish topical novels, many of which were filmed.² With the publication of *Die Stadt ohne Juden* he became widely known. A column on sex that he had written for a Viennese weekly in 1921 led him to co-edit his own journal, *Er und Sie*, which was devoted to sexual questions. He spoke out for the rights of women, opposed the punishment of homosexuals and criticized modern marriage—controversial topics subject to censorship. The journal was promptly confiscated and banned, which led to a nasty court case against Bettauer and anti-Semitic debates in the Vienna City Council. Bettauer was acquitted, but threats against him as a pornographer were made by the extreme right, which also objected strongly to his socialist sympathies and Jewish background. He was assassinated in 1925 by a young Nazi who was defended in court by the former head of the Austrian Nazi Party. The murderer, Otto Rothstock, was acquitted by reason of insanity and was released after spending about eighteen months in a mental hospital. As of 1981 Rothstock was still living in West Germany.³

Josef Nadler, a prominent Austrian literary historian, commented on the murder as follows: "Es war eine sinnvolle Handlung, als Hugo Bettauer 1925 seines schmutzigen Handwerks wegen von einem jungen Mann erschossen wurde."⁴

In 1922 Bettauer published the amazing total of five novels, two of which deal with racial discrimination.⁵ In the first, *Das blaue Mal. Der Roman eines Ausgestoßenen*, the son of a German professor and a mulatto woman emigrates to the United States to escape the problems of his mixed ancestry. In the States, he marries a black woman and joins in her struggle for emancipation. The second novel, *Die Stadt ohne Juden*, takes place in Vienna shortly after World War I. It begins with a large anti-Semitic demonstration for the Chancellor, Dr. Karl Schwertfeger, who is about to address Parliament on his proposal to expel all Jews. There had been an election a year before, brought about by financial chaos and general unrest, which resulted in a victory for the Christian Social Party. They had won with Schwertfeger's slogan "Hinaus mit den Juden aus Österreich!", which was also adopted by the Pan-German Party.⁶ Schwertfeger 'persuaded' the League of Nations to acquiesce in his anti-Jewish action by threatening the League with *Anschluß* with Germany.⁷

In the novel, Schwertfeger's proposed law applies to all Jews as well as to children of mixed marriages—estimated at between 800,000 and 1,000,000 people. The only exceptions are those too ill to travel, as certified by a court. Though Jews are permitted to take cash and valuables and to sell their homes and businesses, the financial provisions are intended to make Jewish property available to Austrians at favorable prices. Violations of the financial regulations and efforts to remain in Austria underground are punishable by death (*Die Stadt ohne Juden*, p. 15). The small Social Democratic delegation in Parliament is pelted with china when it speaks against this law, and leaves the hall. Taking a strictly racial stance the Pan-Germans proclaim the Chancellor a modern Wotan (p. 21). The sole Zionist deputy favors the law because he expects half of the expelled Jews to go to Palestine; he too is forced to leave the hall (pp. 22–23). The law is then unanimously adopted, and the decision is celebrated by large crowds who hail Schwertfeger as Austria's liberator.

The implementation of this law is followed by vignettes of Austrian life that show its effect on private individuals. One member of Parliament, still recovering from a hangover after celebrating the law's passage, is about to lose his daughter and his two grandchildren because the daughter is married to a Jew—something he had simply forgotten because of the assimilation of his baptized son-in-law. Neither Gentile nor Jew comes off positively, as their satiric names emphasize. Antonius Schneuzel's support of the anti-Semitic law brands him a flawed Christian, an Austrian "redneck," while Alois Corroni, originally named Sami Cohn, is a renegade Jew who protests his expulsion because he regards himself as a good Christian (pp. 23–26).

Other Austrians, Jews and Gentiles, emerge just as negatively. Another assimilated Jew doesn't want to go to Palestine because there are too many Jews there (p. 27). A Gentile businessman makes a sizable profit from helping a Jewish banker get his money out of the country (p. 28). A prominent Jewish writer, modeled on Schnitzler, complains that he is being treated like a Galician refugee (p. 32). A Gentile writer rejoices that he will no longer have to compete with more eminent Jewish writers, and that his girlfriend who is married to a Jew will now be his (pp. 33–34).

