



Rudolf Steiner, 1906
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Carl Lorenz Graf von Brockdorff and his wife Sophie von Ahlefeldt (Brockdorff) were in charge of Germany's largest theosophical lodge, the Berlin lodge, formerly the "German Theosophical Society."² Their tasks involved helping to establish new "branches" and looking after the central theosophical lending library, which offered a mail service. Rudolf Steiner's emphatic verdict in the fall of 1902 was, "I realized that they were among the noblest of people."³

Rudolf Steiner did not mention in any of his preserved letters what his impressions were on first entering their house or during the lecture courses he gave there, but he said in his memorial address for Sophie von Brockdorff after her death in June 1906, "Those who remember how quietly and efficiently the Countess gathered the most varied minds in her home to send out rays of light will fully appreciate all that she did."⁴ Whether Rudolf Steiner was skeptical when he received the Brockdorff's first invitation is not known. A few years later he wrote in one of his basic works (*Theosophy*) that it is of the greatest importance for one's spiritual development to meet events and people without prejudice. "If you look at a fact in the world with previously formed judgments in mind, you will not be open to the calm and profound effect it may have on you."⁵ The Brockdorff's invitation to speak at their house was such a fact and it is more than likely that Rudolf Steiner approached it without prejudice, despite his earlier, quite severe, criticism of the Theosophical Society that had been based on a previously formed judgment.

Because of the way it mingled material and spiritual realities, as well as other obvious shortcomings, the theosophy of Franz Hartmann

had not convinced Rudolf Steiner when he came across it in Vienna, in the circle around Marie Lang and Friedrich Eckstein. (“He simply declared it to be spiritually feeble.”)⁶ Yet, Rudolf Steiner had, at the time, appreciated Marie Lang’s and Friedrich Eckstein’s obvious spirituality—as he had the circle of truly seeking individuals who gathered around Marie Lang. Toward the end of his time in Vienna, he read the first theosophical books (Mabel Collins’ *Light on the Path* and Alfred Percy Sinnett’s much discussed *Esoteric Buddhism*), but he probably did not go much further than that. (“I met various theosophists but nothing in what they had to say induced me to develop an interest in the kind of writings propagated by this Theosophical Society.”)⁷

Rudolf Steiner stayed in touch with Eckstein and Lang after leaving Vienna; he also read new theosophical publications while he was in Weimar, writing critical reviews in which he dealt with the then controversial phenomena of hypnosis and spiritism—they were for him as justified as they were problematic⁸—as well as the dangers of taking on without reflection the Eastern spirituality favored in theosophical circles. In a book review of 1892 he wrote that he did indeed think highly of the “intuitive Eastern wisdom” and its imagery. (“It is characteristic of the Eastern spiritual life that it creates images that express in the most detailed and pictorial way the great thoughts of humanity.”)⁹ At the same time he spoke of the—entirely different—role that fell to Central Europe that consisted in the conscious taking hold of the “I.” This task could not be bypassed by borrowing from ancient Eastern wisdom or by making recourse to “spiritistic suggestions.” (“In basing their doctrine on the suggestions of a consciousness that is detached from the ‘I,’ the spiritists are mocking science, because science can only rest on judgments formed by the ‘I.’ By adopting views suggested to them from outside they place themselves on the same level with those who believe in Revelation. It shows the dullness and cowardice of today’s rationality that people often seek to gain knowledge of the world without thinking.”)¹⁰ In Berlin—three years before he gave his first lectures at the Brockdorff’s house—Rudolf Steiner occupied himself again with the theosophist

Franz Hartmann, who enjoyed great popularity in Germany and Austria. When Hartmann founded the “International Theosophical Brotherhood” and published a German translation of the *Bhagavad-Gita*, Rudolf Steiner wrote (in his *Magazin für Litteratur*) that the theosophists failed to recognize the responsibility of Central Europe for the advancement of knowledge and referred to the followers of Hartmann as ignorant and arrogant:

They shrug their shoulders at the European approach to science, deriding its reliance on reason and insisting that the truth can only be found on the Oriental path. . . . Nothing but empty phrases borrowed from Eastern writings without a trace of substance. Their inner experiences are mere hypocrisy. Adopting phrases from writings that in themselves constitute profound literature, and using them to declare the entire Western striving for knowledge to be worthless, is nothing short of impertinent. The Theosophists know nothing of the depth and inwardness that pertains to the Western approach to science, and yet they reject it as superficial and purely conceptual.

