

1849-07-29

Nordau, Max Simon

NORDAU, MAX (Simon Maximilian Suedfeld; 1849–1923), co-founder of the World Zionist Organization, philosopher, writer, orator, and physician. Born in Pest, the son of Rabbi Gabriel Suedfeld, Nordau received a traditional Jewish education and remained an observant Jew until his eighteenth year, when he became a militant naturalist and evolutionist. In 1875 he earned an M.D. degree at the University of Pest, and he settled in Paris in 1880 as a practicing physician. Nordau's career in journalism dates back to his childhood. In 1867 he joined the staff of the *Pester Lloyd*, and in time he became a correspondent for leading newspapers in the Western world, including the *Vossische Zeitung* in Berlin, the *Neue Freie Presse* in Vienna, and *La Nación* in Buenos Aires, Argentina.

Nordau achieved fame as a thinker and social critic with the publication of *Die Conventionalen Luegen der Kulturmenschheit* (1883; *The Conventional Lies of Our Civilization*, 1884). He sharply criticized "the religious lie," the corruption and oppression of monarchical and aristocratic regimes, the deceptions of political and economic establishments, and the hypocritical adherence to outworn sex mores. He set forth as an alternative what has been called his "philosophy of human solidarity." Nordau's "solidaritarianism" signifies the unity of mind and love. It insists on the intimate connection between free institutions and free inquiry in all areas of human concern. The *Lies* was translated into fifteen languages, including Chinese and Japanese. It raised a storm of controversy and was banned in Austria and Russia. It was followed by *Paradoxe der Conventionalen Luegen* (1885³; *Paradoxes*, 1896), which discussed such topics as optimism and pessimism, passion and prejudice, social pressure and the power of love, sham and genuine success. This work also went through several editions and translations.

Even more controversial was *Entartung* (1892; *Degeneration*, 1895), in which Nordau subjected major figures and trends in European art and literature to scathing denunciation. Applying Cesare Lombroso's term "degeneracy" to the works of such men as Nietzsche, Tolstoy, Wagner, Zola, Ibsen, and such phenomena as symbolism, spiritualism, egomania, mysticism, Parnassianism, and diabolism, Nordau predicted the coming of a human catastrophe of unprecedented proportions. An entire literature developed over *Degeneration*, including a rebuttal in book form by George Bernard Shaw. More than 60 years after its first publication, *Degeneration* continued to be the subject of doctoral dissertations accepted by American universities; the book was republished in New York in 1968. Three other works merit perhaps even greater attention than *Lies* and *Degeneration*. The first is *Der Sinn der Geschichte* (1909; *The Interpretation of History*, 1910), which examines man's advance from parasitism through supernaturalist illusion to knowledge and human solidarity. To Nordau, the purpose of man's history was to achieve a lessening of human suffering and to actualize "the ideal of goodness and selfless love." The second, *Biologie der Ethik* (1921; *Morals and the Evolution of Man*, 1922), is a treatise on the natural roots of ethics, the relations between the legal and the moral, and the meaning of "scientific ethics," which aims at the improvement of human life through the cultivation of the twin "solidaritarian" powers of intelligence and compassion. The third, *Der Sinn der Gesittung*; "The Essence of Civilization" (written in 1920), was published in 1932 in an unsatisfactory Spanish version. In this last, fragmentary work, Nordau advocated "the elevation of the independent local community, the free city-republic, to the general type of community" as the best means of redeeming the individual from his bondage. Nordau argued the

case of "solidaritarian socialism," which assigns to private property its proper limits without, however, abolishing it. Nordau regarded Communism as entirely unacceptable and, in its Bolshevik form, as "socialism gone mad."

In the field of belles lettres, Nordau's major works are *Der Krieg der Millionen* (1882), *Die Krankheit des Jahrhunderts* (1888; *The Malady of the Century*, 1896), *Seelenanalysen* (1892), *Das Recht zu Lieben* (1894; *The Right to Love*, 1895), *Drohnenschlacht* (1898; *The Drones Must Die*, 1899); *Doktor Kohn* (1899; *A Question of Honor*, 1907); *Morganatisch* (1904; *Morganatic*, 1904), *The Dwarf's Spectacles*, and *Other Fairy Tales* (1905), and an unpublished biblical tragedy in four acts, *Rahab* (c. 1922).

The Jewish problem was never foreign to Nordau's thoughts. His revulsion against antisemitism is reflected in his essay on Jacques Offenbach entitled "The Political Hep! Hep!" included in *Aus dem wahren Milliardenlande* (an abridged translation entitled *Paris Sketches* appeared in 1884). In the *Lies* Nordau condemned hatred of the Jew as a symptom of the malady of the age. Nordau's upbringing, his piety toward his Orthodox parents (his observant mother lived in his house in Paris until her death in 1900), and the references to Jewish destiny in his general writings all show that the frequent charge of Nordau's alienation from Judaism in his pre-Zionist period is exaggerated.

