

“VIENNA GOES TO POT WITHOUT JEWS”

HUGO BETTAUER'S NOVEL *DIE STADT OHNE JUDEN* (THE CITY WITHOUT JEWS)

FLORIAN KROBB

Hugo Bettauer's novel, *The City without Jews*, was first published in German in 1922, and became his largest success, reaching a circulation of 250,000 (translations included—an English one appeared in 1926¹). The book was dramatized in the same year, and the film adaptation also became a commercial success two years later. After the war Bettauer became a forgotten author; attempts to revive his reputation have been honourable, but not very successful. A reprint of his best-known novels appeared in 1980;² and some information on this strange author was provided by the Canadian scholar Murray Gordon Hall in his monograph *Der Fall Bettauer*.³ Indeed, Bettauer's "case" seems almost more interesting than his literature, which, from an aesthetic point of view, must be considered second rate, owing its success largely to its scandalous and provocative subjects and sensationalistic presentation.

Hugo Bettauer was born on 18 August 1872, the third child of a wealthy Viennese stockbroker of Galician Jewish origin, in Baden, a select resort outside the Austrian capital. His father died when Hugo was only one-year-old. At eighteen Bettauer converted to Protestant Christianity. After he had left school, a dazzling career began: he volunteered for the army, deserted five months later and was forced to leave the country. At Zürich University, he read philosophy for a little while,

then moved on to the United States, got married, fathered a child, started a career in journalism, became a naturalized American, and spent the entire fortune he had inherited from his father. By 1899, he was back in Europe, this time in Berlin, where he worked for a local paper until, because of controversies over his reporting of the Berlin police's sloppiness, he was expelled from Prussia, moved to Munich, wrote recipes for a gourmet magazine and eventually went back to the United States, accompanied by a sixteen-year-old girl who was to become his second wife. In New York, he published his first novels in German-language periodicals. In 1908, he arrived back in his native Vienna, writing for respected papers like *Die Zeit* and *Neue Freie Presse*.

After World War One, more novels appeared in quick succession; their huge success provided Bettauer with the money to launch his own magazine, entitled *Er und Sie: Wochenschrift für Lebenskultur und Erotik* ("Him and Her: A Weekly about Lifestyle and Eroticism"), in spring 1924, which caused an uproar in the literary market and a political scandal that shook the whole Austrian Republic. The magazine's content was both morally provocative (which explains the huge commercial success) and politically reformist (which explains the hostility of large portions of the Austrian population and political establishment). In his editorials, Bettauer addressed



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1. Hugo Bettauer, *The City without Jews*, translated by Salomea Neumark Braun (New York, 1926).

2. Hugo Bettauer, *Gesammelte Werke* (Salzburg, 1980): Volume IV, *Die Stadt ohne Juden* (all page references are to this edition, the translations are my own).

3. Murray G. Hall, *Der Fall Bettauer* (Vienna, 1980). A short introduction appeared under the title "Der Fall Bettauer. Ein literatursoziologisches Kapitel der Zwischenkriegszeit" in *Jahrbuch der Grillparzer-Gesellschaft*, 3. Ser. 13 (1978), 141-58.

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questions like homosexuality, abortion, the legal position of illegitimate children; doctors gave advice on sexual questions, and personal ads did their bit to increase the paper's popularity. No wonder that conservative circles started a vehement campaign against what they must have perceived as a purveyor of promiscuity and obscenity, trying—unsuccessfully at first—to have *Er und Sie* banned. An outright battle over the magazine unfolded between the socialist Lord Mayor of Vienna, defending the freedom of the press, and the Christian Conservative Federal Chancellor of Austria, who attacked the “moral contamination” of the population by “literary mudlarks” and irresponsible politicians. Soon Bettauer's Jewish origin was used as an argument against him by conservative antisemites.

