The Renegade’s Challenge
Kraus and Schnitzler as Public Figures in Fin-de-Siècle Vienna

With the assistance of several press-cutting agencies, Arthur Schnitzler collected around 21,000 notices concerning his work over a period of forty years. These clippings, now held at the University of Exeter Library, offer a double treat for the researcher. There is the excitement of knowing that the writer himself once read them, while, at the same time, gaining a unique view of the society that Schnitzler had to contend with. This essay, by focusing on the press responses to Schnitzler’s winning the Bauernfeld Prize for his play *Lebendige Stunden* (Lively Hours) on March 17, 1903, reveals how great a role anti-Semitism had begun to play in cultural discourse at that time.

“Wie schön ist es ein Arier zu sein—man hat sein Talent so ungestört . . .” (How nice it is to be an Aryan—one’s talent is left undisturbed . . .)¹ Schnitzler wrote this poignant comment in his diary on November 11, 1904, after his wife Olga had recited a poem to him by Detlev von Liliencron. How impossible it was for a Jewish writer to be judged solely on his literary merits in turn-of-the-century Vienna, even if a work bore no connection whatsoever to his origins, had been vividly demonstrated to him the year before. On March 14, 1903, Schnitzler's cycle of four one-act plays entitled *Lebendige Stunden*, had its premiere at the Deutsches Volkstheater. Playing off the word *lebendig* in its double meaning of “alive” and “lively,” the seasoned forty-one-year-old playwright presented a quartet of confrontations in which illusions of filial piety, revenge, seduction, and romance appear to have more of a role in survival than reality. Although death, both natural and threatened, lurks in the background of each of the playlets, the sprightly dialogues, well laced with irony and humor, sustain a philosophical mood.

Three days after the premiere, *Lebendige Stunden* was crowned with the Bauernfeld Prize awarded annually since 1894. The members of the committee that decided on Schnitzler were all at the highest level of Vienna's cultural establishment: Adolf van Berger, the Austrian director of the Hamburg Schauspielhaus; the Burgtheater actor Josef Lewinsky; the literary critic Dr. Jacob Minor; the court-connected lawyer Edmund Weissel; and the Minister of Education, Dr. Wilhelm von Hartel. It was

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

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because Von Hartel was a member of the current government, however, that a Christian Social member of Parliament, Robert Pattai, thought he saw an opportunity to open an anti-Semitic query.

Pattai began by asking the Minister to answer for “[d]ie unbegründete Auszeichnung eines nicht preiswürdigen Werkes, eine Verletzung der Rechte der nichtjüdischen Schriftstellerwelt unserer Heimat und einen Verstoß gegen den Sinn und Zweck der Stiftung” (a groundless honor given a non-prizeworthy work, a violation of the rights of the non-Jewish writers' world of our homeland and an infringement of the meaning and purpose of the foundation). Pattai asserted that since many Jews had won this prize recently, it would give other countries the impression that only Jews did any writing in Austria. Finally, he made the point that the anti-Semitic newspapers would run with in glee: the award reflected the repression of non-Jewish writers by the influential Jewish press.

The anti-Semitic clamor that was unleashed can be followed in the Exeter press cuttings. It began in the Deutsche Zeitung with accusations against the “Clique der jüdischen Kaffeehaus liga” (clique of the Jewish coffee house league), and with even more desperate cries against “[d]as furchtbarste und gefährlichste Kartell das dem geistigen Leben unseres Volkes die schlimmsten Gefahren bringt” (the most terrible and dangerous cartel bringing with it the worst dangers to the spiritual life of our people). The Deutsche Volksblatt stated: “Diese Preiszuerkennung geht über alle früheren Faustschläge ins Gesicht des arischen Wien.” (The awarding of this prize goes beyond all earlier punches in the face of Aryan Vienna.) The Volksblatt concluded that the clique of politics and finance now had a role in art and literature. Similar accusations in similarly overheated language could be found in the Presburger Tagblatt, the Münchener Neueste Nachrichten, and Kikeriki. A few defenders interrupted the cacophony. The equanimity of their prose read like pale but soothing echoes of the liberal era. The Vossische Zeitung recalled that “der Stiftsbbrief weisst so wenig wie der lebendige Bauernfeld selbst—dessen lieblings Dichter Heine, dessen täglich Spielgenossen im kaufmännischer Verein meist nicht arische Partner, dessen Sterbehaus die Villa Wertheimstein war—einen Unterschied zwischen teutonischer und nicht teutonischer Dichtern deutsche Zunge auf” (the mission statement distinguishes as little as did Bauernfeld when he was alive—whose favorite poet was Heine, whose daily card-playing cronies in the merchant's club were usually not the Aryan partners, whose last years were spent in the Villa Wertheimstein—a difference between the teutonic and non-teutonic German writer's tongue).