Nordau met Theodor *Herzl in 1892. As Paris correspondents for German-language newspapers, they witnessed the manifestations of antisemitism in the French capital. In November 1895 Herzl discussed his idea of a Jewish state with Nordau, after Emil Schiff, a friend concerned over his mental condition, advised him to see a psychiatrist. Far from declaring Herzl insane, however, Nordau concluded the consultation by saying: "If you are insane, we are insane together. Count on me!" To Nordau, the idea of a Jewish state appeared as a most welcome means for the implementation of his "solidaritarian" philosophy by Jews in the land of the Jews.

At the First Zionist Congress (1897), Nordau drafted the famed Basle *Program. He served as vice president of the First to the Sixth Zionist Congresses and as president of the Seventh to the Tenth Congresses. In his famed addresses to these Congresses he surveyed the Jewish situation in the world and described and analyzed the physical and material plight of the Jews in Eastern Europe, as well as the moral plight of the emancipated and assimilated Western Jew, who had lost his contact with his fellow-Jews and faced political and social antisemitism, which excluded him from non-Jewish society. These addresses, together with his other Zionist pronouncements, became classics of Zionist literature. At the Congress of 1911 he warned that if current political trends persisted, six million Jews, i.e., those living in the Russian Empire and other East-European countries, were doomed to perish. He was convinced that only political Zionism could forestall the tragedy. Nordau passionately defended Herzl's political Zionism against *Aḥad Ha-Am's cultural Zionism, which he regarded as being pre-Zionist. He believed that his opponent's idea of a "spiritual center" would only obstruct the Zionist effort to rescue large masses of Jews in Erez Israel. Citing a statement of the "cultural Zionists" – that "we are not concerned with Jews but with Judaism" – Nordau told the Sixth Zionist Congress, "'Judaism without Jews' – we know you, beautiful mask! Go with this phrase and join a meeting of spiritualists!"

In loyalty to Herzl, Nordau supported the *Uganda Scheme and coined the phrase *Nachtasy!* (night asylum) to stress the temporary nature of the proposal. He himself was convinced that the idea of a charter for Uganda was a grave error, because Jews who

could not go to Palestine would prefer America or Australia. An assassination attempt in Paris, by a young anti-Ugandist, Chaim Selig Luban, who held Nordau responsible for the scheme, failed. Nordau himself defended Luban before the investigating judge.

In his last conversation with Nissan *Katzenelson, Herzl stated that Nordau should be his successor as president of the Zionist Organization, adding, "I can assure you that he will lead the cause at least as well as I did or better." Nordau, however, declined to serve as president when he was offered the post after Herzl's death; he chose to remain outside the organizational hierarchy. His opposition to the cultural Zionism espoused by Aḥad Ha-Am was only matched by his opposition to the practical Zionists led by Chaim *Weizmann. Nordau believed in political action rather than in small-scale, gradual agricultural colonization.

Nordau spent World War I in exile and in relative isolation in neutral Spain. He favored Vladimir *Jabotinsky's idea of a *Jewish Legion, but felt that the Zionist movement should remain neutral, since Zionists lived in countries on both sides of the international conflict. In 1920 he delivered his celebrated Albert Hall address in London, in which he told British statesmen and Zionist leaders that if the *Balfour Declaration of 1917 was to have meaning, that meaning must be made manifest by the swift creation of a Jewish majority and ensuing Jewish political independence in Palestine. In 1919, when a wave of pogroms swept the Ukraine and other parts of Russia, he began advocating the speedy transfer of 600,000 Jews to Palestine within a matter of months. The Zionist leadership rejected his proposal as unrealistic, and in 1921 Nordau retired from active Zionist work. He died in Paris in 1923 and was interred in the Old Cemetery in Tel Aviv in 1926. In the late 1930s, Jabotinsky was to name his own program for the speedy creation of a Jewish majority in Palestine by the mass transfer of Jews from the Diaspora "The Max Nordau Plan."

[Meir Ben-Horin]

His daughter MAXA NORDAU (1897–1991) was a French painter. She was born in Paris, where she studied under Jules Adler. In 1937 she painted mural decorations in the Palestine pavilion at the Paris international exhibition, and during World War II lived in the U.S. A conservative representational artist, her subjects included Israeli landscapes, urban scenes, workyards, nudes, and portraits. Among her portraits are *Max Nordau*, *The Young David*, and *The Pioneers*. She illustrated books, including *Contes pour Maxa* by her father, and collaborated with her mother in writing *Max Nordau, a Biography* (1943).

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