

# The Asconan Idea in Politics

by Martin Green

In the field of politics, the Asconan idea proved to be, in one sense of the phrase, a precursor of Nazism. Life philosophy blazed a path that the ideologists of National Socialism followed; and *Die Tat* readers who had assented to the former found it easy to assent to the latter. And because the Nazi regime, with its appalling accompaniments—the camps, the Holocaust, the Second World War—is the greatest historical development in our memory, everything that can be called its precursor is rightly recoiled from.

In German studies, therefore, whether practiced in Germany or elsewhere, there is a strong polarization of feeling around a subject like Ascona. *Either* one must prove that it had nothing to do with Nazism, *or* one must prove that it has no lien on one's own sympathies. And beyond the reach of academic studies, this pressure is felt in current political choices. The most striking development in German politics of recent years, the growth of the Green party, has been overshadowed, as we have seen, by anxiety about the resemblance between its ideology and that of National Socialism, since both express the fear of industrialization and "scientization" and big-city sophistication, and both support the drive to protect the environment, the little people, and all native and regional traditions.

From an intellectual point of view, and therefore from many other points of view, this intensity of anxiety, this rigidity of classification, is unfortunate. It prevents people from thinking freely, and from expressing as much as they do think, about important topics. Throughout this book, and particularly in this chapter, it has been my purpose to resist that polarization, and to arouse more sympathy, more awareness, more justice, for what I call the Asconan idea. But I must begin by taking seriously the causes for that anxiety.

The readers of Diederichs' journal *Die Tat* were the kind of people who, at least at first, listened sympathetically to Nazi spokesmen. They were the intellectual elite among that audience. In his introduction to *The Crisis of German Ideology*, George Mosse tells us that the Nazis found their greatest support among educated and responsible people, the *Bildungsbürgertum*; and that their ideas had been widely current before 1914. [1] He says that nature mysticism, sun worship, theosophy, and other ideas were allied to politics after 1870, because Germans wanted a spiritual unity to correspond with their new political unity. [2] The Germans, they were told, had lived originally in dark and misty forests, and had aspired to the sun; hence they are sun worshipers, or "sunlightmen," *Lichtmenschen*. [3] And just as the German mind derives from their forest landscape, the Jewish mind derives from the desert; the Jews flee the sun, preferring to be indoors, and their minds are shallow and arid, like their soil; they are the opposite of the Germans. [4]

Politically and culturally this was a conservative set of ideas, which flattered the landowners, and the peasants, and the artisans, rather than the owners of department stores and modern factories and the bureaucrats. It therefore served the purposes of the *Bildungsbürgertum*, always resistant to industrialization and bureaucratization. And Mosse tells us that these ideas had penetrated the educational system before 1918, not to mention more specifically culture-class movements, like the *Jugendbewegung*.

Mosse says Diederichs gave respectability to these *völkisch* ideas by calling them the New Romanticism (the phrase seems to have been given to Diederichs by Hermann Hesse, the

Ascona novelist). [5] He nevertheless declares Diederichs un-Nazi, because he *was* an aristocrat (of the mind) and was *not* a racist; but he aligns Diederichs with the much more extreme ideologists, Paul de Lagarde and Julius Langbehn, who are always acknowledged as sinister heralds of Nazism. (They are also principal subjects of Fritz Stern's *The Political of Cultural Despair*.) [6]

There are certainly connections between these men and those we are studying. Lagarde said many of the same things as Ascona did: that modern German culture enfeebled its men; that Germans should retreat to their mountain peaks and become ancestors again, not heirs; that it was better to split wood than to continue civilization. [7] And Diederichs declared that Lagarde's books were the finest he ever published. [8] Langbehn, who was a more popular, less scholarly, author than Lagarde, had felt on his travels that Catholic peoples (such as one met in Ascona) exuded a joy of life and a childlike goodness that had long before disappeared from Protestant progressive culture. [9] He attacked science, especially scientific medicine, and big cities, and scholars; men like Mommsen and Erasmus, he said, had sacrificed soul to mind, and so were (rightly) forgotten by the people. His heroes were Rembrandt and Shakespeare, men of self-contradictions who reconciled opposite tensions within powerful personalities. These ideas indicate the main traits of *völkisch* thinking.

