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## ARTHUR SCHNITZLER'S LIFE AND WORKS: A SURVEY

Our knowledge of Schnitzler's life is at best fragmentary. The author's reluctance to answer questions about his personal life or to submit biographical sketches has left us with relatively little autobiographical information. Frida Ilmer commented on this in 1933, two years after the author's death:

Schnitzlers Einstellung gegenüber den Versuchen, biographische Daten von ihm zu erlangen, verdient übrigens bemerkt zu werden. Ausser den Tatsachen, dass er am 15. Mai 1862 geboren wurde, sich ursprünglich der Medizin widmete und am 21. Oktober 1931 daselbst starb, besitzen wir nur sehr spärliche Daten über sein Leben, die meistens auf Aussagen seiner Freunde beruhen. Über sein Privatleben wissen wir so gut wie nichts. Der Grund dafür liegt darin, dass Schnitzler sich entschieden – und scheinbar auch erfolgreich – gegen angehende Biographen wehrte.<sup>1</sup>

Sol Liptzin begins his monograph on Schnitzler of 1932:

Always frank in answering questions about his literary work, he resented all written references to his personal life. When asked for complete biographical data, he submitted the following: "I was born in 1862 and was a physician."<sup>2</sup>

It is of course true that we now know more about the author than was the case in the first years after his death. Several volumes of published correspondence (as well as periodical articles containing correspondence), the memoirs of his wife, and numerous special studies have contributed to our store of biographical information. But we shall have to await the publication of Schnitzler's autobiography, *Leben und Nachklang*, *Werk und Wiederhall*, covering the first twenty-seven years of his life, and the numerous *Tagebücher*, kept for fifty years of his life, for a complete biographical portrait. In the meantime we shall have to remain content with a biographical sketch drawn primarily from external sources.

Arthur Schnitzler was born of upper middle-class Jewish parents in Vienna on May 15, 1862. The father, Johann Schnitzler, physician and university professor, was born in Gross-Kanissa (Hungary) and his native tongue was Hungarian. His own father too had been a physician, and so the medical tradition was well-established in the

Schnitzler family. The original family name "Zimmermann" was changed for some unknown reason by the father to "Schnitzler." The author's father, Johann Schnitzler, was a prominent laryngologist, who counted a number of well-known theatrical people among his patients (such as Adolf Sonnenthal and Charlotte Wolter). It is interesting to note that in his youth he had written a few dramas himself, but had given up his literary activities when he entered the medical school of the University of Vienna. According to a recent biographical study Schnitzler regarded his father as a "superficial, friendly man without a deep knowledge of people."<sup>3</sup> The mother, Louise Markbreiter, had also been born in Hungary, but came from the Burgenland area, where German was always spoken. Her brother was a well-known lawyer in Vienna. Arthur was the oldest of two brothers; Julius, his younger brother, later became an outstanding surgeon and director of the Vienna City Hospital.

The Schnitzler house was located in the Jägerzeile, now the Praterstrasse, in Vienna. The importance of *Ort* and *Zeit* for the author has often been cited: cosmopolitan Vienna before the First World War with its intricate class structure and highly heterogeneous population. Of equal importance in his development was his Jewishness; Schnitzler himself was keenly aware of his Jewish origins. Whether his parental faith was a burden to him or not we can only surmise on the basis of his writings. Robert O. Weiss concludes that it was:

There can be no doubt that Arthur Schnitzler tasted the bitter dregs of anti-Semitism. Only a member of an actively persecuted minority could have written a novel like *Der Weg ins Freie* . . . and only a man who had gained much inner stature through suffering hatred and injustice could have replied with the moderation and, above all, the analytical understanding demonstrated in the drama "Professor Bernhardt."<sup>4</sup>

Yet, the house in the Jägerzeile, by virtue of the father's profession, constituted a gathering place for theatrical people and artists. The character Irsil might well speak for the young Schnitzler in "Alkandi's Lied":

Mein Vater war ein kunstbefliss'ner Mann  
In uns'rem Hause, jedem Edlen offen,  
Hat man der Künstler beste angetroffen.<sup>5</sup>

The father often received complimentary tickets to the opera and the Burgtheater. Arthur frequently accompanied him, seeing at the age of six or seven his first theatrical performance, *Orpheus*, at the Carltheater. At the age of ten the boy witnessed a performance of Gounod's *Faust*, during the course of which one of the actors bowed in the direction of Professor Schnitzler's box. The great astonishment of the young boy at the impropriety of such behavior would seem to

foreshadow his later artistic preoccupation with the problem of reality and illusion epitomized in "Der grüne Kakadu."