Their talk of highest knowledge (which they do not possess) and their mystifying way of citing foreign knowledge without comprehension nonetheless seems to mesmerize a number of people today. The Theosophical Society is spread all over Europe and has followers in all the major cities. Their opaque ramblings about experiencing the divine within seem to attract many more people than the clear, bright, conceptual knowledge of the West. (1897)¹¹

Rudolf Steiner nonetheless accepted Count Brockdorff’s invitation in the summer of 1900 to give a lecture in the Theosophical Library, a venue that was not associated with Hartmann. The Count and Countess received him equally without prejudice, although they knew nothing of him—and were probably unaware of the highly critical article on theosophists he had published in the *Magazin*. When it was proposed to them to ask Rudolf Steiner whether he would speak about Friedrich Nietzsche on one of their Thursday afternoons,¹² they accepted gladly. As Rudolf Steiner mentioned in his memorial address, the Countess “quietly and efficiently . . . gathered the most varied

minds in her home to send out rays of light.” “The audience was very impressed with the [Nietzsche] talk and the Brockdorffs asked Rudolf Steiner if he was also prepared to lecture on a more theosophical topic.”¹³ One step led to another—from the esoteric evening on Goethe’s *Tale* to the winter courses in the Theosophical Library, which were enthusiastically received, not only by Ms. Brockdorff. These regular weekly evening lectures (each followed by a discussion),¹⁴ which Rudolf Steiner presented on Tuesday nights between seven and ten o’clock, brought new life to the lodge’s theosophical work, which had almost come to a standstill.¹⁵ Marie von Sivers, who attended the lecture course on mysticism, urged Rudolf Steiner there and then to join the Theosophical Society. He declared this to be impossible since “I strictly differentiate between Eastern and Western mysticism.”¹⁶

Neither during the courses he gave at the Brockdorffs’ house nor in the subsequent transcriptions did Rudolf Steiner ever make any concessions to the Theosophical Society, to Eastern mysticism, or their enforced reception in Central Europe. When asked to speak about a “more theosophical topic,” he chose Goethe’s spirituality, followed by Christianity, its mystical origins and its evolution in the West—in the age of the German mystics and their encounter with modern science. Nor did he ever refer to any theosophical publications. Two decades later he looked back on this situation and wrote:

The theosophical literature I had known otherwise was most disagreeable to me in method and attitude; it never presented anything I could relate to in my own work. I gave the lectures, relating what I said to the mysticism of the Middle Ages. I found a way of expressing the spiritual knowledge I wanted to convey in the views of the mystics, from Master Eckhart to Jakob Böhme.¹⁷

When lecturing at the Workers’ School and other venues Rudolf Steiner usually took his audiences’ level of understanding and their previous knowledge into account. With the Theosophical Society he could only do this to an extent, but he nevertheless made a thorough

impression and was asked not only to return to give more lectures, but also to consider joining the theosophical movement. This he was unprepared to do, however. Marie von Sivers later recalled personal conversations she had with Rudolf Steiner at the time, in the late fall of 1900:

He could never, as he said [then], do anything other than point to the difference between the two spiritual approaches and emphasize the significance of the Western path. Humanity, he said, could not revert to ancient wisdom alone but needed to stride forward on the paths of spiritual development history had paved and absorb the intellectual achievements that had been made. While the wisdom of the East deserved to be admired and studied with greatest sensitivity, it failed to consider the progressing historical development. It was the mission of the West to contribute this element. This is also where he saw his own task. The Mystery of Golgotha, which was not recognized in its significance by the Oriental people or the followers of Eastern philosophies, was central to his life and work.

