

## THE ARTIST AND GERMANY

by

IMRE HOFBAUER

As a youth, soon after the first world war, I made up my mind to leave the small Hungarian town where I was born and go to Germany, partly to complete my education there, and partly because in those parts Germany was deeply admired as a land of learning, literature, industry and civic virtue.

Before my departure one fine autumn day, our family doctor invited me to accompany him on his rounds in the poorest quarter of the town, a former army camp. Despite the bright weather and the mellow charm of the surrounding plain, the wooden huts, covered with black roofing felt, made a scene of bleak desolation. Squalor and overcrowding in the huts were appalling. Disease was rampant. The inhabitants were listless and obviously underfed. Dirty children with impetigo on their heads and faces, stood about everywhere, a sickening presage of the future. To some extent, this was the aftermath of war. But the doctor had experienced similar conditions in the town for half a century and his devoted service to the poor had brought them but little alleviation.

On our return to his house, the doctor took me to his surgery which was lined with books from floor to ceiling and from behind some old folios he produced two volumes of the drawings of G. Grosz.

That was the first time I saw the work of this artist.

Sick with indignation as I was, those drawings were a revelation to me, just as they must have been to others who had grown up in the liberal era which had then ended. They gave me a clue to the causes of widespread misery and to the nature of the self-interest that lay behind it. When I had already been in Germany for some time the drawings of Grosz were to open my eyes to the true connection between the assassination of the German Socialist statesman, Erzberger, and the fact that a leading Hungarian politician, who afterwards became Prime Minister, was affording shelter to the assassin.

Life in Germany or rather, the pace of life, took my breath away. The echoes of the Revolution were still there, with the rat-tat of a machine gun in the night and wildly hooting police cars. But the scene was dominated by the racketeer who seemed to wear a halo of gin-vapour and Havana cigar smoke. Money changed hands by the bushel and was available to finance almost any wildcat scheme. One could scarcely imagine that somewhere there were factories with workers toiling in them.

On the one hand, there was a mad pursuit of money and pleasure, carried on with the traditional German '*Tüchtigkeit*', though joined in by foreigners from all over Europe. In the cafes and night-clubs, in an atmosphere of alcohol, tobacco smoke and cocaine, the racketeers were floating new companies with people they had never seen before. Yet most of these enterprises prospered almost automatically under the inflationary impetus, and fortunes were made overnight, not only by the mushroom firms, but also by the old established industrial and trading concerns and the banks.

At the same time, jazz was an important factor in the life of Germany,—jazz and debauchery. There was a crazy overlapping of moral standards as between the two eras. An ambiguous remark might bar access to the home

of a family, and externals of respectability, such as those four-inch high stiff collars, were retained; yet the daughters of the same family took their full share in the post-war night life, including the carnivals which were nothing but an opportunity for mass love-making. Pregnancy in an unmarried girl was taken for granted. A commercial traveller from Denmark or a student from the Balkans arriving in the evening might easily wake up the following morning in a strange four-poster bed with the mistress of a patrician home lying beside him. Homosexuality was rampant.

Yet it could happen at a night-club that a drunken customer, calling for a piece by Mozart, would cause a sudden hush. All present, including the manager, the waiters, and even the 'champagne cuties' sitting on the knees of their respective clients, would keep still, as if participating in a solemn rite. Many people would have tears in their eyes. An odd sentimental scene, yet I saw nothing incongruous in it. They worshipped the spirit and its creation. The Germany of Goethe, Bach and Heine was not yet dead.

The men in the Universities, laboratories and research centres, worked as frantically as others played, organising into systems everything that great minds in Germany and elsewhere had conceived.

It took some time before it began to dawn upon my young mind that all this, the pursuit of money and pleasure, side by side with the pursuit of knowledge, bore an escapist character. The Germans were sorely perplexed and afraid of themselves.

What of the middle and working classes? Their dividends, pensions, salaries and wages had depreciated to nothing. Their sons, many of them with University degrees, were either unemployed or went to work as crossing sweepers or miners. The homes of these families were for sale to buy bread—and so were their daughters. Everything was for sale. The business men, often of a jovial disposition, seasoned the negotiations for a deal with the planning of Fehme murders—the assassination of political opponents. There was nothing clandestine in these methods; they were an accepted means of getting rid of their enemies. But there was another facet of this scheming: The preparation for war.

That this trend was general, is evidenced by an experience of my own. One day, in Berlin, I asked a man in the street to direct me to a certain address. He was a typical German, well set up, and with the traditional duelling scars on his face. He took a great deal of trouble to ascertain the route but finally hailed a taxi and drove me to the obscure alley which I sought. I did not know how to thank him for his great kindness and told him so. Whereupon he said:

“Never mind, my friend; you'll help us to fight the French”.

On the whole, it appeared that the Germans suffered from all kinds of neuroses, which caused them to cling to fixed ideas as the final argument. For the first time they had freedom. But they did not know how to be free. They did not know what to do with their new Constitution. They were like freed slaves, all at sea because they were free. Their civilization had been shattered. Their literature, architecture, art, methods of manufacture, monetary system, in fact, their whole being was shaken to the core and transformed in consequence of the upheaval of war. I thought I shared the prevailing belief that a fresh outlook, a new Germany was emerging from the chaos.

All this comes to life in the work of George Grosz.

He also succeeded as no other artist before in portraying the individual German in any walk of life, as the product of language, tradition, climate, etc. His work reflects German aggressiveness, German worship of discipline, and the notorious German lack of flexibility. Grosz's vision penetrated to the very core of the German character, and brought it to the surface with the force of prophetic utterance. Unlike many other social satirists (as Grosz chooses to call himself), he did not approach it academically but went fearlessly where others were groping in the dark.

The professional critic might link Grosz with Leonardo or Goya. But that is only a matter for idle musings. Reproductions have carried the art of the Cinquecento and subsequent periods to the common people and Grosz cannot have escaped its influence. On the other hand, I think Grosz has affinities with his great contemporary, Picasso. Is that due to the 'genius of the age?' To both of them, generations of artists owe a debt of gratitude. The influence of Grosz might have been greater than it has been. Progressive people all over the Continent looked up to him. But he was proscribed in several Central European countries between the wars, and students had to smuggle his work across frontiers. The experience of a colleague of mine, a student at Prague University, who was imprisoned in one of those countries for trying to take some volumes of Grosz's work across the frontier, was no isolated case. Indeed, Grosz's influence might have been more immediate than that of Werfel and Kafka, his great literary contemporaries.

Grosz's brush and pen present with living force the misery of the masses in the welter of militarism, rapacious big business, the fusion of reactionary forces, the side-tracking of reason by the German myth and ancestor worship. There is a Promethean spark in every stroke.

Though Grosz left Germany before the advent of Nazism, he had his share of persecution. He was repeatedly hauled before the courts for blasphemy because he drew Jesus on the Cross wearing a gasmask and army boots. In 1932 he emigrated to the United States, where he is today regarded as one of the foremost artists. The social satirist in him has gradually given way to the painter.

But many of us are hoping that Grosz, the visionary and prophet will yet return.