Perhaps stimulated by his artistic environment, Schnitzler began writing at the early age of nine. In a letter to Georg Brandes, the established writer recalls his early efforts:

Früher einmal, von meinem 9. bis zu meinem 20. Lebensjahr hab' ich geschrieben "wie der Vogel singt" -- ich muss damals sehr glücklich gewesen sein; denn ich erinnere mich gar nicht, wie ichs eigentlich gemacht habe. Ich habe noch manches, Trauerspiele und Fastnachtsspiele und komische Romane; nahezu durchaus blödsinnig. Aber ich habe selbst zu der Zeit, da ich diese Dinge schrieb, nie das Bedürfnis gehabt, es irgendwem zu zeigen.<sup>6</sup>

His first major dramatic attempt came in 1872 and was called "Aristokrat und Demokrat," probably influenced by Schiller's *Sturm und Drang* plays. Prior to the publication of "Anatol" in 1893, Schnitzler had written about thirty plays, fifteen dramatic fragments, and a large number of poems. Schinnerer, in commenting on the early works, discerns in them a definitely hedonistic, epicurean philosophy.<sup>7</sup>

From 1871 to 1879 he attended the Akademische Gymnasium in Vienna, at the same time continuing his youthful writing efforts. According to Herbert Lederer the major literary influences at this time were Tieck, Immermann, and E. T. A. Hoffmann; one might surmise that it was from the last of these that he acquired his tendency towards exotic names.<sup>8</sup> In 1878 Schnitzler began his most ambitious pre-*Anatol* work, the Grillparzer-like drama "Aegidius," which he completed two years later.

In 1879 he entered the University of Vienna as a student in the *medizinische Fakultät*, graduating with the M. D. degree in 1885. From 1885 to 1888 he was *Aspirant* and *Sekundärarzt* in Vienna. His internship was under Professor Standhardtner for internal medicine, under Professor Isidor Neumann for dermatology and syphilology, and under Professor Meynert for psychiatry. His literary interests and wide readings never diminished; he occupied himself with Kant, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Hebbel, Georg and Ludwig Büchner, Ernst Mach (his old friend Hermann Bahr was a Mach-disciple) and Hermann von Helmholtz. Schnitzler's first published work, observations on a medical conference in Amsterdam, appeared in 1879 in a medical journal edited by his father. His first published literary work (the poem "Liebeslied der Ballegrine") appeared the following year in a Munich literary journal. Six years later, in 1886, a number of aphorisms and his first narrative work appeared in the Viennese weekly, *Die Deutsche Wochenschrift*. In the same year his first contribution was accepted by the Viennese literary periodical, *An der schönen blauen Donau*, edited by Paul Goldmann. Some of these early contributions appeared under the pseudonym "Anatol."

In the summer of 1888 Schnitzler undertook a study trip to London

(investigating medical conditions and clinics under Felix Simon), Paris, and Copenhagen. Upon his return he took up the position of *Assistent* at the Allgemeine Poliklinik, where he worked under his father as a resident in laryngology. Simultaneously he served from 1887 to 1894 as editor of the *Internationale Klinische Rundschau*, to which he also contributed a number of medical book reviews. In spite of his activity in laryngology it soon became evident that his real medical interest was psychiatry. In 1887 he had reviewed a book by Charcot, translated from the French by Sigmund Freud, and he soon gained some competence in hypnosis. His medical dissertation in 1889 was entitled "Behandlung der funktionellen Aphonie durch Hypnose." (Hypnosis plays a rôle in several of the early works.) At this time he conducted many hypnotic experiments, keeping careful notes of the results. At least one critic has affirmed that Schnitzler's decision to give up these experiments was the result of malicious rumors circulating among the uneducated public.