I often heard him say this, as early as in the fall of 1900, whenever an eager theosophist tried to convince him otherwise. And the firmness of his words betrayed the strong will and historical necessity that spoke through them.¹⁸

Rudolf Steiner needed to be independent—and he lectured not only at the Theosophical Library in the winter of 1900/1901, but continued to speak at the Workers' School, to *Die Kommenden*, the "Association for the Defense against Anti-Semitism," the Giordano Bruno Society, and to the independent Berlin student organization *Freie Studentenschaft*. All these groups and institutions were small and not very influential, but the seeking, modern, critical minds Rudolf Steiner found there embodied for him the Western "element of progressive historical development."

But even without all this, the two extensive lecture cycles he presented at the Brockdorffs' house were very important for Rudolf Steiner. He did not speak later in any detail of how he experienced his lectures and the encounters he had there, but wrote, as cited earlier, of his talk on the esoteric background of Goethe's *Tale of the*

Green Snake and the Beautiful Lily, “This was an important experience for me. I was able to speak with the words created directly from the spiritual world. Circumstances in Berlin had thus far limited me to hints about the spirit, allowing it only to shine through my presentations.”¹⁹

Rudolf Steiner stood by the approach he had pursued for years in his epistemological, philosophical, and Goethean studies—although it had not been widely recognized. He set his hopes on the cultural change that seemed to announce itself at the time, supporting this change in public while holding back or denying many of the spiritual concerns and questions that were not only close to his heart but also intimately linked with his being. Only in Vienna, in the circle around Eckstein and Lang, had he, for a period of time, met esoteric seekers; then he had moved on to Weimar and Berlin and to the conflicts prevailing there, into which he entered fully and vigorously. At the same time he continued on his inner path, achieving profound spiritual experiences in the period leading up to the turn of the century. Bearing all this in mind it can be assumed that he enjoyed his weekly visits with the Brockdorffs in the winters of 1900/1901 and 1901/1902. Yet, not even there was he prepared to speak of his own spiritual experiences, even though he came much closer to his true mission and to a modern Spiritual Science when lecturing at the Theosophical Library.



Rudolf Steiner met Marie von Sivers again at the Theosophical Library in the fall of 1901. The 33-year-old artist from Petersburg also attended his second lecture course on “Christianity as Mystical Fact.” He was intrigued by her speech and recitation work and had several conversations with her, finding great interest, as it had always been his wont, in the particular skills and faculties of other people. “One rarely meets people now who understand whether or not a poem is spoken in the right way. Artistic speech is often seen as misplaced idealism. It would never have come to this if people were more aware of the fact that speech can be formed artistically.

Friedenau - Berlin, 13. April 1901

Hoch geehrtes gnädiges Fräulein!

Vielen Dank für die Theosph. Rev. Ich sende sie gleichzeitig
unter Kränzband an Sie. Der Artikel über Bacon ist sehr
interessant. Es gibt mir nach den vorliegenden Richtungen
für zu denken. Ich habe aber das entschiedenste Gefühl, daß
der Autor die Sache etwas leicht nimmt. Ich kann nämlich
die Überzeugung nicht theilen, daß die Bacon'schen philo-
sophischen Schriften einen esoterischen Sinn bergen. Und dies
ist doch wohl notwendig, wenn man ihn als Rosenkreuzer
betrachten will. Bitte vielmals wegen der Verzögerung im Ent-
scheidigung
Mit dem besten Empfänglichen

Ihr ganz ergebener

Dr. Rudolf Steiner

Friedenau - Berlin, Kasparallee 95

Schools do not care enough for this either.” Rudolf Steiner wrote this three years earlier, in the spring of 1898, in an essay entitled “A Word on the Art of Recitation,” which was published in the theater supplement to the *Magazin für Litteratur*.²⁰ When he invited Marie von Sivers to accompany him to one of the literary evenings of the *Kommenden* she accepted. (“One could only marvel at how Rudolf Steiner had ended up with this group.... He seemed like a disguised prince among ravens.”²¹) At a private reception held by the Brockdorffs on November 17, 1901, to celebrate the 26th anniversary of the foundation of the Theosophical Society in New York (November 17, 1875), she asked him again whether he would consider working for the theosophical movement in future.

