

**Ansgar Martins, ed., *Hans Büchenbacher: Erinnerungen 1933-1949. Zugleich eine Studie zur Geschichte der Anthroposophie im Nationalsozialismus* (Frankfurt: Info3, 2014)**

**Reviewed by Peter Staudenmaier, August 2014**

Following on his 2012 study of Rudolf Steiner's racial teachings, Ansgar Martins has published another principal piece of research on typically neglected aspects of anthroposophy's history. This volume, like the previous one, is published by the Frankfurt-based anthroposophist publisher Info3, another small step in the increasing movement toward greater historical openness – albeit haphazard, hesitant and vacillating – on the part of some German anthroposophists. That Info3 continues to provide Martins' stringent analyses to an anthroposophical readership is an encouraging sign. The new book offers challenging reflections on anthroposophy's divided and obscured past in the Nazi era.

The central occasion for the new volume is the publication of a manuscript that has circulated for some time among Steiner's followers: a reminiscence of the Nazi period by anthroposophist Hans Büchenbacher. This relatively brief text, though problematic in several ways, is a fascinating historical source and has been excerpted and cited in various contexts over the years. The new book represents the first full publication of Büchenbacher's manuscript. But the book offers much more than that: in addition to Büchenbacher's first-hand memoir, which takes up 70 pages (including extensive annotations by Martins), the remaining 350 pages consist of thorough appendices prepared by Martins from a wide range of other sources.

Büchenbacher's memoirs present an important and unusual eye witness narrative of anthroposophist life in Nazi Germany. Hans Büchenbacher (1887-1977), a personal student of Steiner, was a prominent leader in the early anthroposophical movement. He was an organizer for 'social threefolding' in the 1920s, later became editor of the official journal *Anthroposophie*, and from 1931 to 1934 served as chairman of the Anthroposophical Society in Germany. When the Nazis came to power in January 1933, everything changed for him.

Though raised Catholic, Büchenbacher was considered "half-Jewish" according to Nazi criteria because of his father's Jewish ancestry. He did not count as Jewish according to Jewish tradition, much less according to his upbringing or background or belief or cultural identification or religious practice or his own self-conception, but merely according to the Nuremberg laws. He was fully committed to an emphatically Christian version of anthroposophy throughout his adult life (Martins refers to Büchenbacher's "deep Christian faith"). But the experience of being perceived as Jewish – long before Hitler came to power – left him attentive to antisemitism in its various guises. This gave him a distinctive critical perspective on both the rise of Nazism and the responses of his fellow anthroposophists.

Büchenbacher wrote the memoirs in the final years of his life. The text is thus a retrospective narrative, not a document composed during the Nazi era itself. And as with any autobiographical account, it is important to keep in mind the conspicuous limitations and the enormous inventiveness of human memory. But many of Büchenbacher's specific claims are borne out by other evidence, as Martins demonstrates. Often Büchenbacher's remarks are still quite bitter, decades later, and personal resentments undoubtedly color some of his ex post facto

descriptions. He also adopts a conspiracist framework throughout the text. Despite all of these factors, the work yields a very revealing record of a turbulent time.

It is not a flattering portrait. According to Büchenbacher, “approximately two thirds of German anthroposophists more or less succumbed to National Socialism.” (40) He reports that a wide range of influential anthroposophists, whom he identifies by name, “staunchly supported Hitler.” Both Guenther Wachsmuth, Secretary of the Swiss-based General Anthroposophical Society, and Marie Steiner, the widow of Rudolf Steiner, are described as “completely pro-Nazi” (24). Büchenbacher concludes with a lament for the far-reaching “Nazi sins” of his Dornach colleagues.

Some of the details are striking. Büchenbacher describes stopping by the editorial office of the journal *Anthroposophie* in February 1933 and finding “a large portrait of Hitler” decorated in anthroposophical manner with crystals. When Büchenbacher asked the journal’s managing editor, C.S. Picht, about this homage to Hitler in the headquarters of the official publication of the Anthroposophical Society in Germany, he realized that “Picht was deeply infected by Nazi views.” (19) Anthroposophist Erhard Bartsch, leader of the biodynamic movement, told Büchenbacher that “those who have truly Michaelic spirit will side with Adolf Hitler.” (23) According to Büchenbacher, a number of other prominent anthroposophists also supported Nazism, including Alfred Meebold, Friedrich Kempter, Edwin Froböse, and Herbert Hahn, figures who are often celebrated among Steiner’s followers today.