Hermann Bahr, upon his return from Paris, had gathered around himself a group of the young "moderns" in the Café Griensteidl, a group that became known as "Jung Österreich" and later as "Jung Wien." The group included, among others, in addition to Bahr himself, Beer-Hofmann, Hofmannsthal, Felix Dörmann, Karl Kraus, Richard Specht, Felix Salten, Peter Altenberg, and Schnitzler. Here many a literary conversation was held and here many a literary work was read aloud by its author, discussed, and criticized. But Schnitzler, as much as he might have appeared at this time to his contemporaries as the living embodiment of Anatol, soon broke away from café society with its literary associations, thereby revealing an inclination towards aloofness. In April, 1892, he wrote to Richard Beer-Hofmann: "Das Café Griensteidl existiert für mich nicht mehr . . . Ich will versuchen, ein Virtuose der Einsamkeit zu werden."<sup>9</sup>

Turning again to Schnitzler's literary activities, the stage manuscript of "Das Märchen," a problem play showing the strong influence of Ibsen, was printed at the author's own expense in 1891. The play was subsequently performed in 1893 at Das Deutsche Volkstheater in Vienna. The same year saw the publication of the complete "Anatol"-cycle, again at the author's own expense. His literary reputation was not secured, however, until 1894 when "Sterben" appeared in *Die Neue Deutsche Rundschau*. Even greater was the applause for "Liebeleil," when it was performed the following year under the direction of Max Burckhard in the Burgtheater. Olga Schnitzler writes of this production in her memoirs:

Auf der vierten Galerie des Burgtheaters hatte ich bittere Tränen geweint um Christinens Schicksal, und etwas erstaunlich Neues, Schönes war geschehen: Da standen sie nicht wie sonst auf der Bühne in einer heroischen Dekoration, in farbigem Kostüm, grosse Verse rollend, nein, ein junges

Mädchen aus dem Volk klagte im wienerischen Dialekt ihre Liebe und ihre Verzweiflung, einfache Menschen, nah und vertraut, waren in die Sphäre der Dichtung gehoben worden. Konnte man ihnen nicht in jedem Augenblick begegnen, waren es nicht Worte echter, väterlicher Einsicht, die der alte Musiker, Christinens Vater, da oben sprach? Wusste hier einer von unserer nur zögernd und schamhaft eingestandenen Bedrängnis, wagte er es auszusprechen, dass die unbegreiflich festgerammten Begriffe unserer Eltern keine Geltung mehr hatten für uns, die wir nun heranwachsen? Man war also nicht im Unrecht, nicht allein -- welche Befreiung!<sup>10</sup>

“Liebelein” was published in book form in 1896 by the S. Fischer Verlag in Berlin, a firm that was soon to become the author’s regular publisher.

Schnitzler’s decision to turn “professional” as a writer was made in 1893-1894; until then he had had some misgivings about his literary ability and was also concerned about his father’s reaction. The death of Johann Schnitzler in 1893 and his son’s leaving the Allgemeine Poliklinik in the same year to establish himself as a general practitioner in Vienna seem to mark a turning point in his life. It was possibly his disillusionment with his medical colleagues, coupled with the feeling that he had chosen the wrong speciality (laryngology), that turned Schnitzler from a medical career. Though he continued to practice medicine, and in a brief outline of his life stresses that he never officially gave up his medical practice, his dominant interest became writing.

In 1895 Schnitzler met Marie Reinhard, who, until her death four years later, held his affection. Olga Schnitzler reveals that the character Anna in *Der Weg ins Freie* is modeled after her, and that, in fact, the whole novel is highly autobiographical. In a letter to Georg Brandes dated May 8, 1899, Schnitzler wrote:

Vor sieben Wochen ist das Geschöpf begraben worden, das ich von allen Menschen der Erde am liebsten gehabt habe, meine Geliebte, Freundin und Braut – die durch mehr als vier Jahre meinem Leben seinen ganzen Sinn und seine ganze Freude gegeben hat – und seither dämmere ich hin, aber existiere kaum mehr. Aus der Fülle der Gesundheit und Jugend hat sie eine blödsinnige und tückische Krankheit innerhalb zweier Tage ins Grab gerissen, und ich habe sie sterben gesehen, bei vollem Bewusstsein sterben gesehen.<sup>11</sup>

In 1903 Schnitzler married Olga Gussmann and that same year a son was born, Heinrich, who later followed a theatrical career and for several years was Professor of Speech and Drama at the University of California.<sup>12</sup> A daughter committed suicide in 1928 because of her husband’s infidelity. Since 1909 the Schnitzlers lived in a newly purchased house in the Sternwarte Strasse.

