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# Erich Gutkind, «Magical Jew», and his Apocalyptic Visions before the First World War

Marcel Poorthuis

The expression «magical Jews» («Zauberjuden») has been coined by the philosopher Walter Benjamin. With it he referred to the curious phenomenon of a blending between Jewish-mystical elements with occultism and esotericism. Such a blend could be pointed out in Oskar Goldberg's speculations about the Hebrew Bible as a gigantic mathematical riddle, in Benjamin's own reflections upon Kabbalah and philosophy, and in the works of other lesser known persons such as Mynona (ps. of Salomo Friedländer, an anagram of Anonym), Erich Unger, and Erich Gutkind.<sup>1</sup> The Jewish scholar of mysticism, Gershom Scholem, considered the latter an «altogether mystical soul, who had delved in virtually all fields of learning in order to find their secret center, and yet had no contact with anything Jewish and had been almost on the verge of converting to Catholicism».<sup>2</sup> This characteristic betrays the outsider's perspective of the scholar. Gutkind, however, was not a scholar but himself a mystic «from the inside».<sup>3</sup>

Gutkind published his book *Siderische Geburt. Seraphische Wanderung vom Tode der Welt zur Taufe der Tat*, four years before the outbreak of the First World War.<sup>4</sup> In spite of his pseudonym *Volker*, the book betrays a highly elitist conception of art, which is supposed to possess redemptive potential. Decline and resurrection are inextricable interwoven and the final result definitely shows parallels with Kandinsky's *Über das Geistige in der Kunst*, which dated from

<sup>1</sup> Gary Smith, «Die Zauberjuden»: Walter Benjamin, Gershom Scholem, and Other German-Jewish Esoterics between the World Wars, in: *The Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy*, vol. 4 (1995), 227–243. Esoteric influence in the early work of Ernst Bloch, with whom Gutkind became friends, is likewise unmistakable.

<sup>2</sup> Gershom Scholem, *From Berlin to Jerusalem*, Frankfurt a. M. 1977, 80.

<sup>3</sup> «Mystical» in this context does not refer to Jewish mysticism, but rather to a blend of esotericism and Christian spirituality, as we will see later on.

<sup>4</sup> Volker (Erich Gutkind), *Siderische Geburt. Seraphische Wanderung vom Tode der Welt zur Taufe der Tat*, Berlin 1910.

one year later. In it, Kandinsky describes abstract art as the royal road to be taken by modern art. «Das Geistige», sometimes translated as «the spiritual» in reality indicates abstraction from concrete images in order to reach the essence of art.<sup>5</sup> It was the period in which abstract art began to claim birth right in the European society. Erich Gutkind knew Kandinsky and his own thoughts took shape in exchange with this Russian painter, although Gutkind himself was not active in visual arts.

Not the vision of the world but the end of the world and the dawn of a total new reality is what interests Gutkind. He even addresses it:

«You! Our time is resurrection, divinity is no longer a picture of our mind, but becomes deed. This requires a rupture with nature, with matter and with death, in order to live a seraphic existence, in which by sharing divine existence death will be conquered. The sidereal birth will take place when the divine is no longer drawn into the limitations of finite existence, but when the divine will be done by pouring out finite existence in the glowing heights of the stars.»

He offers a diagnosis of his time being both at the height of its development and utterly exhausted:

«Our time is exhausted as at the height of midday. The world reaches its zenith. When everything becomes too narrow the unexpected new world dawns. The redemptive promises of technical achievement, civilization, medicine and science no longer impress us, they do not bring the redemption of the world any closer. Our spiritual achievements become meager, we draw upon the past. Technical achievement remains materialism. Creation is fulfilled, the Father rests and we will act in freedom, transcending the crucifixion of the Son, by embracing the All in divine embracement, as sidereal birth.»<sup>6</sup>

Without claiming to understand all this, we can distill from it one clear element: the firm rejection of progress and of an idea of history developing along an ascending line. The idea of progress, taking as it does its foundation from the past as an extrapolation of it, should be replaced by a truly prophetic vision which takes its strength from the future. Gutkind's younger friend Walter Benjamin – they were friends from 1916 on – would express the same conviction decades later in his well-known *Über den Begriff der Geschichte*.<sup>7</sup> Gutkind phrased his own conviction in the following words:

«Not complacent living, but wandering and divine, unbounded soaring is now our elixir. The doctrine of ceaseless progress no longer wants to satisfy us, for we will recognize, that the World can no longer endlessly progress, but rather rushes to its

<sup>5</sup> Mondriaan, Kandinsky and others reached the abstract via abstraction of concrete images, in contrast with the painter Georg Muche, whose paintings in Galerie Der Sturm were abstract already during the First World War.

<sup>6</sup> Volker (Erich Gutkind), *Siderische Geburt* (see note 4), 11.

<sup>7</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Über den Begriff der Geschichte*, in: *Gesammelte Schriften I-2*, Frankfurt a. Main 1980: «Dieser Sturm treibt ihn [der Engel der Geschichte] unaufhaltsam in die Zukunft, der er den Rücken kehrt, während der Trümmerhaufen vor ihm zum Himmel wächst. Das, was wir den Fortschritt nennen, ist dieser Sturm» (IX).

peak, and if we do not wish to suffocate at the world's peak, something of unheard-of newness must be thrust upon us, which is more than all that has been before. No worldview can satisfy us any longer, only the end of the world, and that end can no longer terrify us, to the end we speak the lustful: You, You!»