Büchenbacher provides extended descriptions of several central participants in the anthroposophist movement. The memoirs feature a thorough account of anthroposophist physician Hanns Rascher, a fervent backer of Hitler who joined the Nazi party as early as 1931. Rascher was a follower of Steiner from 1908 onward and a major figure in anthroposophical medicine. For the first several years of the Third Reich, he played a key role as liaison between the Anthroposophical Society and the Nazi leadership. Perhaps the most disturbing passages for anthroposophist readers, however, are Büchenbacher’s detailed recounting of his interactions with Marie Steiner und Guenther Wachsmuth: even dedicated life-long anthroposophists like Büchenbacher faced a potent undercurrent of antisemitism from the Dornach leadership.

Under pressure from his gentile colleagues, Büchenbacher resigned as chairman of the Anthroposophical Society in Germany in 1934. He emigrated to Switzerland in 1936. In one of the more telling episodes related here, Büchenbacher recalls a private discussion with Rudolf Steiner in 1920 about antisemitism within anthroposophist ranks. Despite Büchenbacher’s testimony that he had personally experienced antisemitism among Steiner’s followers, Steiner categorically denied that there was any antisemitism in the Anthroposophical Society (53).

As an accompaniment to this unique text, Ansgar Martins has compiled a trove of historical information, much of which goes well beyond the parameters of the memoir itself. These appendices alone could easily serve as a self-standing study of anthroposophy in the Nazi era. Some of the most valuable material in the book has less to do with Büchenbacher’s acute reflections than with Martins’ insights into the dilemmas of coming to terms with a devastated and devastating past. In several respects, Martins’ research paints an even more dire portrait of anthroposophists in the 1930s eager to align themselves with Nazism’s ‘new order’. The degree of political naïveté and confusion revealed in the sources he has assembled is at times astonishing.

Martins is sharply critical both of overblown anti-anthroposophist jeremiads (he mentions Irene Wagner’s 2012 book *Rudolf Steiners langer Schatten* as an example) as well as the standard historical complacency among anthroposophists themselves. He has especially pointed

criticisms of the widespread conspiracist strand within contemporary anthroposophy. He warns both anthroposophists and their detractors against “sacrificing knowledge to ideology” and thus falling into “historical ignorance” (99). Above all he stresses the complexity and intractability of the past, and makes very clear that there was no such thing as a reaction of “the anthroposophists” to “the Nazis” or vice versa. His appendices are based on extensive research and incorporate an impressive array of documents from the Dornach archives.

The result is a considerably more sophisticated analysis than many anthroposophist readers are accustomed to. Martins generates unexpected insights by reading anthroposophical texts in the light of Critical Theory, juxtaposing Steiner and Adorno, as well as Hannah Arendt, Gershom Scholem, and others. His excurses include a detailed examination of the relations between anthroposophical thought and German Idealism; an overview of ‘social threefolding’ as a classic example of “the political polyvalence of anthroposophy” (198); and a thorough appraisal of dissident anthroposophist Ita Wegman’s prescient critiques of National Socialism.

It is an expansive discussion, often using some small strand of Büchenbacher’s memoir as the basis for sustained reflection on broader matters. His section on the complex attitudes of figures like Theodor Adorno and Ernst Bloch toward esotericism, for example, brief as it is, offers a more thoughtful treatment than is usually seen even from established experts on esotericism. Martins does anthroposophical readers a significant service by introducing them to Siegfried Kracauer’s incisive critical assessments of anthroposophy from the early 1920s. He also has some suggestive passages on the “transformation of racist ideas into Romantic cosmopolitanism” (227) as an alternative to the historical convergence of anthroposophical and völkisch currents. The appendices provide substantial material on internal anthroposophist conflicts and their possible – though still unclarified – political dimensions.

Among many other incidents, Martins supplies illuminating context on Steiner’s disrupted lecture in Munich in May 1922, a source of continual anthroposophist myths nine decades later. The book as a whole stands as a rebuke to the anthroposophical predilection for conspiracy beliefs and occult explanations of historical events. Martins underscores the shortcomings of any attempt to discern the roots of Nazism “not in history and society but in the spiritual” (158). He gives extended attention to the overlap between the anthroposophist and völkisch milieus and the extravagant racial theories promoted by the first generation of Steiner’s followers.