In 1974 Fritz Stern wrote a new preface to a new edition of his book which bears on the general significance of our topic. Stern drew attention to "the recurrence of cultural despair" and to the revival of *völkisch* ideas in the America (and the Europe) of the late 1960s. He called men like Lagarde and Langbehn "cultural Luddites" who had led German intellectuals into a shameful retreat from liberal values, and into an even more shameful attack upon Jews, democracy, and socialism. [10] He acknowledged their claim to have Nietzsche and Dostoevsky in their roster of ancestors, but insisted that what they called liberalism—the object of all their attacks—was in fact the culmination of the West's secular moral tradition. [11] He called liberalism our *only* intellectual tradition, which it was suicidal to subvert.

Indeed, no politically sensitive reader can be anything but uneasy in the company of Diederichs (and Laban and Brandenburg). In *Entrepreneurs of Ideology: Neoconservative Publishers in Germany 1890-1933*, Gary Stark shows Diederichs' connections with other, and definitely sinister, forces in German publishing, such as Julius Friedrich Lehmann (1864-1935) and the Hanseatic Publishing Institute, set up in 1920. [12] The former, for instance, assumed that Germany's problems stemmed from the foreign elements in its population, notably its Jews, and that racial biology (i.e., the practice of eugenics) was the solution to those problems. Now there were many differences between those enterprises and Diederichs' journal, and his was intellectually and morally superior. (He never even belonged to their union of *völkisch* publishers.) But they were cultural allies, all engaged on the same side of a cultural battle. Their common enemy, in their professional field, was the left-wing press empires of Ullstein and of Mosse, which were in fact controlled by Jews.

Reading *Die Tat*, therefore, one feels oneself uncomfortably close to the precursors of Nazism. For instance, this was a battle primarily of taste and symbol, and one of the symbols important to both the Nazis and the life philosophers was the swastika. This was discussed in *Die Tat* in 1918 (it had been promoted earlier in Schwabing by Alfred Schuler, Klages's friend and teacher). The essay in *Die Tat* is by Ilse Alma Drews; it is four pages long and it straightforwardly recommends the swastika in preference to the cross. [13]

Drews said the swastika was suddenly to be seen everywhere, especially as the sign of *Deutsche Verbänden* and religious communities. She defined it as an Aryan symbol, to be

found in India, but not in China and Japan, and as the sign of a sun religion, worshiping Baal or Odin. (Diederichs had the sun on his Serakreis banners.) It formed a natural opposite to the cross of Christ, expressing triumph not defeat, action not suffering. (Schuler used to call the cross a castrated swastika.) "As the Christians joyfully gather round their cross symbol, so should all of us too, who confess the new religion, meet each other under the common sign of the swastika." [14] Such a community would be inspired, strong in faith and glad in deed. "The swastika can, like no other sign, warn and arouse us, light the holy flame in us, so that we become joyful sacrifices to the highest . . . a victory sign of the new, inner-world God." [15]

The swastika could not, at that time, have the meaning it came to have for us. But it was already an antitype to Christianity, symbolically. And such coincidence of symbols was not an accident, but the sign of a considerable continuity of ideas that connected *Die Tat* with Nazism. The Nazi newspaper the *Völkischer Beobachter* began in 1928 to publish a column of "culture criticism" called "News from the Asphalt Desert," which described and denounced life in the metropolis, that melting pot of all evil, characterized by prostitution, bars, sickness, Marxists, Jews, strippers, modern art, and Negro jazz. The way to deal with it was to repatriate the urban masses, back to their native villages and farm work. [16] This was also Diederichs' solution to the problems of the big city, and we have heard similar prescriptions from Laban.

But there were differences. The Nazi cultural analysis quickly grew vulgarly scurrilous and racist, as *Die Tat* never was. In 1926, the Nazi writer Paul SchulzeNaumburg said that artists always paint self-portraits, whatever their ostensible subjects, and so one can take Expressionist and Cubist art to be expressions of the artists' own mental and physical sickness—their degeneracy. [17] The party put on exhibitions of degenerate art, including items from Prinzhorn's collection. Reversing the meaning of Prinzhorn's work, which was that the mentally sick remain poignantly alive and recognizably human, the Nazis undertook to show that modern artists were just mentally sick. This shows the connection but also the distance between them and Ascona.