The relationship between Benjamin and Gutkind during the twenties needs further research.<sup>8</sup> In this article, however, the focus will be upon the days immediately preceding the First World War.

Two events deserve our attention: the cooperation between Erich Gutkind and the Dutch writer and psychiatrist Frederik van Eeden; and the involvement of both in the foundation of the Forte-Kreis, a spiritual bond for the spiritual government of Europe.<sup>9</sup>

### *Erich Gutkind and Frederik Van Eeden: Welt-Eroberung durch Helden-Liebe*

Van Eeden had read *Siderische Geburt* already July 1910, in the same month of its publication.<sup>10</sup> He was deeply impressed and felt that humanity stood at a turning point in its history. Both Volker and Van Eeden himself had to play a central role in this turning point. Van Eeden liked the criticism of materialism, as he himself had done in his most famous book, an allegorical fairy tale: *De kleine Johannes* (Little John). In it, Pluizer en Cijfer symbolize the vivisection-like attitude of science and economics, by killing what is human, emotional, alive and vibrant.

A striking element in the writings preceding the First World War is a consciousness of being elected as one of the happy few. Kandinsky had spoken of «some unseen and wicked hand», which scatters new obstacles in the way, so that the path often seems blocked and totally obliterated. The rescue seems to come from a human being like ourselves, «except that he has in him a secret power of vision. He sees and points the way».

Kandinsky does not shrink from the use of religious language: he refers to a cross that is heavy to bear for the lonely human being who is scorned and hated. Humanity as such is viewed in strikingly elitist terms: «He drags after him over the stones the heavy chariot of a divided humanity, ever forwards and upwards».

Already in 1910, Frederik van Eeden and Erich Gutkind had composed a manifest that with even more clarity would bring forward both the religious terminology and the elitist outlook: *Welt-Eroberung durch Helden-Liebe* testifies of the same mysticism, coupled with aristocratic spirituality. Its subtitle: ein Aufruf zur Sammlung gerichtet an die königlichen des Geistes, [a call to come

<sup>8</sup> Smith, «Die Zauberjuden» (see note 1), 240–241. Erich Gutkind and Walter Benjamin would remain loyal to utopian projects after the war. In the early 1920s, they had plans to emigrate in order to found a Hebrew state on the island of Capri.

<sup>9</sup> See my article: The Forte-Kreis: an utopian attempt to spiritual leadership over Europe, (forthcoming).

<sup>10</sup> Frederik van Eeden, *Dagboek* [Diary], part 2, Culemborg 1971, July 21, 1910; Jan Fontijn, *Trots verbrijzeld. Het leven van Frederik van Eeden vanaf 1901*, Amsterdam 1996, 254.

together directed to the Royal people of the spirit] is characteristic of the outlook. On closer scrutiny, the manifest appears to consist of two parts that show considerable differences. The first part is by Van Eeden, whose outlook consist of economic preoccupations – he had just failed in the enterprise of Walden, a utopian colony in Bussum, the Netherlands and had become convinced of the central role of «inspired millionaires». This is how the first lines run:

«Noblemen of all peoples, unite! When the crowd speaks of rulers and kings, it refers to the leaders and rulers of human labour and thinks first and foremost of official kings, the crowned hereditary or chosen leaders of peoples and of states. It knows quite well, however, that these often cherish the title and the pomp, whereas the true leaders are the politicians, or rather the men of fortune, the kings of the money. The organization of mankind is not just a material economical affair, but also a spiritual affair. [...] The Royal Man – the Prophet, the Poet, the Sage – is understood by only very few people.»

There is an element of utopian socialism in the text, be it of a peculiar kind:

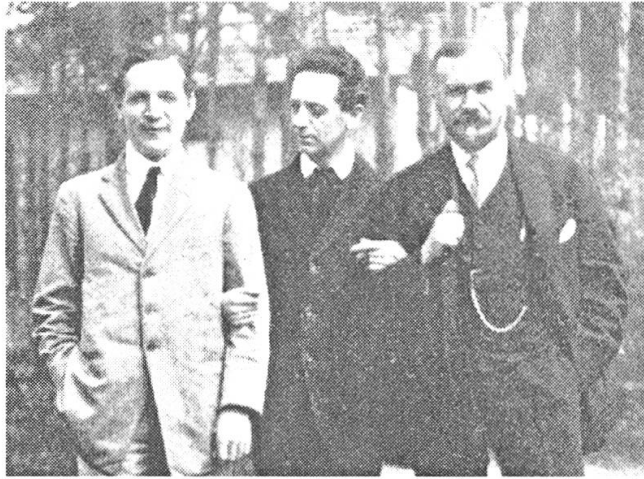
«The conflicts between the Royal Man and the crowd are always rooted in money. [...] The Royal Man considers money as a mere trifle and a toy and does not care about it. Suddenly he discovers how it intrudes into his deepest and most sacred feelings. [...] For the Royal Man every word contains a lie and all money is false. The crowd honors money as if it were an equivalent achievement. This is the old lie of the herd, which has satisfied the crowd during centuries already.»

The elitist outlook may also have been influenced by a certain Darwinist perspective – Van Eeden's father was as a biologist, in close contact with Darwin and with Schopenhauer and others and was himself founder of the Colonial Museum in Haarlem. Next to that, Van Eeden is convinced that history will be made by great men, heroes and wise men, but not by politicians, official spokesmen of the Christian Church and of other religions.<sup>11</sup> Van Eeden was convinced of the wide gap that separated Jesus from the Christ of the churches. Utopian anarchism as would be propagated by the members of the Forte-Kreis as well, such as by Martin Buber and Gustav Landauer, cherished a strong suspicion against centralist power and state control.