1893 saw the publication of shorter narrative works, *Die Frau des Weisen*, as well as his second problem play, “Freiwild”. “Reigen” appeared in 1900 in manuscript form to be distributed among a small circle of the author’s friends. (When Olga Gussmann, soon to become

his wife, asked him if she might see this much-discussed work, he replied that it might not be appropriate for a young lady.) The same year "Leutnant Gustl" was published in the *Neue Freie Presse* (Vienna) and soon Schnitzler, who was *Oberarzt* in the Reserves, heard of a military investigation concerning his satire. The following judgment was rendered:

Der Ehrenrat für Landwehroffiziere und Kadetten Wien hat über die wider den Oberarzt Dr. Arthur Schnitzler im Verhältnis der Evidenz des k. k. Landw. J. R. Klagenfurt Nr. 4 erhobene Anschuldigung, dass er als dem Offiziersstande angehörig eine Novelle verfasste und in einem Weltblatte veröffentlichte, durch deren Inhalt die Ehre und das Ansehen der k. k. österr. u. ung. Armee herabgesetzt wurde, sowie dass er gegen die persönlichen Angriffe der Zeitung *Reichswehr* keinerlei Schritte unternommen hat nach der am 26. April stattgehabten Schlussverhandlung erkannt – der beschuldigte Oberarzt hat die Standesehre . . . verletzt . . . [Schnitzler had not answered a denunciatory article in the *Reichswehr*.]<sup>13</sup>

In consequence he was demoted to *Sanitätssoldat*.

In 1901 "Der Schleier der Beatrice" was brought out by S. Fischer, to be followed in 1902 by the cycle *Lebendige Stunden*. Many critics have designated the publication of "Der einsame Weg" in 1904 as the beginning of the author's "second period," a moving away from impassioned youthful cynicism to a greater reflective maturity. Other major dramatic works to follow were "Der Ruf des Lebens" and "Zwischenspiel" in 1906, "Komtesse Mizzi" in 1908, "Der junge Medardus" and "Das weite Land" in 1910. With the publication of "Professor Bernhardt" in 1912 the second period draws to a close. A number of narrative works were published during these years, "Der blinde Geronimo und sein Bruder" appeared in 1900, and the author's only novel, *Der Weg ins Freie*, in 1908.

The fact that Otto Brahm, the gifted theater director and close friend of Schnitzler, died in 1912 has been suggested as an important factor in the author's turning more and more to the narrative form. Schnitzler's fiftieth birthday in the same year was celebrated by the German press, a number of special *Hefte* appeared in his honor, and several critical studies on him were published. Three of his dramas earned him literary prizes: for "Zwischenspiel" he received the Grillparzerpreis in 1908; for "Der junge Medardus" the Raimundpreis in 1910; and for "Professor Bernhardt" the Wiener Volkstheaterpreis in 1914.

Up to the outbreak of the first World War Schnitzler traveled extensively in Europe, frequently spending his summers in Switzerland or on the Danish coast (the third act of "Komödie der Verführung" is laid here). His reaction to the senselessness of war is found in his correspondence with Georg Brandes and in the posthumously published work "Über Krieg und Frieden." After the war he finally agreed to a performance of "Reigen;" the première took place in

Berlin in 1920, leading to demonstrations and riots, in consequence of which a court trial was held on the morality of the work. In the final verdict the drama was vindicated and designated a "moral deed" in the interest of the preservation of public morality.