Nevertheless, Alfred Rosenberg, the Nazi party's main spokesman on cultural matters, had a standard speech on the subject entitled "Today's Cultural Crisis," which was a debased version of Diederichs' ideas. Rosenberg described contemporary Germany as fragmented, and called for the cult of a national myth to reunify it. [18] The international culture of modernism was corrupt, he said, and Germans of all sorts must unite to defend their homes against all its manifestations, against pornography but also against pacifism, for both were "degenerate." His enemies, or victims, included many prominent artists. He attacked Heinrich Mann as a pacifist, and Max Reinhardt as a Jew; his ally, Alfred Heuss, attacked Ernst Krenek and Kurt Weill for their stage revues, such as *Johnny Spielt Auf*, which had a Negro actor in the lead and used jazz music.

And the great difference was the use of force, which Diederichs and the other Asconans never contemplated. As soon as they came to power in 1933, the Nazis shut down the Bauhaus in Berlin, burned books in public, and drove Kurt Jooss' dance company into exile. Klee and Kandinsky, Gropius and Mendelssohn, were forced to leave Germany. Writers like Karl Kraus and Walter Hasenclever were publicly denounced, as were performers like Paul Robeson and Josephine Baker. It was this atmosphere of imminent violence to which Laban and Wigman, deciding to stay in Germany, had to close their eyes and to disguise as "tragedy." Can we trace the *roots* of this violence in Ascona? It would be easy to rest my case on the *fact* that Ascona was never a home to violence, never, for instance, the forcing ground

for anti-Semitism that Munich and Vienna were. But were the symbolic gestures of the Asconans, if translated into the terms of politics, pointing in this direction?

Ulrich Linse points to the connection between Gräser and Louis Haeusser, the craziest of the "inflation saints," who did preach a need for violence. Haeusser may indeed have done as much as any single individual to frighten the German middle class into the arms of the Nazis, because the Nazis promised to restore the order he threatened. Moreover, some of the inflation saints (not those who had lived in Ascona) were sinister *portents* of Nazism. Some of them, such as Haeusser, again, preached a religious need to develop the will and to melt individuals down into a corporate entity. He, then, can be seen as a sinister *caricature* of Gräser, in his fusion of the religious with the political, that is, of the anti-Christian with the antiparliamentary.

There is nevertheless a great difference between the two, which is signaled by the word *chaste* in both its literal and its figurative meanings. Haeusser was grossly promiscuous: he kept in effect a private harem, and allowed himself every sexual freedom; whereas Gräser was the opposite. And when they are measured against each other in terms of public self-display and the embrace of ideas, the difference is again striking. Despite its rhetoric of geniality, Gräser's was a quiet and stern call: He called people to asceticism and quietism. Indeed, he was not a political figure at all. And despite occasional fiery phrases, his was a mild call, so mild indeed as to be ineffective.

Indeed, none of the Asconans, as far we know, joined the Nazi party. There *were* transitions to National Socialism, from Surrealism or Expressionism. Hanns Johst, Gottfried Benn, and Arnolt Bronnen were writers who joined the Nazi party. But they are not to be associated with Ascona, even in their artistic tendencies; for instance, Benn's Symbolist aestheticism was quite un-Asconan.

Perhaps we must conclude simply that Diederichs and Laban and Brandenburg contributed to the pre-Nazi atmosphere, but not to Nazism itself. That distinction is substantial, though so of course is the connection. For example, the culture of body movement, of group bodies as well as individual ones, so dear to Ascona, was something the Nazi regime actively promoted. It served their political purposes. By 1922 Rudolf Bode had written, "The larger the mass in movement, the stronger the effect of irrational impulses, the more powerfully the soul's innermost currents begin to roar. . . . The instinctive forces [in the individual] . . . are reinforced under the influence of comrades striving for the same good." [19] Clearly the Nazis made use of this idea in their mass ceremonies.