Gutkind's writing in the second part of *Welt-Eroberung durch Helden-Liebe* is far more esoteric. He views the «low needs» rooted in poverty, as necessary, but not as essential. It is the «high need» that brings us closer to the divine. The labourers will never discover that on their own. The rich will feel the dissatisfaction that is needed in order to reach such a «higher need». Technical advancement has uprooted mankind, although mankind should be liberated from a mere natural position. In order to transcend individualism, mankind has to reach for the divine and the genuinely social. We have to acquire a new relationship to the body and the blood, which transcends a materialist outlook. Neither should we aim for the divine above earthly life: the divine is dynamism, is life itself. Re-

<sup>11</sup> Cp. also Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero Worship and the Heroic in History* (1840).

demption will take place when man has embraced God and world simultaneously in his consciousness, not the one at the expense of the other.<sup>12</sup> This new divine consciousness will no longer be bound by causality, but will be absolutely free. Perhaps not the individual <I> is intended here, but the Soul of the World.



Upton Sinclair – Erich Gutkind – Frederik van Eeden  
(in: *Frederik van Eeden*, Dagboek, deel 3, Culmborg 1971, 68)

The individual has to free himself from material bonds in order to enter the realm of the ecstatic, the divine. Capitalism is a necessary stage, but will die out in order to make way for the New Royal People. «In these royal seamen, in the metaphysical heroes glowing with divine love will be the beginning.»<sup>13</sup> The relationship of the divine to the world is like a dance, bringing dynamism in dead matter. Hence transcendence and matter are not excluding categories, not opposites. After Plato who placed the ideas above matter, *Welt-Eroberung durch Helden-Liebe* will abolish the dualistic dichotomy between God and world.

It should be noted that the clarity of the <hour of midday>, as mentioned in the *Siderische Geburt*, is meant allegorically. It stands for a catastrophic dominance of rational science, whereas the night side of existence offers the redemption by art, dreams, creativity and youth. The absence of God in science can be replaced by the divinization of the human being himself, who will discover his potential as creator. Especially youth has the potential to create a new community. The influence of the young Buber is obvious here. One may also be reminded of the Kabbalistic individualistic speculations of Mynona (Salomo Friedländer), who argued that the «schöpferische Differenz», the creative difference between Creator and man could be transcended by artistic perfection in order to reach a

<sup>12</sup> Ute Nicolaus, *Souverän und Martyrer. Hugo von Hofmannsthal's späte Trauerspiel-dichtung*, Würzburg 2004, 30–31, points to Buddhist influence here.

<sup>13</sup> Frederik van Eeden/Volker, *Welt-Eroberung durch Helden-Liebe*, Berlin/Leipzig 1911, 122. The Dutch historian Fenneken van Doesum, who regrettably passed away very early, in her book: *Koninklijken van Geest. De vriendschap tussen Frederik van Eeden en Erich Gutkind*, Gaanderen 2006, 54–78, compared the two writers.



«schöpferische Indifferenz». His book with the same title appeared only in 1918, which makes influence of Gutkind upon Friedländer plausible.

The book *Welt-Eroberung durch Helden-Liebe* served as a kind of program for the Forte-Kreis, a circle of artists and thinkers aiming at the spiritual government of Europe. The members are supposed to take part in a so-called *Blutbund*, an expression probably coined by the anarchist Gustav Landauer to express genuine relationship freed from the constraints of this world, in contrast with artificial capitalist relations built on profit.<sup>14</sup> Several lists of potential members exist and sometimes one gets the impression that hundreds of idealistic artists from the whole of Europe and even from the Far East (the founder of the Republic of China Sun Yat-sen and the Bengalese poet Rabindranath Tagore are mentioned as some of them), were involved. Just to mention some of the consulted persons: William Archer, Poul Bjerre, Erich Gutkind, G.S. Lee, Jeanette Lee, F.T. Marinetti, Ezra Pound, Rainer Maria Rilke, F.F. Roget, Romain Rolland, Sun Yat Sen, Upton Sinclair, Karl Spitteler, Rabindranath Tagore, the millionaire Hjalmar Wyk, George Bernard Shaw, the philosopher Max Scheler, the actor Paul Wiecke, the German writer Walter von Molo, Walter Rathenau. The actual circle consisted, however, of eight persons: the writer and psychiatrist Frederik van Eeden, the Dutch writer from Chinese descent Henri Borel, the Swedish psychiatrist Poul Bjerre, the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber, the Jewish anarchist Gustav Landauer, the Jewish writer and esoterist Erich Gutkind, the Nietzschean writer Florens Christian Rang and the multitalented Theodor Däubler.<sup>15</sup> The politician Walther Rathenau and the writer Romain Rolland remained somewhat at a distance. A second circle had been foreseen in which many of the people just mentioned would feature. The outbreak of the war would, however, change everything.

#### *The Forte-Kreis, Gutkind and Gutkind's wife*

The name Forte-Kreis was derived from the village of Forte dei Marmi at the Italian coast, where meetings in a serene atmosphere should take place. Still, the word Forte in combination with the marble appealed already to the participants without having seen the place itself. The historical background of the Forte-Kreis has been studied in depth several times. In addition, the individual members of the Forte-Kreis have documented their participation in a variety of ways: in letters, in diaries, in philosophical essays and so on. A collection of diaries during the First World War has been edited by the writer Romain Rolland, who, al-

<sup>14</sup> Ulrich Linse, Vom «Gemeingeist». Über Gustav Landauers Ratenutopie, in: Richard Faber/Christine Holste (Hg.), *Der Potsdamer Forte-Kreis. Eine utopische Intellektuellenassoziation zur europäischen Friedenssicherung*, Würzburg 2001, 123–143.