Put to trial for “corruption of public morals” and “Kuppelei” (procuring), he was found not guilty on both counts; still the paper could not survive. Ironically, the idea of *Er und Sie* caught on to such an extent that several imitations soon appeared, with titles like *Ich und Du*, *An Alle*, *Wir Beide*, *Wir Zwei*, *Das Rendezvous* and *Adam und Eva*. On 10 March 1925, about six months after his acquittal, a twenty-one-year-old dental technician went into Bettauer's office and fired five shots at him. Bettauer died sixteen days later from the wounds. Otto Rothstock, the assassin, a very dubious character and member of the NSDAP, claimed to have wanted to save society from an “immoral parasite”. He became a popular hero overnight, and his trial deteriorated into a farce: Rothstock was held in a psychiatric institution for twenty months and then released—a crass and politically-motivated miscarriage of justice.

Die Stadt ohne Juden was by no means Bettauer's only novel with a provocative subject; in general, Bettauer dealt with issues in his fiction similar to those he addressed in his magazine *Er und Sie*: abortion, prostitution, equality of the sexes, homosexuality; in addition to this kind of sex-related issues he raised other serious social questions like child abuse, poverty and drug addiction. All of his novels of the 1920s—and he was tremendously productive—became bestsellers. Between 1921 and 1928, ten of his books were adapted for the screen; amongst them, of course, *Die Stadt ohne Juden* and, probably best remembered, *Die freudlose Gasse* (1925), with a screen-play by Willy Haas—a film in which Greta Garbo played her first major part.

The plot of the novel is easy to convey. The parliament of the small Austrian state that remained after the break-up of the Habsburg Empire at the end of World War One decides to purge Austria of Jews. This measure, carried out with the approval of the League of Na-

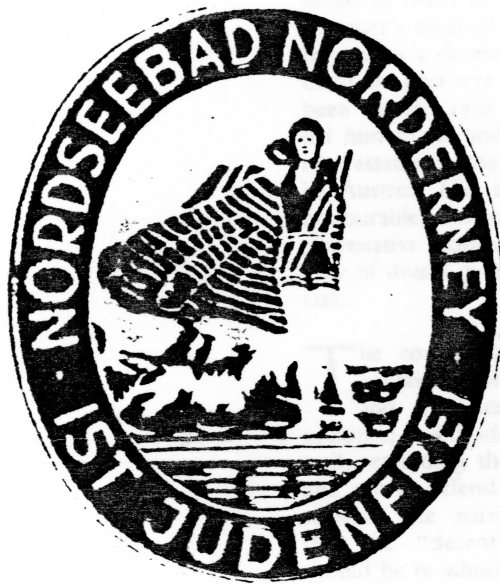
tions, is meant as a cure for all the nation's economic problems: the Jews are asked to leave the country within six months; their property and wealth, though, is to remain in the country. Austria is hit by a nationalistic euphoria; the nation finally appears united and at ease with itself. Yet, after a short period of high-spirited self-righteousness, an endless supply of cheap accommodation in the best quarters of Vienna, a local and national press without “subversive” Jewish tendencies, Austria's luck changes. The price of Christian purity is rapid economic decline, hyper-inflation and mass poverty. The country's economy, as well as its culture, fall into a sorry state. The assumption had been that all the good Christian virtues of the Austrians would produce a boom in productivity and creativity once liberated from alleged Jewish dominance; instead, complete paralysis appears the main reaction to changed circumstances. Soon enough the first voices of discontent start demanding a change of government and a repeal of the tight legislation on Jews. A young Jewish artist, posing as a French tourist to be near his Gentile fiancée, starts an anonymous campaign to bring back the Jews, and finally, with the help of the Socialist opposition and the pragmatic members of the business community, the Christian Conservative government is overthrown and the expulsion order revoked. The re-established socio-political harmony is complemented by the happy ending of the private love story; and with this unequivocally positive outlook the parable comes to quite a conciliatory conclusion.

The novel was obviously conceived as a warning that a state founded on antisemitism could not work. “Wien versumpert ohne Juden” (p. 82)—this almost untranslatable verdict of a coffee-house regular, commenting on the sudden lack of a cultivated atmosphere, elegance and urbanity, sums up the result of the expulsion of the Jews: Vienna “goes to pot without Jews”—it loses all of its former character and deteriorates into a mere village. Parks and streets are deserted, fashion houses have to close down, the theatres and operas are empty for lack of performers and audiences alike, the press and literature become utterly uninteresting; Austria has isolated itself from the international community—both current intellectual trends as well as trade and commerce pass Vienna by.