Moreover, Laban himself thought in racial categories. In August 1930, before the Nazis came to power, he used racist language. Writing in *Der Tanz* in August of that year, he says that the currently fashionable dances belonged to other races, but the white race was beginning to take account of the dance-*Einstellung* (attitude) proper to it. [20] And writing in 1935, about Vienna in 1929, he says he had had the feeling that everyone there was uprooted, and were so many dying branches on a huge tree. They had lost faith in their racial destiny. "People were un-German, and would have liked to be different." [21] Here in effect he is justifying the *Anschluss* that Hitler forced upon Austria, in the name of German nationalism. And apropos of his travels in America, he says that Negroes cannot invent dances; what we associate with them are only degenerate versions of white dances. Thus dance becomes for him a cultural criterion that marks the inferiority of blacks. He even made racist contrasts between the black races and the American Indians; black dancing always moves toward frenzy, whereas Indian dancing never does. [22]

Hand in hand with these ideas went a new enthusiasm for Wagner, who was being promoted by the regime as the great German composer. In the same book, Laban says he only overcame his repugnance for that degenerate form, the theater, by means of his work at Bayreuth, by doing the choreography for Wagner productions. And in *Deutsche Tanzfestspiele* he says, "I always repeat, the greatest German dramatist has shown us dancers what we have to do." [23]

He says he had found a Wagner manuscript that justified his innovations in the staging of dance scenes in the music dramas, and that Siegfried Wagner had seen in Laban's work the true continuation of his father's. [24] In this book, Laban thanked the Reichskulturkammer for giving Germany a *Tanzbühne*, and these references to Wagner (more humbly flattering than we find in Laban elsewhere, in reference to no matter whom) are surely to be taken as tokens of loyalty to official Nazi taste. He says in his autobiography, to explain his new enthusiasm, that he had always admired the master's great art, but he had hitherto been repelled by the hangers-on. [25]

In *Deutsche Tanzfestspiele* he put a heavy stress on the German nature of Expressionist dance. "Germany is the land in which this ideal of our time took first and deepest root." [26] Everywhere else on earth it is called German dance. And Wigman's essay in the same volume is equally nationalist and scornful of international sophistication and jazz. German dance, she says, took stock of itself around 1900; that was when it found "its way back to the original sources of power, on which all true art in all ages has fed and will feed." [27] In such a scheme of ideas, the Asconan enthusiasm led straight to Nuremberg.

But if some of the ideas of Ascona are recognizable, even in distorted mirror-image caricature, in the ideology of Nazism and pre-Nazism and so must be tarred with the same brush—for such is the rough justice in which the historical consciousness deals—nevertheless, other ideas of Ascona are recognizable in another, very different political movement. This movement is much more remote from Ascona, geographically, historically, and culturally; and to claim a connection between the two is paradoxical, but it is also perfectly valid. The movement I am thinking of is Gandhism, and the connection is one perfectly orthodox in the history of ideas: Gandhi read the same books as the pioneers of Monte Verita, was inspired by the same heroes, and formulated the same ideas at the same moment of world history.

When Gandhi was a law student in London in 1888 to 1891, he was converted to vegetarianism by the same arguments that converted Ida Hofmann and Henri Oedenkoven. He had of course *practiced* vegetarianism before, in India, perforce; but only in London did he come to believe in it. Vegetarianism came to him, moreover, in the company of the same ideas as it came to the people of Monte Verita. It came, for instance, with theosophy. Gandhi knew the people in London whom German theosophists went over to meet. It came with nature cure, and Tolstoyism, and reformed dress, all in the mood of a strong reaction against the philistine civilization of the West. Gandhi looked at the Eiffel Tower in 1890 with the eyes of Tolstoy, and with some of the same feelings Oedenkoven had when he looked at the Paris Exposition of 1900.

Gandhi did not embrace all these ideas during his three-year period in London. Perhaps he did not even hear about some of them. In any case, much of his energy was then engaged in the opposite enterprise, of admiring the West and learning from it; it was not his by inheritance, as it was, say, Oedenkoven's, and he had much to do to assimilate it. Only after a brief return to India, and gradually during his twenty-one-year stay in South Africa (1893-1914), did he

buy the whole reform and resistance package. This twenty-one-year period of his life almost exactly parallels our period in Ascona, from 1900 to 1920.

But even in that first stay in London, we find him aware of Tolstoy and Edward Carpenter, the two great prophets of the simple life, both well known on Monte Verita. We find him fascinated by his eccentric compatriot Hemchandra, who wandered the world in his loincloth, like the Asconan, Salomonson, both of them half-indifferent to the scandal they caused, half-gleeful about it. (Such comic figures are an important part of the folklore of movements like Gandhism or Asconism.)