By 1903, Schnitzler had long been confronted by the ugly accusations of the anti-Semitic press. Earlier, they had dealt with the
scandals he had no hesitation provoking, such as his disturbing representation of the mentality of the average military man in *Lieutenant Gustl*. The attacks on the Bauernfeld Prize went even further, however, since they were not concerned with a controversial issue, but with Schnitzler’s identity as a Jew. Schnitzler had, however, no desire to respond to the uproar; he hated any public display of himself. Even appearing on-stage in response to an audience’s enthusiasm gave him pause. On this occasion he gave the briefest of answers in an interview in *Die Zeit*. Claiming no influential connections, all he had to say about the inquiry was “Derlei interessiert mich nicht und ich habe keinen Anlass von so nebensächlichen Zwischenfällen auch nur in geringsten Notiz genommen.” (Those kind of things do not interest me, and I have no reason to take the slightest notice of such irrelevant incidents.)

In fact, Van Hartel, despite the furor raised by Pattai, was under no obligation to answer to Parliament, since, as he explained to the press, he was a member of the Bauernfeld commission as a private citizen, not as a representative of the government. However, to put the matter to rest, he added simply: “Nach dem Wortlaut und dem Geiste des Stiftbriefes, hierbei nicht der Taufschein, sondern literarische Leistungen masgebend waren.” (According to the letter and the spirit of the mission statement, not the baptismal certificate, but literary achievements set the standard.) These few words, which exposed the inappropriate nature of the parliamentary inquiry and the absurdity of its thesis, should have ended the matter. There was one journalist, however, for whom the Bauernfeld affair offered a specific challenge—Karl Kraus, the independent publisher of *Die Fackel*.

In his youth, at the time of his first efforts in journalism around 1892, Kraus had been a great admirer of Schnitzler. His letters to Schnitzler at that time have a starry-eyed tone and show eagerness to please. He joined the literati known as Jung Wien at the Café Griensteidl, and at one point Schnitzler even refers to Kraus in his diary as “our protegé.” However, by 1895, a drastic break occurred between the young man and the Griensteidl habitués, fueled either by Kraus’ open contempt for some of the writers’ flirtation with “decadence” or by some unforgivable personal slight.

When Kraus began to plan the founding of *Die Fackel* at the close of the 1890s, he issued two leaflets intended to break all affiliations that might make him vulnerable. In *Die Demolierte Literatur* he eviscerated the reputations of the writers of Jung Wien. There, Schnitzler was treated dismissively as “der Dichter der das Vorstadtmädel burgtheaterfähig machte” (the writer who made the girl from the suburbs fit for the Burgtheater). In *Eine Krone für Zion*, ostensibly a response to Theodore...
Herzl's messianic visions, Kraus made clear that he could not be counted among those supporting the causes of his fellow Jews.

Now, four years later, the Bauernfeld affair put Kraus between a rock and a hard place. He knew, as a critic, that he had to reprimand Pattai for the absurdity of his accusations, but, at the same time, he did not want to praise Schnitzler, his former mentor, nor did he wish to speak out directly against anti-Semitism in a way that suggested an alliance with Jewish interests. The hair-splitting was brilliantly achieved, but with troubling implications. In earlier issues of Die Fackel Kraus had, like Pattai, ranted against the Jewish press clique, going so far as to accuse them of encouraging anti-Semitism by their very existence. Therefore he had to defend Pattai's stance on the press, while at the same time refusing to go along with the politician's support of the native over the talented. Readers were given the following statement to parse in the March 26 issue: “Ich schätze den Schaden den die literarische Hyksos-Herrschaft angerichtet hat, noch viel höher als Herr Dr. Pattai; denn ich schätze die 'christlichen Talente' die auf verwüstetem Boden sich kaum entfalten konnten, geringer. Es werden, wenn ungeschickte Interpellationen nicht der liberalen Pressclique zu triumphen verhelfen, hoffentlich bessere Zeiten kommen.” (I value the harm done by the literary Hyksos rulers much higher than Dr. Pattai; if I value far less the 'Christian talents' barely able to develop on ravaged soil. There will be better times ahead, if clumsy inquiries don't assist the triumphs of the liberal press clique.)