<sup>15</sup> Däubler (1876–1934) wrote the poem *Das Nordlicht* in 1910, in which he combined a quite traditional versification with gloomy and visionary chords: «Wir sehn das Leben uns die Jugend rauben, / Es ängstigt uns das Alter und der Tod, / Drum wollen wir an einen Anfang glauben / Und schwören auf ein ewiges Urgebot.»

though not strictly a member himself, was acquainted with the circle and agreed with its pacifism. Some of the members have themselves been studied quite exhaustively.

In order to assess the spiritual background of the Forte-Kreis, I will describe some phases of its inception, not as a historical reconstruction, but as a process revealing both common ideals and elitism. Without claiming to have researched all the documents, a valuable treasure constitutes the archive of Frederik van Eeden in Amsterdam, together with his four volumes of diaries. They document a feeling of impending doom and a sense of a new era to be inaugurated by the Kreis, simultaneously with an intensification of mutual debate and a thorough exchange of spiritual ideals. It is well-known that a deep dissension over the role of Germany in the First World War and a heated controversy over pacifism vis-à-vis the «command of the hour» caused the eventual abolishment of the Forte-Kreis. In spite of that, many members continued to refer to its ideals even decennia later. The relevance of the Forte-Kreis lies in its ability to attract creative minds from widely different backgrounds, as such documenting the spiritual atmosphere of Europe at a turning point of its history, the ominous year 1914.

As I have highlighted the clash between Van Eeden and Martin Buber extensively in another publication, I want to highlight the role of Gutkind and others somewhat more. The first (and last) meeting of the Forte-Kreis, would take place June 1914.

Van Eeden had been silent in the conversations during the first meeting, which was felt by the other participants as a dialogical presence. Still, the language barrier caused some discomfort among some participants. It was also felt that the Jewish participants were too dominant in the conversation. Van Eeden was considered the organizer of the Forte-Kreis, but he himself felt initially unsure, whether this in his perception rather bourgeois company of men smoking cigars and drinking Schnapps would really be the hoped for spiritual government of Europe. Things changed, however, when the following occurred, according to all present the main event of the conference. Martin Buber maintained that Jews could understand Jesus better than Christians. After an emotional disagreement, Buber and Rang stood up and embraced each other. Van Eeden and Henri Borel had not fathomed the real depth of the issue, but from that moment on, this «sacramental gesture of peace and of reconciliation» (Borel) was a sure token that the Forte-Kreis could establish peace on a world wide scale as well.

Another topic was the participation of women. Striking is the total absence of women in this group of geniuses. Initially the members' wives were welcome, and Van Eeden pleaded for Erich Gutkind's wife Lucy Gutkind. He met with opposition, which came down to the following: women were welcome, but not as spouses, but as free personalities. Still Van Eeden threatened to leave the meeting. «It was a critical moment. However, we restored the broken unity and



we all shook hands.»<sup>16</sup> In an earlier stage, the American Allen Upward had argued that women had to be left out because «they were more dangerous than gunpowder»!<sup>17</sup> Sexual passion would destroy the noble aim of the group. Apparently, the building of bridges also had its limits!

Characteristic were the accounts in retrospect by Van Eeden and Gutkind after the meeting. Van Eeden:

«What has happened is so powerful and overwhelming that it takes one's breath away. The seven people form one untouchable personality. Nobody has lost, all have won. And over all hovers God's spirit, the spirit of freedom in solidarity, of humility in pride, of richness in poverty.»<sup>18</sup>

And Gutkind wrote in similar vein to Wassily Kandinsky:

«Something happened which made the sceptics among us silent, and even the optimists could not have hoped for. Here in our house in Potsdam, in the large flower garden at the lake, some of our friends came together. [...] And they were only a few hours together when not only a unity, but something happened that we should call a miracle, indescribable, you should see it for yourself. [...] It had nothing to do with sentimental feelings. It was naked life itself, experience, among us, a transcendent being, without which we could not live further. Simultaneously we felt – bordering on magic – that we held in our hands a power to bring the big decisive electrical strike into the world.»<sup>19</sup>

A larger circle of the Kreis would meet in due time, it was planned. The outbreak of the war on July 30, 1914, prevented that meeting. The war would soon prevent any further meeting of the Forte-Kreis.

### *The clash over the war in the Forte-Kreis: the ecstasy of Buber and Gutkind*

Although Van Eeden had been quite silent during that first meeting, in the aftermath in the summer of 1914, he became more outspoken. When the German Empire began to mobilize on 30 July 1914, France – sporting significant animosity over the German conquest of Alsace-Lorraine during the Franco-Prussian War – ordered French mobilization on 1 August. Germany declared war on Russia on the same day. It was Rang's idea to write a collective diary by all members of the Forte-Kreis, which would be edited later on by Romain Rolland. This idea has probably contributed to a drastic polarization of the group. Rang wrote to Van Eeden 24.8.1914:

<sup>16</sup> Van Doesum, *Koninklijken van Geest* (see note 13), 83–84; 54–78; Frederik van Eeden, *Dagboek* [Diary], part 3, Culemborg 1971, 12 juni 1914.