Above all, perhaps, the closeness of the parallel is clearest in the paradoxical fact that one of the ideas that came to Gandhi along with vegetarianism was Hinduism. Gandhi was in fact introduced to Hinduism in London in much the same way and at much the same time as the Asconans were introduced to it. It was two English theosophists who, asking Gandhi for help in their studies of the *Bhagavad Gita*, provided the occasion for his first reading of that poem, in the English translation by Sir Edwin Arnold. Gandhi knew Hinduism from inside, but he approached it in London philosophically from the West and in translation, and in the company of Western reform-thinking.

Perhaps the most important component of that reform package, from several points of view, was nature cure. Gandhi read Dr. Kuhne and Dr. Just, and followed their prescriptions, not only in diet and cooking (he seems to have used recipes from their books, for example, to make bread from home-ground flour) but also in the matter of mud plasters and cold baths, and above all in his refusal of drugs and surgery. The huts he designed for his Sevagram ashram were very like the light and air huts of Monte Verita; the cure Hesse and Dalcroze got at Monte Verita they could have got at Tolstoy Farm. Gandhi experimented in health matters, boldly and ceaselessly, on himself and his wife and children, and on his friends. He weaned them from both doctors and the luxurious living that, he believed, made doctors necessary. He tells many tales in his books (for instance, of how he saved his son, Manilal's life, breaking his fever by wrapping him in a wet sheet) for which there are parallels in nature cure books.

Moreover, the significance of this experimentation is hard to overestimate. First of all, this was for him, as it was for the Asconans, a mild but implacable, a Gandhian, rebellion against Western culture. The form of authority that he defied was that most sacred in Western culture—scientific medicine. After freeing himself from that servitude (he felt reliance on doctors to be servitude), it was easy for him to defy Western legal tradition, political realism, the self-confidence of Christianity, and many other things. His manifesto, *Hind Swaraj*, of 1910 is as much a defiance of Western culture of that kind—Western culture in its imperialist phase, gorged and congealed—as it is a piece of political nationalism. *Hind Swaraj* was, unknowingly, Ascona's manifesto, and should have been required reading at Monte Verita. (Tolstoy, who read it with enthusiasm in the last months before his death, would have told them so.)

But second, and even more important, Gandhi made himself a new man by means of nature cure. He was the man, of all those millions of patients, for whom it worked, on whom it had the magical effects the books promised. He built himself a new body; he who had been feeble and enervated, prone to headaches and dizziness, a slave to his palate, became hardy and vigorous and capable of working eighteen to twenty hours a day. In the last years before his assassination, he declared his intention of living to be a hundred and twenty-five years old. He also built himself a new personality; he who had been unable to speak in public became a

magnetic speaker, a leader, a guru, a decider of others' destinies, a man of national power. And he did all this, he felt, by means of the disciplines of nature cure.

He did it far away from Ascona, geographically and culturally. But what he saw in South Africa was perhaps not so different. He saw in Natal another Eden, an untouched park land, the polar opposite to the crowded cities and the corrupt civilization of England and to that of India. South Africa was where Indians were simply Indians, and were not separated from each other by caste laws or religious affiliations. It was where Gandhi could define himself anew, unconstrained by others' expectations and obligations. It was where he could experiment with life—and he did experiment, as much as the people of Ascona and in much the same ways.

Of course he chose his part of South Africa, and rejected the other parts. His Ascona, or at least his Monte Verita, was Tolstoy Farm. Gandhi lived for several years after 1904 in Johannesburg, which in those years soon after the gold rush was a city like San Francisco a generation before. He and his friends set up what they called Tolstoy Farm some distance away as a place of refuge for the families of the men who were sacrificing their homes and jobs to go to jail as *satyagrahis*. Tolstoy Farm was a Robinson Crusoe venture, where they built or made everything for themselves and created their own culture—their own school, religious services, diet, sleeping arrangements. Gandhi felt himself transformed, and wanted to devote the rest of his life to manual labor, which he had never engaged in before. He proposed to change his name as a way to repudiate his family heritage (his family had been administrators, advisers to a prince, and that now seemed to him a form of robbery and oppression). Thus Tolstoy Farm stood in a severer relation to Johannesburg than Carmel's relation to San Francisco, and even than Ascona's relation to Munich. Gandhi's was the most total and strenuous rebellion. And it was the most triumphant. Looking back on the experience, Gandhi often said it was his time of greatest faith, and that he often prayed to have so much faith restored to him. He meant that he then had the courage to go in defiance of tradition and even of reason, for instance, treating people with serious diseases by the means of nature cure, something he later dared not attempt. Faith in himself and faith in God were closely related in Gandhi, and he acquired that faith during what one might call his Ascona period.