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A different picture emerges from an upper-class family in the suburbs. Hofrat Spineder, a civil servant, and his wife are independently wealthy; they live on a magnificent estate filled with art objects and surrounded by large gardens. Spineder is a Gentile stereotype: the "good" Austrian—a conservative patrician, civilized, music-loving, decent, tolerant, but also somewhat staid and old-fashioned (p. 54). Though he serves the young republic loyally, he still wears an imperial-style beard. Their young daughter is in love with Leo Strakosch, a Jewish artist who has won their affection for his own qualities and his devotion to their dying son when the two young men served together in World War I (pp. 55–56). The Spineders have many Jewish friends in the arts, and it is not surprising that these aristocrats gladly befriend a poor, gifted Jewish artist. But even though Spineder is opposed to the expulsion law he refuses to allow his daughter to emigrate with Leo. He does not want to lose his only surviving child and fears that she and her children would lose their roots. Leo leaves for Paris with their blessings and without rancor (pp. 58–60).

On the last day of the year the remaining Jews are taken away on thirty huge trains by using all available rolling stock, borrowing locomotives from neighboring countries and suspending all public transportation (p. 61). A million people celebrate the departure of the last Jews. Led by the Chancellor and the Mayor of Vienna, the people vow to live without Jews and affirm their vow by singing a new national anthem (p. 64). Most citizens wear a swastika (p. 123).

The second and last part of the novel begins with accounts of life in a Vienna without Jews. After an initial euphoria over more available housing and cheaper food the mood turns sour. As many businesses begin to fail, unemployment increases. The Austrian currency falls and inflation rises. Financial support from abroad does not materialize, partly because of the influence of expelled Jews, partly because potential donors sense a lost cause in Austria, and partly because Jewish businessmen can no longer go to Vienna. Foreign banks close their Vienna offices, and the city ceases to be a commercial center. Culturally, Vienna turns into a backwater. The quality of life declines—music, theater, the press, shops and restaurants lose their flair. Even a convinced anti-Semite protests against the provincialization of the city (p. 82; elsewhere the word 'Verdorfung' is used: see p. 144).

Almost a year later, as Austria's economy continues to deteriorate, Leo Strakosch returns to Vienna in the unlikely disguise of a Frenchman. He comes to meet secretly with Lotte Spineder, but mainly to agitate for repeal of the expulsion law. He secretly prints and puts up posters opposing the law and electrifies the crowd by calling for new elections. A key event is the Mayor of Vienna's defection from the anti-Semitic side. The Mayor is persuaded to call for new elections by his chief of staff, Joseph Kallop, who is of Jewish background.

The history of Josef Kallop is typical of many prominent Viennese Jews, including Bettauer. The grandson of a Galician grain dealer named Pollak, he escapes the provisions of the anti-Semitic law by the opportunism of his father and grandfather. His grandfather married a Gentile and converted to Christianity. His father in turn married a Gentile, changed his name to Kallop and became a well-known lawyer. Josef Kallop entered the civil service and has risen to high position through sheer intelligence. It is he who writes the Mayor's speech against the anti-Jewish program, shrewdly arguing in pragmatic terms and making sure that the speech receives

maximum press coverage. Rappaport's motive is not to help the Jews but to stay in office and enable his wealthy Jewish girlfriend to return from exile (pp. 165–169).

The Mayor's defection emboldens the opposition. When the workers threaten violence, the government agrees to hold new elections. Leo, always in French disguise, manages to form a new political party with the aim of repealing the anti-Semitic law. But its program contains the provision that in bringing back the Jews the government should keep out "alle jene Elemente, die nicht schon vor dem Weltkrieg in Wien seßhaft waren, . . . es sei denn, sie können vor einem zuständigen, aus Bürgern und Arbeitern zusammengesetzten Gerichtshof nachweisen, daß sie willens und fähig sind, in Österreich nutzbringende, produktive, werterzeugende, dem Gesamtwohl notwendige Arbeit zu leisten" (p. 186). In other words, keep out recent immigrants who usually come from the East, as a sop to prejudiced voters and perhaps also to assimilated Jews, who were often hostile to their Eastern brethren.

The election results in a parliament which leaves the winning side one vote short of the two-thirds majority needed to repeal the law. Leo contrives to keep one anti-Semitic deputy away from the key vote by getting him drunk, thereby ensuring the law's repeal. Dropping his disguise, Leo poses as the first returning Jew and is tumultuously received at City Hall where the Mayor salutes him "Mein lieber Jude!" (p. 218).

A literary history of Austria completed in 1937 calls the book "eine freche Satire auf den Antisemitismus in Wien."⁸ Though decidedly unsatirical, the novel is a remarkable attack against the anti-Semitism in a country where the Nazi Party had originated and where pro-*Anschluß* sentiment was prevalent even in moderate parties. The first large Nazi rally in Vienna, featuring a speech by Hitler, took place in February 1922, the year of Bettauer's novel.⁹ Even earlier, in October 1919, an actual proposal was made to sequester Jews from non-Jews. It may well be that this proposal prompted Bettauer to write *Die Stadt ohne Juden*.