The book builds productively on the research of other scholars, drawing on Bernadett Bigalke’s important work on the Leipzig theosophical milieu, on James Webb’s groundbreaking research on the politics of the modern occult revival, and on the thoroughgoing appraisals of the Waldorf movement in Nazi Germany by Ida Oberman and Karen Priestman, which deserve a wider readership. In the wake of the pioneering studies by historian Helmut Zander, Martins’ book is a nearly comprehensive account of the current state of research for a German readership.

A large proportion of the appendices address the thorny problem of anthroposophical antisemitism, something which unfortunately is not of merely historical relevance. (Steiner himself depicted Jews as paragons of “national egoism”; see e.g. Rudolf Steiner, *The Challenge of the Times*, Anthroposophic Press 1941, 26-33). Tellingly, this central segment of the book is directly preceded by Martins’ perceptive reflection on the metaphysics of *Deutschtum* or Germanness and its anthroposophist interpreters (365-66), assessing the peculiar mixture of cosmopolitanism and Germanocentrism which Steiner adopted from German Idealism and recast in occult terminology. The subsequent sections yield crucial insights on the esoteric form of assimilationist antisemitism predominant among several generations of anthroposophists.

Some of the best analyses in the book examine the troubled relationship between anthroposophy and Judaism. Martins approaches these questions with unusual historical depth and sensitivity. In a wide-ranging and remarkably nuanced treatment, he presents fascinating if disconcerting details on individuals from Jewish backgrounds drawn to anthroposophy who viewed Steiner's esoteric Christianity as a way to 'overcome' their own Jewish roots. These are balanced with fine overviews of Hugo Bergman, Ernst Müller, and even Adolf Arenson as proponents of a synthesis of anthroposophy and Jewish spiritual currents. Martins also reconstructs a series of cases of anthroposophists of Jewish descent who fell victim to the Holocaust. This is important and path-breaking research. His final pages on anthroposophist composer Viktor Ullmann, deported because of his Jewish origins and killed at Auschwitz in late 1944, are especially poignant.

By including the experiences of Nazism's victims, the book adeptly expands historical perspective and challenges both apologetic accounts and historically simplistic forms of criticism. Anthroposophy's antagonists and its defenders have together settled too frequently for such one-sided versions of history. But the preponderance of evidence presented in these pages points, for better or worse, in the same dispiriting direction that scholars have highlighted for some time.

Through patient accumulation of historical detail, Martins' appendices build up to a panorama of pro-Nazi anthroposophist sentiments in the early years of the Third Reich that is just as woeful and just as worrisome as Büchenbacher's first-hand reminiscences. There is much unflattering attention to Wachsmuth and Marie Steiner in particular, as well as to Swiss anthroposophist Roman Boos, who had been Rudolf Steiner's personal secretary and a central proponent of 'social threefolding' in the 1920s. Boos' pro-Nazi efforts during the early years of the Third Reich were consistently supported by Steiner's widow. Martins considers Boos, along with Hanns Rascher, primarily responsible for much of the anthroposophist agitation in favor of Nazism.

Indeed according to Martins, Boos and Rascher were the major architects of overall policy toward the Nazi regime within the Anthroposophical Society in 1933 and 1934, with the full cooperation of the anthroposophist leadership in Germany and in Dornach (326-28). But they were scarcely alone. In July 1933 the faculty of the Rudolf Steiner School in Berlin drafted a text meant to demonstrate the "harmony between National Socialism and Waldorf pedagogy" (283). Others, such as anthroposophist race theorist Richard Karutz, went a good deal further. In Martins' words, Karutz's racial theories from 1934 show that even when "anthroposophy's individualism and spiritualism remained entirely present, they did not pose any hindrance to the affirmation of Nazi ideas" (321).

This is in several ways a brave book, confident in its historical foundations and unflinching in its arguments, continually aware of the ongoing resonance of the topics under investigation. For at least some of its readers, it will serve to unsettle longstanding anthroposophical shibboleths. Martins deserves gratitude not just from Steiner skeptics but from Steiner enthusiasts for pursuing such themes in the face of sometimes vitriolic anthroposophist opposition. Works like these can help to open up anthroposophy's history at last, giving view to the remarkable political and ideological heterogeneity among Steiner's early followers. The book succeeds admirably in its effort "to show the cultural and political breadth of anthroposophy." (236) That the story it tells is not always one of inspiration but of admonition is historically unexceptional. In esoteric quarters, however, such insights are still relatively new and sure to arouse indignation.