<sup>17</sup> Letter to Frederik van Eeden, March 5, 1914, quoted in Fontijn, *Trots verbrijzeld* (see note 10), 339. Later on, Martin Buber, would propose Margarethe Susman as a member, but she remained at the fringe of the Forte-Kreis.

<sup>18</sup> Van Doesum, *Koninklijken van Geest* (see note 13), 84; 54–78; Frederik van Eeden, *Dagboek* [Diary], part 3, Culemborg 1971, 13 juni 1914.

<sup>19</sup> Letter July 5, 2014, quoted in: Christine Holste, *Der Forte-Kreis (1910–1915). Rekonstruktion eines utopischen Versuchs*, Stuttgart 1992, 118.

«My dear friend, I am in the army, hurray! And I may join this struggle of the most noble and peaceful of peoples on earth against jealousy and resentment, which wish to strangle his throat. I thank God...Hurray! I call to the circle of friends... Eeden, the hour of the world has come, its beating heart, however, is Prussian German!»

This letter must have felt as an earthquake. The inspiration of the group was no longer fed by a prescience of impending disaster and by the necessity to develop new spiritual values. According to Rang, the inspiration was intrinsically connected to the outbreak of the war and to an unconditional support of Germany as the call of the hour. Van Eeden wrote to his friend Henri Borel that Rang's position was untenable; his attitude was evolved from a pacifist to a staunch patriot who was happy to serve Germany with arms for a just cause against the supposed betrayal by England. Van Eeden spoke of Rang's patriotic drunkenness and detected in Gutkind as well a «roughening by Nationalitis.» Van Eeden repeated his diagnosis in an open letter to all members of the Forte-Kreis, in which he spoke of an intoxication, of mass hysteria and of Rang's drunkenness.

At that time, Van Eeden was not sure about Buber's position, but he would soon find out. Gutkind radicalized quickly and spoke about a holy war against the English empire. Buber appeared to be sad about Van Eeden's reaction and Rang felt deeply offended by this «Holländerei des Geistes». Rang considered Van Eeden's position in the Forte-Kreis as no longer tenable. Rang's letter to Buber from 18.9.1914, however, contained much more than just an admittance that serving Germany in the war was unavoidable:

«Yes, Buber, the purification and liberation of the soul, about which you speak, this is what I mean. [...] Something apodictic, necessary, transcendental breaks through! Man belongs again in freedom to God. [...] The one, all determinative power breaks through in the conscience of the people: the ability to sacrifice. Wherefore? Who knows? Certainly not for some goal that would be convenient: not for regaining peace, prosperity, and so on. This would deny the depth and height of this explosion in Europe, in the world. Rather is it the new age of belief that dawns; wherein one believes what one does, because one does what God wants, not what people want. I do not speak about enthusiasm for the war – that fortunately does not hold Germany in the grip – but I speak about a tremendous inner determination to give one's life for the unknown higher good. Nation and fatherland are just coverings... the divine is the nucleus.»

These words were implicitly directed against Van Eeden's accusations. Not only Buber, but also Gutkind felt deeply wounded by this criticism. It may not be a coincidence that both were Jewish. Both longed for existential experiences that would transcend mere individualism and would allow a supra-individual ecstasy, which Judaism did not seem to offer to them at that time. They both found such a movement in the war. In addition, Jewish soldiers could now prove against anti-Semitic German patriots their loyalty to the German culture. This loyalty would no longer be a matter of culture but of action. Both Buber and Gutkind had emphasized strongly the importance of the deed, without bothering too much about the moral direction of those deeds.

It was Gustav Landauer who displayed the clearest political orientation, while staying aloof from rhetorical German patriotism or massive anti-English sentiments. He detected in the German attitude an immature political instinct and a «flight into the apocalyptic sea of mists of unspeakably confusing and confused religious and metaphysical general statements.»<sup>20</sup>

Buber's search was to transcend rationalism and individualism by enthusiasm and a collective movement and here it was. He felt that now the concept of people [Volk] had become a profound reality. «Millions have applied for voluntary service, among them Wolfskehl and Gundolph.» Karl Wolfskehl and Friedrich Gundolph were German-Jewish poets in the circle of Stefan George. Buber deplored not to have stood the medical examination, but tried to contribute in other ways: «If not at the front, then still in the neighborhood», Buber wrote to Hans Kohn. Buber reproached Van Eeden, rightly perhaps, to condemn German's invasion of Belgium, without noting that Belgium had made an agreement with England and France against Germany. But Buber had his own passions about Germany and the war. It is striking how especially the Jews in Germany were eager to demonstrate their loyalty to Germany. The Jewish writer Hugo Bergmann avowed in the midst of the war, that he feels «how deep we Jews are entrenched in German culture, now that we fight for it. Our generation has only an artificial relationship towards the Bible and Hassidic Judaism, whereas our attitude to Fichte or any other European thinker who shows us the way is far more natural». Perhaps the German Jews saw an opportunity to prove to the anti-Semites that Jews were among the most patriotic Germans. The tragedy of German Jewry is that this demonstration proved utterly in vain. The separate registration of Jews in Germany during the war was a bitter disappointment. Jews were still set apart and remained so.