In a speech in Vienna's City Hall on 9 October 1919 Leopold Kunschak (1871–1953), founder of the Christian Workers' Movement in Austria and a prominent member of the Christian Social Party, demanded the expulsion of Jewish refugees ("Hinaus aus Wien mit den Flüchtlingen . . . !")¹⁰ and if this was not possible, their internment in refugee camps. The remaining, i.e. native, Jews were to be confined in ghettos. Arguing that Jews were strangers and undesirables solely because they were Jews, Kunschak drafted a law "über die Rechtsverhältnisse der jüdischen Nation."¹¹ The purpose of this law was to isolate Jews from other citizens by declaring them to be a national minority with limited and strictly defined rights. He submitted this proposal to Dr. Ignaz Seipel (1876–1932), subsequently Austrian Chancellor (1922–1924 and 1926–1929), who was then one of the drafters of a constitution for republican Austria. Seipel found the proposal too radical and asked Kunschak to revise it. When he saw the revised draft Seipel considered it a workable piece of legislation but asked Kunschak to withhold it until further notice. The revised draft, together with Seipel's comments, was not published until 1936.¹² This proposal recognized Jews as a national minority and regulated their political, vocational and educational life on a strictly numerical basis. Especially noteworthy is the contrast between the inflammatory anti-Semitism of Kunschak's 1919 speech ("Die Juden sind nicht nur die Not, sondern auch die Seuche unserer Zeit . . .")¹³ and his 1936

comment, when making his proposal public, that the Jewish question should be solved rationally and justly, "ehe die Lösung dem Bereich hemmungsloser Brutalität überantwortet ist."¹⁴ This comment sounds remarkably as if this convinced anti-Semite had been sobered by observing Nazi rule in Germany for three years.

Bettauer's treatment of this anti-Semitism is completely on target in stressing its extreme narrow-mindedness and lack of common sense. These anti-Semites accuse Jews of amassing wealth while ignoring their own materialism. Wenzel Krötzl, a member of Parliament, is a dishonest real estate broker who enriches himself by selling homes formerly owned by Jews. Antonius Schneuzel is able to give a million to his Jewish son-in-law. They envy Jews for being better at making money.

The most complex and therefore most interesting figure in the novel is the Chancellor and Foreign Minister, Dr. Karl Schwertfeger, who is in part modeled on Karl Lueger. The name Schwertfeger suggests someone engaged in a violent cleansing process, but he retains doubts about its effects. Even at the very beginning, as he is being hailed as Austria's liberator from the Jews, he looks gloomy and discourages demonstrations of approval. He is too intelligent not to understand the complexity of the issue. He has been in office a whole year before he proposes the anti-Semitic law to Parliament. When he does so, he claims to be a friend of the Jews because he is convinced that Austrians are unable to deal with Jews. He says that the Jews are too smart, too sophisticated, too quick-witted for the naive, devout, nature-loving Austrians (*Die Stadt ohne Juden*, p. 10).

Schwertfeger's description of the Austrian national character does an injustice to the sophisticated among the Viennese, for Viennese culture is an inextricable mixture of Jewish and Gentile contributions. So intertwined are the two peoples that ten members of Parliament, nearly one-third of all Gentile journalists, and numerous relatives of Austria's Archbishop are half Jewish and subject to the expulsion order (p. 46). Schwertfeger himself is aware of the inaccuracy of his characterization. He knows that intelligence and wealth are not limited to Jews, and he knows that he cannot count on his followers. When the law is repealed he commits suicide, thereby attesting to the fateful nature of this issue.

His clinching argument for expulsion is the stereotypical one that the Jews dominate Austrian life:

Sehen wir dieses kleine Österreich von heute an. Wer hat die Presse und damit die öffentliche Meinung in der Hand? Der Jude! Wer hat seit dem unheilvollen Jahre 1914 Milliarden auf Milliarden gehäuft? Der Jude! Wer kontrolliert den ungeheuren Banknotenumlauf, sitzt an den leitenden Stellen in den Großbanken, wer steht an der Spitze fast sämtlicher Industrien? Der Jude! Wer besitzt unsere Theater? Der Jude! Wer schreibt die Stücke, die aufgeführt werden? Der Jude! Wer fährt im Automobil, wer praßt in den Nachtlokalen, wer füllt die Kaffeehäuser, wer die vornehmen Restaurants, wer behängt sich und seine Frau mit Juwelen und Perlen? Der Jude! (p. 11)

And he concludes with the racial statement that the Jews "nie Deutsche im Herzen und im Blut waren" (p. 13). This is the kind of rhetoric Bettauer must have heard.