Finally, an important feature of Gandhi's politics was the exaltation of woman to equality with men, and even superiority. He often declared himself more at ease when his principal allies in an action were women and not men. He in fact aspired to a motherly relation to his disciples, felt himself to be womanly; and the claim was supported by women who knew him. He was not, of course, an erotic feminist, like so many of the men who came to Ascona, but his politics were a fulfillment of some of the feminist aspirations of Ida Hofmann and the people of Monte Verita.

There are also important differences between Gandhi and the Asconans. He was not a life philosopher; he believed in a transcendent God. And more crucial in terms of his temperament, he was so far from being a prophet of eros that he was one of the great ascetics, and refused to find any trace of divinity in sexual eros. Moreover, and most crucial in terms of his reputation, he was gifted in matters of politics: an organizer, a leader, a strategist, a compromiser, a draftsman of resolutions. None of the Asconans had those gifts, and generally speaking there seems to be a temperamental incompatibility between the two life forms. It was because of his extraordinary double endowment that Gandhi was able to lead the Asconan idea out of Ascona and give it political reality, on a national and indeed international scale.

To some degree there was a chronological split between what I have called his Asconan period and his career on the world historical stage. He was not an international celebrity while he was on Tolstoy Farm, and once he had become one he did not get back to the farm. But much more striking is the degree to which he was able to combine the two. Again and again, in India, he retired from politics and devoted himself to his ashram. His ashrams were versions of Tolstoy Farm; they were not political organizations, and though someone like Nehru was often in them, he was never of them. The ashrams were places of life-experiment, in diet, in spinning, in spirituality; and they were also, like Ascona, places of refuge for the troubled, the crazy, the misfits. But perhaps the most striking testimony on the extent to which Gandhi remained true to his origins is that when he was released from prison in 1944, at the age of seventy-five, he set up a nature cure sanitarium, and devoted himself again to all those matters he had studied in 1910. Even when he went on his mission of mercy to Noakhali in 1947, he took as his message the healing powers of the sun, the water, the air, the soil. He was still a nature cure doctor, even as the mahatma and the father of free India.

Of the Asconans we have discussed, Gusto Gräser, most resembles Gandhi. This is so primarily because both dedicated their major energies to peace, to nonviolent action. Gandhi persuaded other people to take such action; Gräser did not. But Gandhi always said that a true *satyagrahi* acts alone, and that his action takes effect whether or not it is acclaimed or reported. *Satyagraha* could be an individual action. Nonviolence makes it possible "for a single individual to defy the whole weight of an unjust empire, to save his honor, his soul, and lay the foundation for that empire's fall or its regeneration." [28] I think Gandhi would say that Gräser saved his honor and laid the foundation for the German Empire's fall.

Gandhi spoke of how he represented all those who fasted or protested in silence, all those the world did not hear about, so he represented Gräser, too. The two men's mode of action was, from an ordinary point of view, passive; they suffered others' violence; notably they allowed themselves to be put into prison, over and over again. And they refused to hate, or to let others hate, their jailers. Gräser's poem asking for a pass, during the war, has many parallels in Gandhi's friendly and humorous letters to his British jailers or judges.

One important difference between them in ideology is that Gräser declared himself to be not an ascetic. In fact, as I have tried to show, he embraced what he called need (lack, poverty, severity) as completely as most ascetic saints, as all but the self-torturers. That he denied asceticism was important, because it was part of Gräser's life philosophy and anti-Christianism, something we cannot imagine in Gandhi. Gandhi valued suffering as suffering, though he was not sentimental or melancholic. But in this aspect, Gandhi is to be assimilated to someone else I have connected to Ascona through Otto Gross—Franz Kafka.