This controversy within the Forte-Kreis is still able to divide the spirits nearly a century later. Whereas most commentators agree with Van Eeden that Rang was intoxicated with a drunkenness of war, Christine Holste seems to judge Van Eeden's attitude as a birds-eye perspective and as a condescending condemnation from a safe distance. Whatever is the case, Holste's judgment cannot be applied to Landauer's attitude who had so much in common with Buber, but remained his opponent in this case for years after. He considered Buber's political thinking dangerous and infected by a thirst for absolutes. The ideal of «Realisation» [Verwirklichung] of an unconditional heroic life created what Landauer condemned as an aesthetic approach to war.

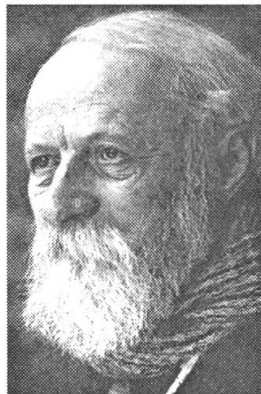
Buber explicitly announced his leaving of the Forte-Kreis one year later. He thought that his friend the Jewish anarchist Landauer would agree with him that Van Eeden's criticism, coming as it did from a Dutchman, was totally unacceptable. Landauer, however, was deeply shocked by Buber's idea of a Messianic

<sup>20</sup> Letter of Landauer to Poul Bjerre 27.7.1915, quoted in Martin Buber, *Briefwechsel aus sieben Jahrzehnten I*, Heidelberg 1972, 64–65.

vocation of the German people in the midst of the war. Landauer wrote a painful letter to Buber 12.5.1916, which Buber chose to omit from his edition of Landauer's letters, but can be found in the edition of Buber's exchange of letters. In the first edition of *Der Geist des Orients und das Judentum* [The spirit of the East and Judaism], Buber had argued that the German people was the only people to have received the vocation to be a bridge between East and West.<sup>21</sup> Together with Buber's nearly mystical interpretation of the war as a kind of «catharsis», especially for German Jews, this phrase formed a nearly insurmountable gap between the two friends. Landauer called Buber a «Kriegsbuber» and denied to him the right to propagate his «aestheticism» about the war. Many young Jews felt betrayed by Buber, Landauer wrote, while stating: «It is not betrayal, but obfuscation. Attributing to Germany the role of redeemer in the midst of this war, without taking into account the colonial conquests of Germany, means politics of war.» The Jews on the battlefield do not go to war because they are forced, but out of an overwhelming sense of duty, Landauer summarizes Buber's opinion. Landauer then counters that these poor fellows have only one overwhelming sense ... to live. The war creates a sense of community, Landauer admits, «but who needs this roundabout route?»



G. Landauer



M. Buber

(in: *Frederik van Eeden*, Dagboek, deel 3, Culmborg 1971, 69, 70)

In more than four pages, Landauer pours out his outrage over Buber. It is well-known that for Buber, this letter constituted one of the most painful experiences of his lifetime. In the second edition of *Der Geist des Judentums und die Orient*, Buber tacitly changed the phrase about Germany's vocation: «For this world-historic mission, Europe has at its disposal a mediating people that acquired all the wisdom and all the skills of the Occident without losing its original Oriental character, a people called to link Orient and Occident in fruitful reciprocity, just as it is perhaps called to fuse the spirit of the East and the West in a new teaching. How this will come about cannot as yet be outlined». Curiously, all readers will henceforth have thought that here Buber had Judaism in

<sup>21</sup> Martin Buber, *Das Judentum und die Juden, Vom Geist des Judentums, Der heilige Weg, Das Judentum und die Menschheit, Die Erneuerung des Judentums*, in: Martin Buber, *Der Jude und sein Judentum*, Cologne 1963, 4–142, contains the corrected version.

mind. In any case, Buber would turn his back to the unqualified and unconditional enthusiasm (‹Begeisterung›) as the foundation of his thought only a few years later. By developing what would constitute his major contribution to philosophy, the dialogical principle, he managed to steer away from the fascination of the irrational and charismatic that threatened to become inhumane. He would honour the memory of his friend Landauer, who was assassinated in 1919, with a dedication in his essay *Der heilige Weg* and decades later with a chapter in his book on anarchism: *Pfade in Utopia*.

Erich Gutkind was convinced that Germany defended the culture of Bach, Eckhardt and Boehme against ‹English mercantilism›. Roughly spoken then, Van Eeden, Landauer and Borel stood on one side, whereas Buber, Rang and Gutkind stood on the other side. Letters were exchanged and new ideals brought forward. Bjerre had even been busy building a wooden villa in Sweden with guestrooms and even an altar, especially designed for the Forte-Kreis.<sup>22</sup> They would never convene again, to Bjerre's disappointment. Bjerre had always combated religious narrow-mindedness and sectarian tendencies. The spiritual ideal of a new mankind, dedicated to peace and happiness and full of art, culture and noblesse, had turned into an apocalyptic scenery of the First World war, capable of ruining even these friendships, although the ideal remained. Even in 1928, Gutkind attempted to bring together the ‹geniuses of Europe›, complete with a new list of names, as many of the old members had died.

#### *Once more: the Siderische Geburt*

Because of its esoteric character and due to the rise of the Forte-Kreis, Gutkind's *Siderische Geburt* has remained somewhat in the dark. Still, this apocalyptic – utopian document has influenced major thinkers such as the Jewish Marxist Ernst Bloch, who speaks of the humanization of the divine and refers to astral myth. Likewise utopian thinking had been in the air before the First World War: painter and writer Alfred Kubin published his surrealist utopian novel *Die andere Seite* in 1909, hence before *Siderische Geburt*.<sup>23</sup> Many Jewish writers, some of them I have mentioned above, testify of a remarkable ‹otherworldliness›, which may be explained out of a deeply rooted ambiguous feeling towards German culture, which they embraced without being accepted, while simultaneously

<sup>22</sup> Note that ideas of a revival of a sacrificial Dionysiac cult to strengthen the blood bond were around, e.g. propagated by the poet Wolfskehl.