Marie von Sivers was born into a Baltic German family and grew up in Warsaw (then part of Imperial Russia), in Riga and, mostly, in St. Petersburg. She attended a German private school and discovered her love for poetry and literature at an early age.²² It was her wish to study languages and comparative religion but her conservative and status-conscious parents did not approve of her choice. After she had finished school, however, and spent some time teaching in the country, she went to Paris for two years where she received excellent instruction in acting and recitation at the Conservatoire. In Paris she also discovered, in 1898, *The Great Initiates. The Secret History of Religions*, a book by the French writer and theosophist Édouard Schuré that had been published nine years earlier, which inspired, as she would later write in a letter, “her search for the spirit.”²³ Schuré was well known in France as an author and spiritualist—“people had respect for his theosophical knowledge because it came disguised as poetry, was rather elusive and did not claim to be a science of the spirit” (Wiesberger²⁴). In *The Great Initiates* Schuré presented the “esoteric tradition” or “mysteriosophy” of the world religions as the “light of human consciousness”—starting with Ancient India through the mysteries of Egypt, Israel, and Greece, to the esoteric secrets of Christianity, or the “mission of Christ,” with which he concluded his extensive work. Schuré was keen to show

that the esoteric essence of the world religions was found through meditation and initiation and that it had persisted “without interruption” and “in unity.” For Schuré, not only the future evolution of all religions but world peace depended on the “esoteric transformation of Christianity.” The mysteries were the cradle of human civilization and humanity had to find them again to arrest the “decline into materialism and anarchism” and to effect a renewal of the arts. Schuré saw this as a realistic prospect. Science and the “modern spirit,” as he pointed out in the preface of *The Great Initiates*, used “more precise tools and based themselves on a more solid foundation” (albeit “without knowing or aspiring to this”) to “restitute the ancient theosophy” for which human souls were longing at the end of the nineteenth century.

If we proceed from the experimental, objective psychology to the intimate, subjective psychology of our time that finds expression in poetry, music, and literature, we see it permeated by a web of unconscious esotericism. There may never have been such sincere and real longing for a spiritual life, for the invisible world that has been ignored by materialistic scholarly theories and by the view of the world at large.... Never did [the human soul] long more ardently for an invisible Beyond without being able to come close to it....²⁵ The art of creating and forming souls has been lost and will not be found again until science and religion, reunited as one living force, will strive unanimously to bring good and salvation to humankind. For this to happen, science does not need to change its methods; it merely needs to widen its scope; Christianity need not relinquish its traditions but understand their origin, spirit and import. We are certain that the time of spiritual renewal and social transformation will come. The first signs are there. Once science has become true knowledge, religion will unfold its capacity and human beings will act with new-found energy. The art of living, all arts, will only awaken to a new existence when this balance has been established.²⁶

Édouard Schuré was not an initiate but he was erudite and spiritually sensitive; he lived in and with images and possessed intuitive faculties. His book *The Great Initiates* was important for many readers,

appearing—as it did—“among an abstruse literature like an enlightening synthesis of the past” (Schneider²⁷).