In 1921 Schnitzler and his wife separated. In a letter to Brandes he writes:

Von meiner Frau bin ich geschieden – aber wir sind gute Freunde geblieben  
– ja in der letzten Zeit wieder geworden, könnte man besser sagen.<sup>14</sup>

The death of his daughter in 1928 was a heavy blow. Schnitzler's loneliness, so often mentioned by critics as a central problem in his works, increased as he grew older. One recalls Baron Diebl and Anatol's exchange in "Anatols Grössenwahn:"

Baron: Also Eremit geworden?  
Anatol: Eremit geblieben.<sup>15</sup>

Invited to visit America, Schnitzler declined, saying that he was becoming "menschennüde." He died of a heart attack on October 21, 1931, while still attempting to give to his most elusive drama, "Der Ruf des Lebens," its final form.

Schnitzler's third literary period, beginning in 1912 and extending up to his death, has often been called "retrospective" by critics, and it is perhaps true that the author felt most at home in pre-1914 Vienna; indeed, the tributes accorded to him in 1922 speak of him and his works as if already belonging to the past. His greatest literary achievements were narrative in form, although the cycle *Komödie der Worte*, published in 1915, and the dramas "Fink und Fliederbusch," "Die Schwestern," "Komödie der Verführung," "Der Gang zum Weiher," and "Im Spiel der Sommerlüfte" fall into this last period. Among his masterpieces in narrative form during these years were "Frau Beate und ihr Sohn" in 1913, "Doktor Gräsler, Badearzt" (1917), "Casanovas Heimfahrt" (1918), "Fräulein Else" (1924), "Traumnovelle" (1925), and finally "Flucht in die Finsternis" (1931). A number of works have been published since the author's death, but an even greater amount of material remains in the *Nachlass*, awaiting editing and publication.

In this brief sketch too little has been said of the variety in form and content of the Schnitzlerian world. It is hoped that the bibliography which follows will better display this richness and contribute in some small measure to a better understanding of an author whose permanent position in the history of German literature is now secure.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Frida Ilmer, "Die Gestalt des Künstlers bei Schnitzler" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Johns Hopkins University, 1933), p. 177-178 (note).



- <sup>2</sup> Sol Liptzin, *Arthur Schnitzler* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1932), p. 1.
- <sup>3</sup> Herbert I. Kupper and Hilda S. Rollman-Branch, "Freud and Schnitzler – 'Doppelgänger'," *Journal of the American Psychoanalytical Association*, VII (1959), 112.
- <sup>4</sup> Robert O. Weiss, "A Study of Arthur Schnitzler (With Special Consideration of the Problem of Psychosis in 'Flight into Darkness'" (unpublished Ph. D. dissertation, Stanford University, 1955), p. 34-35.
- <sup>5</sup> Arthur Schnitzler, *Die dramatischen Werke* (Frankfurt a.M.: S. Fischer, 1962), Bd. I, S. 10.
- <sup>6</sup> Kurt Bergel (ed.), *Georg Brandes und Arthur Schnitzler: Ein Briefwechsel* (Bern: Francke), S. 71-72.
- <sup>7</sup> See Otto P. Schinnerer, "The Early Works of Arthur Schnitzler," *Germanic Review*, IV (1929), 153-197, and "The Literary Apprenticeship of Arthur Schnitzler," *Germanic Review*, V (1930), 58-82.
- <sup>8</sup> See Herbert Lederer, "The Problem of Ethics in the Works of Arthur Schnitzler" (unpublished Ph. D. dissertation, University of Chicago, 1953), especially Chapter III, "Arthur Schnitzler's Literary Background."
- <sup>9</sup> Lederer, 142.
- <sup>10</sup> Olga Schnitzler, *Spiegelbild der Freundschaft* (Salzburg: Residenz Verlag), 1962, S. 17.
- <sup>11</sup> Bergel (ed.), 75.
- <sup>12</sup> He is now director of the *Theater in der Josefstadt* in Vienna and one of the best-known *Regisseurs* of Europe.
- <sup>13</sup> Otto P. Schinnerer, "Schnitzler and the Military Censorship: Unpublished Correspondence," *Germanic Review*, V (1930), 243.
- <sup>14</sup> Bergel (ed.), 135.
- <sup>15</sup> Arthur Schnitzler, I, 110.