Hartmut Binder says that Kafka felt his whole circle to be marked by sexual aggression, sexual problems, and failure in marriage. [29] He notes his parents' sexual activity with disgust in his diary; his father "lies next to my mother, and if he rubs against her, close-related flesh must ease itself." And he couldn't stand to hear from his sisters of their husbands' uxoriousness. What he heard from Gross was the need to exorcise every hint of possession and power from sex; but he was inclined to think, like Gandhi, that that could not be done, that only perfect chastity could save one from the taint. Like Gandhi, he associated sexuality with eating, and was easily disgusted by both. [30]

Although Kafka's field of activity was art, nor morality, he surely makes us feel, both by the process of his writing and by his product, that his was a passionate commitment to purity comparable with Gandhi's. And the two men's images constantly interact in our minds. To

take just one example, Kafka's story "The Hunger Artist" is about a man who starves on display in a circus; he is someone who *chooses* suffering for dubious reasons (the figure clearly represents Kafka himself), and whose suffering is yet deeply moving to the reader, and indeed, though impurely, to the circus-goers.

On Gandhi's last fast in Delhi in 1948, even those around his bed could hear angry gangs chanting, "If he wants to die, let him die." Those who had to deal with the political demands Gandhi was enforcing by his fast must surely have repeated the phrase sotto voce. Nehru furiously confronted one of those groups, saying that they would repeat their slogan only over his dead body; but surely his fury must have derived in part from his own complicity with them. Lord Mountbatten's press secretary wrote in his diary his admiration for the way the little old man's fast had pushed other news off the front page. Gandhi was the Hunger Artist of politics.

And the last lines of Kafka's story say how much happier the circus crowd felt when, after the Hunger Artist's death, a panther occupied his cage, and paced up and down, breathing fire and freedom and defiance and appetite. That was the kind of sight they had paid to see. One attraction, rather morbid, had been replaced by another, this one much healthier. Gandhian politics had been replaced by a nuclear-armed India. Surely Kafka and Gandhi would give the same smile at that thought. But Kafka was a writer, not a life artist. It was Gräser who demonstrated, explicitly and implicitly, his protest against the powers—the powers that determine peace as well as war in Western society. It was he who went to jail, and was pushed around, and laughed at, and starved.

He and Gandhi were in fact not passive, because they chose to do just what would provoke official action against them, and they deprived themselves of the usual unofficial supports. The ordinary point of view is inappropriate in such a matter, just as it is when we incline to smile at, or pass over, their shared eccentricity in dress and diet. To choose not to eat meat, and not to wear a jacket and trousers, is a profoundly important declaration of rebellion. Nothing could be more disturbing to those they confronted, however easily the laughter may have arisen. Those who laughed in a crowd were troubled or thoughtful when alone. Gräser's and Gandhi's message hung in the air, however often people refused to take it into their minds. The same is true of their lack of property, of income, of a job, of all those cushions in case one falls. In Gandhi's case, the most notable gesture was his letting his insurance policy lapse in South Africa, a gesture that provoked bitter reproaches from his brother. Soon after, Gandhi became so eminent that there was no question of his being left to starve. But there was still a question of his key enterprises being controlled by (starved by) those to whom he had to appeal for funds. He believed that public work should not have permanent funds, but should meet its current expenses by constant appeals, or collapse. That made him insecure, dependent, in his work. *That* was the risk that Gandhi ran—the starvation of his various enterprises. They did not in fact starve to death, and neither did Gräser in his physical body. Both suffered but survived.

They were alike in innumerable ways. But they were different in that Gräser gradually resigned himself to being ineffective in practical matters, and to inscribing his witness in art; not in a published book or in any "permanent" form, for as he died it must have seemed to him that all his effort had gone for nothing. His papers were on their way to the city dump; but he had nevertheless inscribed in words, however transparent and evanescent, what he had failed to make real in history. Gandhi also failed. In the last months of his life he saw both the Hindu-Moslem massacres—his nonviolent revolution stained with appalling bloodshed—and

Nehru's modernization of India, free India building heavy industry and armies and armament factories.

But Gandhi had nevertheless done extraordinary things, and had made a difference to history. He had reintroduced into the modern imagination a possibility that had vanished from it: the figure of the saint whose mode of being is not confined to personal relations but extends to politics and national destiny. Put beside Gandhi, Gräser is a pale shadow. But he has perceptibly the same shape. They stand in a series, a sequence. And there are others beside them in that sequence, men further away from Gandhi than Gräser was, in dignity and effectiveness. Let us remember, for a moment, Raymond Duncan, comically inspired by the other two. In 1946 the *San Francisco Examiner* described Duncan as "one of the outstanding screwballs of our time," and made a number of confident jokes about him and his toga and his sandals. [31] And Duncan both justified that tone and took revenge upon it by his behavior. When his son Menalkas took to wearing trousers, Raymond put up posters around Paris, denouncing the friend who had corrupted his son. He appeared on the "Jack Paar Show" in 1959 to say, "I am the greatest living poet. One of the most beautiful of my poems is in French, and takes one and a half hours to recite. . . . I am also the greatest actor in the world." [32] People paid to see and hear him say such things, and he remarked more than once, "Wonderful are the fruits of publicity."