By focusing on such consequences of the expulsion of the Jews, Bettauer does not manage to dispel anti-Jewish prejudices about Jewish dominance in certain professions, like trade and industry, media and culture—on the contrary, by showing the whole collapse of these sectors he implicitly reconfirms the belief that Jews indeed were playing a dominant role. He tries to make people realize that this role should not be perceived as a threat but as mu-

tually beneficial, and that without the Jews' participation neither state nor society would be able to function properly. Thus he does not venture to overtly dismantle antisemitic theories; his basic argument is a very pragmatic one: put up with the Jews because they are needed. Such a realization of inter-dependence was meant to encourage a more sober, less irrational approach to co-existence with the Jewish community.

The means by which Bettauer tries to unmask popular antisemitism as pompous rhetoric is irony; he systematically ridicules all of the ingredients of the Christian-Austrian self-image. The argument, outlined by the Federal Chancellor Dr Schwertfeger in his parliamentary speech justifying the expulsion of the Jews, serves to illustrate the grotesqueness of the government's position:



Our people is a naive, trusting people—playful dreamers, clinging to unproductive ideals, devoted to music and quiet appreciation of nature, devout and straightforward, worthy and thoughtful. These are good, even wonderful qualities, which could blossom into a magnificent culture, a wonderful way of life, if only they were left in peace and allowed to grow.—But the Jews amongst us did not permit this tranquil development. With their uncanny sharpness of wit, with their pragmatism unaffected by tradition, with their feline sleekness, their lightning comprehension, with their various talents honed by centuries of oppression, they have overpowered us, become our masters and taken over our entire economic, spiritual and cultural lives (p. 10).

What the novel sets out to prove is that the last thing to blossom in an Austria without Jews is culture and society. Thus, what the leader of the government invokes as the true Christian-Austrian identity, a new fundament

for a reborn nation, is revealed as nothing but the reflection of a severe backwardness and of the identity crisis of a curtailed nation; and as a thoroughly inadequate principle upon which to build a state.

In his down-to-earth approach to showing the reality behind popular prejudices, Bettauer does not stop short of including time-honoured Austrian institutions like the "süßes Mädel", illustrating how a matter can appear in different lights when viewed from different perspectives. For when he ironically points to yet another very ordinary field where the absence of Jews is painfully felt, for some it must have read like an implicit reconfirmation of the popular prejudice that Jewish virility and Jewish money work hand in hand to spoil Christian maidens. The argument is in great danger of backfiring:

When the sweet girls were amongst themselves and in a confiding mood, when they exchanged stories of their erotic adventures and experiences, they told each other about the sensuality of the Jews and the diversity of their erotic tastes, which so sharply contrast with those of their good upright Christian, but at the same time ever so unamusing Aryan friends . . . The girls in the offices and shops, the sewing-shops and factories knew little about politics, rather more about real life. And they began to miss him dearly, their young Jewish man (p. 118 ff.).

Sign indicating that the Frisian bathing resort of Norderney was free of Jews

Equally ill chosen are the examples Bettauer provides to illustrate how Austria declines economically and culturally. Obviously his caricature of Austria and the Austrians was meant to be amusing; the danger, though, of such an approach is all too obvious. It is based on one fundamental misjudgement: the story could only have an amusing effect for those who did not need persuading that a fruitful and tolerant co-existence was desirable, and that no alternative was practicable. Such readers surely were able to appreciate Bettauer's exaggerated presentation of prejudices and clichés because they were able to identify his irony.

The trick by which the good outcome is eventually brought about illustrates how the core of the Austrians' fragile self-image is attacked by Bettauer in a rude and offensive manner. The last Christian Conservative Member of Parliament left in Vienna after the election caused by the campaign for the re-admission of the Jews—elected by the only group still profiting from the Jewless situation in the capital: the vintners and innkeepers—this "Viennese pillar of the Party" (p. 197) becomes a grotesque caricature. He is prevented from taking part in the all-important ballot on the "Jewish Question", in which he would have had the decisive vote to keep the Jews out of Austria, by a simple trick and the assistance of a few bottles of good claret. Such a portrayal of a hallmark of the genuine Chris-

nian Austria—and the implication that the entire antisemitic ideology he represents was but a drunken fantasy—must have had an offensive, humiliating effect on a large part of the Austrian public. And that in Bettauer's fiction one intelligent Jewish individual, motivated by his love, single-handedly manages to turn public opinion around completely and revoke an essential political development, could not have met with a favourable reception from Christian readers. For the picture painted is rather too black and white—suggesting that all non-Jewish Austrians are either cranky or ever so easily misled: the Prime Minister an inspired orator and demagogue, blinded by ideology; the Viennese deputy a foolish drunkard; the whole antisemitic movement outwitted by one man alone; and even those tolerant and liberal forces unable to act for themselves.