<sup>23</sup> Kubin possessed a copy of Gutkind's book in his library. Cf. Friedrich Niewöhner, *Der grosse Gesang. Siderische Geburt von Volker*, in: Wilhelm Schmidt-Biggemann (Hg.), *Christliche Kabbala*, Ostfildern 2003, 247–256. See also Kubin's letter in: Michael Klein (Hg.), *Fritz von Herzmanovsky-Orlando. Der Briefwechsel mit Alfred Kubin 1903 bis 1910*, Salzburg 1983, 423.



being strongly alienated from their Jewish background.<sup>24</sup> The radicalism of Gutkind's perspective is, however, astounding: not only economic relations should be turned upside down, but Eros should be freed from its greed and violence, science should be reconnected with divine inspiration. Just like in Ernst Bloch's thinking, the sources of this apocalyptic thinking should not primarily be searched in Judaism, but in «heretical» Christian sects. Let us conclude by a close scrutiny of a small section of no more than a few pages of the *Siderische Geburt*:

«Being driven and driving are intrinsically connected with the meta-individual. The beginning of the meta-individual is the sexual drive. In sexuality the I experiences the Thou for the first time, with irresistible force it is propelled forward in lurching desire, in order to throw itself drunken into the Thou. [...] The crown of the meta-individual, the social dimension in which love and community are interwoven, seems to be a quite other domain. The drive for the social seems quite pale in comparison with the storm of the sexual drive and the human being decides not out of desire, but out of necessity to contribute to the social domain. [...] The social is, however, the crown and the acumen of the meta-individual, and when chosen, not out of herd instinct or from expediency, but freely, it can mark the End of world history. The community of all in seraphic interconnectedness is the last step, where the circle closes itself in the divinity. The mild transcendent glory of the Christ shows already that the unification in community is as divine as the sexual unification. The primitive rough propulsion of the sexes embraces every Thou without choosing, and still we will notice how the sexual drive is nothing else but the urge that eventually this one man and unique woman merge in marriage and how this unique feast causes the cosmos to shiver.»<sup>25</sup>

On the one hand, Gutkind seems to connect the erotic drive with the building of an utopian society, in the sense that the erotic points the way to a liberation from mere individualism. This new social dimension, should on the other hand, not be confused with mere sexuality, as it is precisely the roughness of mere sex as a biological urge, that prevents a seraphic existence. The metaphysical urge of male and female to merge corresponds on the divine level with a similar dynamics. The complementarity of male and female prevents, according to Gutkind, a mere rationalism, as if only the male part should constitute the new utopian society. The image of marriage as the pinnacle of unification may have been developed from the sacramental dimension of marriage as it is developed within Catholicism. One should, however, not exclude the possibility of a Jewish-Kabbalistic influence, as precisely there, marriage and divine conjunction of male and female form a cornerstone of the esoteric system.<sup>26</sup> The identification of the divine with the spirit of history shows some affinities with German

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Gershom Scholem, *Wider den Mythos vom deutsch-jüdischen Gespräch* (1964), published in: *Judaica* 2, Frankfurt a. M. 1995. Often Jewish writers from that period like Gutkind and Wolfskehl return to Judaism later in life, possibly due to the Second World War.

<sup>25</sup> Volker (Erich Gutkind), *Siderische Geburt* (see note 4), 105–106.

<sup>26</sup> See my article: «Carnal Israel» and the Primacy of Touch, in: *Nederlands Theologisch Tijdschrift*, 69/4 (2015), 280–292. In addition, Jewish Kabbala had strongly influenced Christian kabbala, which may have reached Gutkind. He may have studied Jewish kabbalah only after *Siderische Geburt*.



idealism and Romanticism, in which, as will be known, Kabbala was one of the sources of inspiration. Some misogynic topics in Gutkind's esoteric *Siderische Geburt*, such as the impossibility of female genius, may likewise be derived from Nietzschean or Schopenhauerian invectives. Although Gutkind warns against an ascetical misunderstanding of his philosophy, one may assume strong influences of 'heretical' Christian thought, notably of Gnostic provenance. The Gnostic tendency to turn inward and to abandon the world to its wicked provenance of the Demiurge can, however, hardly be reconciled to a genuine apocalyptic stand in which the transformation of the world is expected, not its abandonment.<sup>27</sup> Hence what is unique to the *Siderische Geburt*, is the apocalyptic dimension of it, the intuition of a sudden total transformation of reality in the face of impending disaster.

*Erich Gutkind, «Magical Jew», and his Apocalyptic Visions  
before the First World War*

The founding of the Forte-Kreis in 1914 brought together the great minds of the time to take over the spiritual rule over Europe. Feelings of impending disaster coupled with a grandiose view of a better future prompted artists and religious thinkers such as Martin Buber, Gustav Landauer, the Dutch psychiatrist Frederik van Eeden and the esoteric writer Erich Gutkind (*Siderische Geburt*) to form a «Bund», not unlike the «Blutbund» that the anarchist Landauer advocated. In the wider circle names of Romain Rolland, Rabindranath Tagore and many others are mentioned. In spite of (or thanks to) that, the same year the Forte-Kreis collapsed. The German researcher Christine Holz is convinced that the «Dutch» arrogance of van Eeden caused the problems. Others (among whom myself) were astonished at the belligerent German-chauvinistic rhetoric of the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber, who revealed himself as an apocalyptic thinker of the war as purification. I will focus especially upon the role of Gutkind. What was the significance of the *Siderische Geburt* in heralding a new mankind?