One of the more disturbing aspects of the book is that the ending seems to bear out the Chancellor's statement. The Jews are brought back because the country really cannot do without them. It needs their business expertise, their money, their style, their taste, their cosmopolitanism. In the absence of the Jews the formerly elegant coffee houses serve beer and sausages, chic clothing shops carry only dirndl skirts, lederhosen and Alpine hats, theaters perform only provincial Austrian plays, newspapers aren't worth reading. But again and again, Bettauer does a disservice to his own people by emphasizing Jewish bankers and Jewish businessmen without whom the economy fails. In actuality, Germany and Austria today without Jews not only have not collapsed, they are thriving.

The hastily written book is filled with Jewish and Gentile stereotypes. A Jewish critic accurately wrote in 1933:

Allerdings kann man diese seichte Satire, die als freche Verhöhnung des 'arischen' Wien gemeint war und empfunden wurde, auch als nicht minder verzerrende Karikatur des jüdischen lesen.¹⁵

And, indeed, Jewish stereotypes abound. An old man from the East, ostensibly poor, speculates in stocks (*Die Stadt ohne Juden*, p. 29). A rich Jew cheats on his taxes (p. 27). Jewish men keep Gentile women who use their Jewish friends' wealth to support impecunious Gentile lovers (pp. 38–39). This arrangement involves three Jewish stereotypes: Jews are wealthy, Jews prefer Gentile women, Jews are both exploiters and exploited. But most of Bettauer's stereotypes center around money and/or opportunism. It is not surprising to learn that Bettauer gave up his Judaism.¹⁶

It might be thought that anti-Semites would exploit the Jewish stereotypes, but Alfred Rosenberg, perhaps the most prominent Nazi to have commented on the novel, called it "bewußt jüdische Rassenpropaganda,"¹⁷ most likely because intermarriage is prevalent in it and Jews are found to be indispensable to Austria's welfare.

Two of the best Austrian writers paid tribute to Bettauer after he was killed. Karl Kraus praised him for a sensitive essay Bettauer had written for Kraus's birthday,¹⁸ and Musil extolled him for his integrity: ". . . er fiel für die vornehmste Aufgabe seines Berufs: das auszusprechen, was man für richtig hält!"¹⁹

Though the book is seriously flawed, it is a remarkable foreshadowing of future events. The expulsion of the Jews with minimal opposition from the populace by a legally elected government, the prefiguring of the Nürnberg Laws and the mass deportations give Bettauer's novel an uncanny documentary quality. He confronted a major issue head-on, for which he has only recently been recognized.

In 1978 there appeared two publications about Bettauer that aroused fresh interest in him.²⁰ Both were written by Murray G. Hall: "Der Fall Bettauer: Ein literatursoziologisches Kapitel der Zwischenkriegszeit" (*Jahrbuch der Grillparzer Gesellschaft* 13 [1978], 141–158) and his book *Der Fall Bettauer* (Vienna: Löcker Verlag, 1978). Both publications concentrate on Bettauer's life and death and his significance as a social critic; the book includes a thorough and well-documented investigation of his assassination and the trial of his murderer. In 1980 a publisher in Salzburg, Hannibal Verlag, published a six-volume edition of Bettauer's Vienna

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novels which includes *Die Stadt ohne Juden*, as well as Murray G. Hall's 1978 essay. Both Werner Koch's essay, " 'Hinaus mit den Juden!' Hugo Bettauer und die unberechenbaren Folgen" (*Merkur*, vol. 35, no. 3 [March 1981], 254–265) and an unsigned article in *Der Spiegel* (vol. 36, no. 7 [15 February 1982], 189–191) identify Bettauer as a muck-raking critic who provoked the establishment with his social and sexual liberalism. The *Spiegel* article, appearing in the "Books" column, characteristically disparages Bettauer as a writer but describes him as "das erste namhafte Todesopfer des Nationalsozialismus in Österreich" (p. 189). The author of this article expresses the intriguing opinion that Bettauer was being rehabilitated in Austria while Bruno Kreisky was Chancellor (1970–1983). This view is supported by Bettauer's rediscoverer, the Canadian scholar Murray G. Hall, who wrote that Bettauer would be glad to know that certain reforms in criminal law which he had advocated had recently been adopted in Austria.²¹ Koch concludes his *Merkur* essay with Bettauer's last written words, his advice to an unemployed man who wants to commit suicide. Bettauer encourages him to live so that he can join with others to make the world a better place.