There are a handful of minor corrections and amplifications worth considering. One less consequential point derives from a confusion between similar names. The *Artamanen* of the 1920s (referred to by Martins on 344 and 347) were not the same as the *Armanen Orden* founded by ariosophist Guido List in 1911. The Artamanen were a ‘blood and soil’ group, primarily focused on agriculture, an offshoot of the *bündische Jugend* of the Weimar years. They had several links to early biodynamic proponents. According to anthroposophical sources, one of the most prominent anthroposophist Nazis, Friedrich Benesch – whom Martins does not mention – belonged to the Artamanen.

Martins’ brief reference to lesser-known anthroposophist August Wegfrass (325) might be clearer with a bit of additional context. Wegfrass applied to join the Nazi party in 1937 (the Nazi intelligence service, the SD, listed him as a party member already in 1934) and held a series of low-level party positions. His party membership was ultimately revoked in 1942 because of his anthroposophical involvement, despite very positive political evaluations from local and regional party representatives. Wegfrass is yet another example of anthroposophist eagerness to join the Nazi movement, persisting even in the face of stiff resistance from anti-esoteric Nazi functionaries.

Last, in an uncharacteristically foreshortened formulation, Martins reports that seven of the nine Waldorf schools in Germany were “verboten” by the end of 1938 (360). Claims like these are constantly repeated in the anthroposophical literature, but they are incompatible with the archival record. As Karen Priestman notes, “only the Stuttgart and Dresden schools were forced to close by Nazi officials.” (Priestman, “Illusion of Coexistence: The Waldorf Schools in the Third Reich, 1933–1941,” 156) Ida Oberman points out that half of the schools “closed voluntarily” (Oberman, *The Waldorf Movement in Education from European Cradle to American Crucible, 1919-2008*, 153). Several of them continued operating into 1939 and 1940, eventually closing on their own while awaiting official recognition from Nazi authorities. The notion that they were simply shut down by the Nazis is another enduring anthroposophist myth.

Martins demolishes many such myths, and repeatedly confirms the less than heroic accounts of other historians. For over half a century scholars have observed that spiritual movements like anthroposophy can sometimes serve as vehicles for authoritarian, nationalist, and reactionary politics. We now have detailed information about how these dynamics played out among Steiner’s followers in Nazi Germany. There are any number of further possible examples, anthroposophist figures like Heinz Kloss or Walter Abendroth who found a ready hearing during the Third Reich; Martins’ already lengthy list could easily be extended.

Anthroposophists on the whole have failed to confront this part of their past. Mere historical neglect is by no means the only problem. In the case of Franz Lippert, the anthroposophist SS officer who oversaw the biodynamic plantation at Dachau, the standard anthroposophist line today goes well beyond denial. A prominent official spokesman for the German Waldorf movement, Detlef Hardorp, portrays Lippert as a great humanitarian whose inspiring story brings tears to the eyes. These sorts of statements are an embarrassment to anthroposophy, but generally go unchallenged among Steiner’s inheritors. That will become more difficult with the publication of books like this one.

As Martins points out, the extent of anthroposophist cooperation with Nazism cannot be understood merely as a form of “superficial conformity” for the sake of survival (362). The historical record is much more complex than that comforting notion acknowledges. He also emphasizes at several junctures how much more research is still waiting to be done on the history

of anthroposophy during the Nazi era. There is much more for Steiner's followers to learn about the legacy they carry.

There is no reason for anthroposophists to despair in the face of this task. Honest engagement with the past can be a boon to alternative spiritual movements, and anthroposophy is no exception. If it helps devotees of Steiner grapple with the topic, they can think of it as something Steiner himself would have encouraged. At its emergence a century ago, anthroposophy represented the flowering of German aspirations for an occult enlightenment. Its latter-day adherents do not need to abandon these hopes for a better world and enhanced consciousness and a different mode of life. Their dreams of more lucid understanding, of changed human relationships, of a new approach to nature, of a world freed of spiritual narrowness are all eminently worth seeking and striving toward.

But realizing such a vision calls for other means, including clear-eyed social critique and political engagement. Those means are all too often hindered, rather than furthered, by esoteric ideals and practices. Far from forsaking their high ambitions, anthroposophists need only reflect candidly on what it is that has kept these aims from being fulfilled for so long. Facing up to their own history, straightforwardly and without excuses, will be an indispensable step on that path.

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