Satire is intrinsically unfair, it needs to exaggerate in order to bring its messages across. If Bettauer's original intention had been to contribute to a de-escalation of anti-Jewish sentiment in post-war Austria, he seems to have been carried away by a sensationalism which led him to an undifferentiated and indiscriminate assault on the whole Christian community in Austria. His intentions were doubtlessly honourable, his preference for horrendously provocative satirical effects, though, cast a shadow of doubt over the way he went about his task.

The conciliatory resolution of the novel contains a plea for better understanding and co-existence between the communities; it did address the Jews themselves as well, reminding them to behave unobtrusively and not to offend any of the rules of Gentile society. The narrator constantly emphasizes that the "decent" and "productive" Jews should be re-admitted into Austria; the doubts concerning eastern Jews in their caftans, hagglers and other "conspicuous elements", are reinforced rather than dispelled. The programme of the newly-founded Liberal Party thus reads:

The emergency measures against the Jews have to be lifted, but at the same time a prudent and conscientious government has to keep out all those elements who did not live in Vienna before the World War; unless they can prove to a workers' and citizens' court that they are willing and able to do productive, valuable work for the common good (p. 186).

This statement is a clear invective against the new immigrants from the eastern fringes of the former Habsburg Empire who poured into Vienna after the war. It reconfirms the opinion that at least some of the Jewish activities were neither "productive" nor "valuable". The expression of such sentiments strikes us today as a concession to prejudice and as a rather foul

compromise.

In spite of all the reservations expressed above, Bettauer's analysis of post-war Austria, stripped of its entire former Empire, illustrates only too well the mental state of the population, the difficulties in finding a new national consensus. The option of defining the remnant of Austria as a "German" state would have meant the surrender of all pretence of cultural and national autonomy; the alternative option, defining the small Alpine republic as "Catholic", hence antisemitic state, had no attraction for the population, not least in rural areas. Thus the type of antisemitism Bettauer portrays so pointedly can be identified as a revived religious form of antisemitic sentiment, already interwoven with the idea of racial superiority, but still not an entirely new ideology, like the one later adopted in Germany. Yet, the book reads like a prophetic prediction of events to come in Central Europe, an all too precise warning of what might happen when antisemitism becomes the *raison d'être* of an entire nation.

Bettauer captured the mentalities and attitudes of his own times quite vividly, achieving an accurate analysis of popular and popular antisemitism. Even in the details of the concrete measures the state takes, Bettauer anticipates real historical measures, for instance, the Nuremberg Race Laws. In his parliamentary speech outlining the policies of the Austrian state, Bettauer's Federal Chancellor Schwertfeger explains:

As you know, the expulsion order is not concerned with Jews and converted Jews, but also with the offspring of Jews. The children of mixed marriages count as Jewish. . . . In mature consideration the government has decided that grandchildren resulting from mixed marriages, should no longer be regarded as Jews but as Aryans (p. 16).

Thus Bettauer does not have his characters go the whole way to the Nazi definition of a Jew—the full dimensions of antisemitic attitudes in cities must have exceeded the imagination of even the most visionary of prophets. What he did not anticipate was the extent of the barbarism, the scale of the catastrophe. The expulsion from his fictitious Austria is conducted in a relatively civilized manner; the authorities give the Jews enough time to leave the country; there are compensations for the property they have to leave behind, and many other measures to ensure that this experiment is conducted according to the standards set by the international community. And on one other account Bettauer's vision falls way behind the reality of his novel, the Jews are admitted back into Austria; the Lord Mayor of Vienna welcomes the first arrival as "My dear Jew!" (p. 20). When Bettauer's vision became reality, there was nobody left to be welcomed at all.