Yet there is no reason to doubt that he was entirely serious in what he believed, despite the comedy of his performance. In 1930, when Gandhi led his Salt March, Raymond performed his own, to the delectation of the New York media. He marched alone through New York to the Battery, where he drew ten bucketfuls of water from the sea, which he then evaporated in a kettle; he sent the salt to Gandhi as a token of his sympathy. That was as near as he could get to emulating his hero. But many other people, more discreetly, imitated at the same distance. When Gandhi came to London in 1931, George Bernard Shaw came to meet him, and told reporters that they were two of a kind, only Gandhi was Mahatma major, and Shaw was Mahatma minor. And indeed, in terms of ideas, Shaw does stand in a line leading up to Gandhi, just as Duncan and Gräser stand in the other line, that of life style.

Of the people whose life story we have followed, therefore, the most poignant hero is Gräser, partly because he had much less impact on his contemporaries than Gross or Laban, and partly for the opposite reason, that the people fighting for peace in Germany now can draw strength from his story. But above all because he shows how near the West could come to having a Gandhi of its own—that is, how far short it fell.

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## Notes

1. Mosse, *The Crisis of German Ideology* (1964). [—> [main text](#)]
2. Ibid., 2. [—> [main text](#)]
3. Ibid., 5. [—> [main text](#)]
4. Ibid., 7. [—> [main text](#)]
5. Ibid., 53. [—> [main text](#)]
6. Berkeley, Cal., 1961. [—> [main text](#)]
7. Ibid., 32. [—> [main text](#)]
8. Diederichs, *Im Zeichen* (1927) 39. [—> [main text](#)]
9. Stern, *The Politics of Cultural Despair* (1974) 113. [—> [main text](#)]
10. Ibid., vii. [—> [main text](#)]
11. Ibid., xix. [—> [main text](#)]
12. Stark, *Entrepreneurs of Ideology* (1981). [—> [main text](#)]

13. *Die Tat*, 1918, 711-715. [—> [main text](#)]
  14. *Ibid.*, 713. [—> [main text](#)]
  15. *Ibid.*, 714. [—> [main text](#)]
  16. Lane, *Architecture and Politics in Germany 1918-1940* (1968) 155. [—> [main text](#)]
  17. *Ibid.*, 137. [—> [main text](#)]
  18. *Ibid.*, 149. [—> [main text](#)]
  19. "From Isadora Duncan to Lem Riefenstahl," *Ballett International* (1983) 23. [—> [main text](#)]
  20. Koegler, "Vom Ausdruckstanz" (1980) 172-173. [—> [main text](#)]
  21. Laban, *A Life* (1975) 145. [—> [main text](#)]
  22. *Ibid.*, 128 and 133. [—> [main text](#)]
  23. Laban, *Deutsche Tanzfestspiele* (1934) 5. [—> [main text](#)]
  24. *Ibid.*, 6. [—> [main text](#)]
  25. Laban, *Ein Leben* (1935) 212. [—> [main text](#)]
  26. Laban, *Deutsche Tanzfestspiele* (1934) 3. [—> [main text](#)]
  27. *Ibid.*, 9. [—> [main text](#)]
  28. Gandhi, *Nonviolent Resistance* (1961) 134. [—> [main text](#)]
  29. Binder, *Kafka in neuer Sicht* (1976) 374. [—> [main text](#)]
  30. *Ibid.*, 388. [—> [main text](#)]
  31. *San Francisco Examiner*, September 29, 1946. [—> [main text](#)]
  32. *New Yorker*, June 13, 1959, 23-24. [—> [main text](#)]
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**SOURCE:** Green, Martin. *Mountain of Truth: The Counterculture Begins, Ascona, 1900-1920* (Hanover, NH: Published for Tufts University by University Press of New England, 1986), Chapter 8, pp. 238-253.

<http://www.autodidactproject.org/other/ascona.html>