Bettauer's importance, it is clear, lies not in the literary quality of his novels but in his advanced social views and the courage with which he advocated them. His life and death, too little known, is an all-too-realistic warning against an extremism that is still very much with us.

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NOTES

*This essay has benefited from a critical reading by Professor Evan Bukey.

- ¹ Murray G. Hall, *Der Fall Bettauer* (Vienna: Löcker Verlag, 1978), p. 11.
- ² One of these films, *Die freudlose Gasse*, provided Greta Garbo with her first important part. The film was directed by G.W. Pabst and was first shown in 1925. See Murray G. Hall, *Der Fall Bettauer*, p. 34 and p. 190.
- ³ See Gerhard Botz, *Gewalt in der Politik* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1976), pp. 133–137; Murray G. Hall, *Der Fall Bettauer*, op. cit., p. 133; Werner Koch, “‘Hinaus mit den Juden!’ Hugo Bettauer und die unberechenbaren Folgen,” *Merkur* 35, no. 3 (March 1981), p. 261.
- ⁴ Quoted in Murray G. Hall, *Der Fall Bettauer*, op. cit., pp. 25–26.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 18.
- ⁶ Hugo Bettauer, *Die Stadt ohne Juden. Ein Roman von übermorgen* (Vienna and Leipzig: R. Löwit Verlag, 1926), p. 9.
- ⁷ In August 1922 the Austrian Chancellor, Ignaz Seipel, went to Geneva and persuaded the League of Nations to give Austria a loan in exchange for maintaining its territorial and political independence. See Peter Dusek, Anton Pelinka, Erika Weinzierl, *Zeitgeschichte im Aufriß: Österreich von 1918 bis in die achtziger Jahre* (Vienna: TR-Verlagsunion, 1981), pp. 189–190. But since the Treaty of Saint-Germain (1919) fixed Austria’s post-war borders and prohibited *Anschluß*, it is puzzling that Seipel could use the country’s independence as a bargaining chip.
- ⁸ *Geschichte der deutschen Literatur in Österreich-Ungarn im Zeitalter Franz Josephs I.* Ein Handbuch unter Mitwirkung hervorragender Fachgenossen herausgegeben von Eduard Castle. 2. Band: 1890–1918 (Vienna: Verlag von Carl Fromme, n.d.), p. 2251. The preface is signed “Wien, 7. November 1937.”
- ⁹ Bruce F. Pauley, *Hitler and the Forgotten Nazis: A History of Austrian National Socialism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1981), p. 22.
- ¹⁰ Anton Pelinka, *Stand oder Klasse? Die Christliche Arbeiterbewegung Österreichs 1933 bis 1938* (Vienna: Europaverlag, 1972), p. 223. This study includes essential excerpts from Kunschak’s speech with a detailed discussion of the historical context.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 225.
- ¹² This draft, entitled “Zur Judenfrage,” is reprinted with Seipel’s addition in Anton Pelinka, *ibid.*, pp. 297–300. Gerhard Botz believes that Bettauer’s novel was a direct response to Kunschak’s anti-Jewish proposal; see his study *Gewalt in der Politik. Attentate, Zusammenstöße, Putschversuche, Unruhen in Österreich 1918–1934* (Munich: Fink Verlag, 1976), p. 131. I am greatly indebted to Professor Evan Bukey for calling my attention to this important matter and for giving me the references.
- ¹³ Anton Pelinka, *Stand oder Klasse?*, op. cit., p. 223.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 300.
- ¹⁵ Hans Tietze, *Die Juden Wiens*, as quoted in Murray G. Hall, *Der Fall Bettauer*, op. cit., p. 24.
- ¹⁶ Murray G. Hall, “Der Fall Bettauer. Ein literatursoziologisches Kapitel der Zwischenkriegszeit,” in *Jahrbuch der Grillparzer-Gesellschaft* 13 (1978), p. 143.

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Quoted in Murray G. Hall, *Der Fall Bettauer*, op. cit., p. 28.

18 *Die Fackel*, No. 686, May 1925, p. 7.

19 Quoted in Murray G. Hall, *Der Fall Bettauer*, op. cit., p. 142.

20 The *Bibliographie der deutschen Sprach- und Literaturwissenschaft*, which covers the years since 1945, does not have a single entry for Bettauer before 1978.

21 Murray G. Hall, "Der Fall Bettauer. Ein literatursoziologisches Kapitel der Zwischenkriegszeit," op. cit., pp. 157-158.