Kraus defended Schnitzler against the member of parliament's praise for the provincial, by admitting that, for now, what the playwright was capable of, went far beyond anything “österreichische Heimatkunst” (the art of the Austrian homeland) had to offer from “Innsbruck bis Linz, von Greinz bis Krannewetter” (Innsbruck to Linz, from Greinz to Krannewetter). However, Schnitzler was not to be left off the hook. Sidling in with faint praise for his “zarte Geschmak, sein anmutiger Feuilletongeist” (delicate taste, his graceful feuilleton spirit), Kraus then went in for the kill by declaring Schnitzler “[k]ein Revolutionär, keiner der auf den Pfad künstlerischer Seelenerkenntnis eine neues Licht gestellt hat” (no revolutionary, no one who sheds new light on the path of artistic insight into the nature of the soul). And this in 1903, after Das Märchen, Der Grüne Kakadu, and Lieutenant Gustl.

Having access to Schnitzler's diaries, we now know that Kraus' malicious assessment hit home. Schnitzler uttered a cri de coeur at Kraus' malice: “Was hilft alle Vernunft, alle Gleichgültigkeit in der tiefe der Seele gegen die Angriffe, Bosheiten, Büberein wen die Oberflächen doch immer wider aufgewühlt und beschmutzt werden. Sehnsucht: fort, fort aus dem allen . . . nichts mit der Öffentlichkeit zu tun haben.” (What can all reason help, all indifference in the depth of the soul, against attacks,
malice, mischief, when the surface is repeatedly ruffled and dirtied. Longing: away, away from all this, . . . have nothing to do with the public.) Our awareness, as readers of the diary, of this inner struggle between Schnitzler’s drive to confront social taboos and his misery at public exposure, is particularly stirring at this moment. Reigen was to be published six days after Kraus declared the writer “kein Revolutionär.” All the author of Sittlichkeit und Kriminalität had to say about the play was to compare it to the pornographic paintings in Naples shown by guides to tourists with a wink.

Even more daring was the project Schnitzler had embarked upon two days before Kraus’ drastic assessment of his courage—the novel Der Weg ins Freie. Although he had begun life with a diffident attitude to his Jewish background, he finally felt he had to grapple openly with the persona the anti-Semites forced upon him—that of a “Jewish” writer. It would be five more years before this attempt at an honest picture of contemporary Jewish life in Vienna was published, but when it came out, Schnitzler presented a thesis in total opposition to Kraus' approach to anti-Semitism. The journalist’s acceptance of anti-Semitic tropes—“Hyksos-Herrschaften,” for example, which implies a monolithic community of outsiders—was intended to push his co-religionists into the total assimilation he believed would end their troubles.

In Der Weg ins Freie, Schnitzler took upon himself the task of describing honestly the quandary he and other Jews found themselves in when confronted by anti-Semitism. He included avid Zionists, assimilated patriots, would-be Christians, world-weary cynics, and old-fashioned liberals in his narrative. The specificity of his characters' experiences and the variety of their reactions to them was the most telling weapon against the monolithic conception of Jews propagated by Kraus and the anti-Semites. The striking individuality Schnitzler endowed them with revealed the absurdity of the clichés of Jewish cliques and solidarity. He offered no solution to the Judenfrage, but provided the essential corrective of a human dimension.

Ironically, a perusal of articles dealing with the reception of Der Weg ins Freie at Exeter would reveal how new and even dangerous Schnitzler’s frank presentation of the reality of contemporary Jewish life in Vienna seemed. Even the reviewer for the Neue Freie Presse, the paper that came under the most criticism by Kraus for the bias of its influence, shied away from discussing the Jewish characters in the book in any detail. Die Fackel published no comment at all.