Siderische Geburt – Forte-Kreis – Martin Buber – Gustav Landauer – Frederik van Eeden – Erich Gutkind.

*Erich Gutkind, «Zauberjude», und seine apokalyptischen Visionen  
vor dem Ersten Weltkrieg*

Die Gründung des Forte-Kreises 1914 brachte grosse Denker der Zeit zusammen mit dem Ziel, die spirituelle Vorherrschaft über Europa zu übernehmen. Gefühle eines abgewandten Desasters verbunden mit einer grandiosen Vision einer besseren Zukunft veranlassten Künstler und religiöse Denker wie Martin Buber, Gustav Landauer, den niederländischen Psychiater Frederik van Eeden und den esoterischen Autor Erich Gutkind (*Siderische Geburt*) sich in einem «Bund» nicht unähnlich dem «Blutbund», welchen der Anarchist Landauer verfocht, zusammenzuschliessen. Im weiteren Umfeld des Bundes werden Romain Rolland, Rabindranath Tagore und viele andere genannt. Trotzdem (oder gerade deshalb) brach der Forte-Kreis noch im gleichen Jahr zusammen. Die deutsche Forscherin Christine Holz ist davon überzeugt, dass die «niederländische» Arroganz van Eedens Probleme hervorrief. Andere (zu denen ich mich selber zähle) waren erstaunt über die aggressive deutschnationalistische Rhetorik des jüdischen Philosophen Martin Buber, der sich als apokalyptischer Denker des Krieges als Reinigung zeigte. Ich werde in diesem

<sup>27</sup> See for background to this probably too global statement my article: The A-Cosmic Doctrine of Marcion and Paul's Apocalypticism: Theo-Political Implications, in: *Political Theology*, 17/3 (2016), 1–8.

Vortrag besonders auf die Rolle Gutkinds fokussieren. Welches war die Bedeutung der Siderischen Geburt für die Ankündigung einer neuen Menschheit?

Siderische Geburt – Forte-Kreis – Martin Buber – Gustav Landauer – Frederik van Eeden – Erich Gutkind.

*Erich Gutkind, «Juif magic», et ses visions apocalyptiques avant la première guerre mondiale*

La création du Forte-Kreis en 1914 réunit de grands penseurs de l'époque dans le but de prendre le pouvoir spirituel en Europe. Les sentiments d'un désastre éloigné joints à la vision grandiose d'un avenir meilleur incitèrent des artistes et penseurs religieux comme Martin Buber, Gustav Landauer, le psychiatre néerlandais Frederik van Eeden et l'auteur ésotérique Erich Gutkind (Siderische Geburt) à conclure un «pacte», non bien différent du «Blutbund» défendu par l'anarchiste Landauer. Dans l'environnement plus large du pacte, Romain Rolland, Rabindranath Tagore et bien d'autres encore sont mentionnés. Malgré tout (ou justement pour cette raison), le Forte-Kreis s'effondra la même année. La chercheuse allemande Christine Holz est persuadée que l'arrogance «néerlandaise» de van Eeden a causé des problèmes. D'autres (dont je fais partie) étaient étonnés de la rhétorique nationaliste allemande agressive du philosophe juif Martin Buber, qui se présenta comme penseur apocalyptique de la guerre comme purification. Dans cette présentation, je me concentrerai particulièrement sur le rôle de Gutkind. Quelle était la signification de la Siderische Geburt pour l'annonce d'une nouvelle humanité?

Siderische Geburt – Forte-Kreis – Martin Buber – Gustav Landauer – Frederik van Eeden – Erich Gutkind.

*Erich Gutkind, «Ebreo magico», e le sue visioni apocalittiche prima della prima guerra mondiale*

Nel 1914 la fondazione del Forte-Kreis riunì grandi menti dell'epoca con l'obiettivo di riprendere l'egemonia spirituale sull'Europa. La sensazione di un disastro evitato collegata ad una visione grandiosa di un futuro migliore, portò artisti e pensatori religiosi come Martin Buber, Gustav Landauer, lo psichiatra olandese Frederik van Eeden e l'autore esoterico Erich Gutkind (Siderische Geburt) ad associarsi in una «alleanza», non dissimile dal «Blutbund» sostenuta dall'anarchico Landauer. Nell'ambiente vicino all'alleanza si collocano Romain Rolland, Rabindranath Tagore e molti altri. Nonostante ciò (o forse proprio per questo) lo stesso anno il Forte-Kreis crollò. La ricercatrice tedesca Christine Holz è convinta che a causare problemi fu l'arroganza olandese di van Eeden. Altri (tra cui io stesso) si sono stupiti per l'aggressività della retorica nazionalistica tedesca del filosofo ebreo Martin Buber, il quale si rivela un pensatore apocalittico che vede nella guerra un'istanza di purificazione. In questa presentazione mi concentrerò in particolare sul ruolo di Gutkind. Quale fu il significato della Siderische Geburt per l'annuncio di una nuova umanità?

Siderische Geburt – Forte-Kreis – Martin Buber – Gustav Landauer – Frederik van Eeden – Erich Gutkind.

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