Soon after studying *The Great Initiates*, Marie von Sivers embarked on an intense correspondence with Schuré. As a means of promoting the “living word” and in her search for a “theater of initiation”—which she knew she shared with Schuré—she later translated, among other things, his play “Children of Lucifer” into German. It was on Schuré’s recommendation that she developed an interest in the Theosophical Society, and it was a result of this interest that she met Rudolf Steiner on a visit to Berlin, where she attended his lectures at the Brockdorffs’ house. (“At one time Marie von Sivers asked me what I thought of the present spiritual-scientific societies and which one of them one would best join as a way of enhancing one’s inner development. I told her that I was a member of the Theosophical Society and that in my view it was the best at the time, even though I did not find it wholly satisfactory since it increasingly undermined the importance of the Christ” [Schuré²⁸].) Marie von Sivers heard some of Rudolf Steiner’s lectures on mysticism in the winter of 1900/1901 as well as the first of his lectures on *Christianity as Mystical Fact*, before she had to leave for Italy where she worked as a translator. It is possible that the idea for the second lecture cycle arose from a conversation Rudolf Steiner had with Marie von Sivers. “During one of the evenings [of the course on mysticism] she asked Rudolf Steiner the decisive question whether he could speak about the mysteries underlying Christianity in the same way he now spoke about mysticism” (Boegner²⁹).

Marie von Sivers was a very elegant person and, while she was shy and reserved, this did not keep her from initiating important conversations with Rudolf Steiner; in the winter of 1901/1902 she asked him again whether he would join and work for the Theosophical Society. “What I have to represent would be misunderstood if I said, ‘I want to be a member in a society that has oriental mysticism as its shibboleth,’” was his response to her.³⁰ When she asked him, however, on November 17, 1901, if he did not share her view that a spiritual

movement was needed in Central Europe, his answer was positive. He recalled saying to her:

A spiritual-scientific movement must certainly be founded; but I will only be prepared to support such a movement if it is based on, and intent on furthering, Western occultism. And I also said that one needed to start with Plato, Goethe and so on.³¹

Johanna Mücke described a later conversation she had with Rudolf Steiner and Marie Steiner–von Sivers, in which he looked back to the situation at the Brockdorffs' house:

During a conversation in the garden of Haus Hansi between Dr. and Mrs. Steiner and myself, Dr. Steiner reminisced on the time, at the very beginning, when from among the people interested in Theosophy a number were found who were keen to hear what Dr. Steiner himself had to say.

He said, that at the time Mrs. Steiner had asked him whether it was not possible to teach this [theosophical] wisdom in a way that was *more in keeping with the European spiritual life and that acknowledged the Christ impulse*.

Dr. Steiner then said something I shall never forget, “This made it possible for me to act as I had intended. The question had been put to me, and I was now able, in accordance with the spiritual laws, to answer that question.”³²

There is no documented evidence to prove that the conversation related by Johanna Mücke referred to November 17, 1901—or that it may have followed on directly from the earlier passage quoted, which is taken from one of Rudolf Steiner's lectures. But it is conceivable that Marie von Sivers asked Rudolf Steiner, when he indicated that he would only work for a spiritual movement with a Western orientation, whether there was a way of presenting the Eastern theosophical truths in a Christian or Christ-permeated way.

Rudolf Steiner very probably never considered initiating a spiritual or spiritual-scientific movement in the years leading up to the turn of the century, and there are no documents that reveal such an intention. He had done all he could to make a positive impact on the

prevailing culture—in books, essays, editions, lectures as well as with the *Magazin für Litteratur*. In these endeavors he had always built on existing streams, taking into consideration and using any future-oriented spiritual aspects or trends (however small) that he discovered in the scientific or artistic works of contemporary or earlier authors. Developing and continuing Goetheanism as an essential and modern factor in culture and science was essential to him.

Weimar and the years spent in Berlin so far had shown him, however, that he would not achieve the breakthrough he had in mind. In the fall of 1900 he stepped down as editor of the *Magazin*. In the last issue he edited (no. 39)—which was dated September 29, Michaelmas Day—he commented on his three-year editorship in a piece entitled “Taking Leave”:

It was my intention to give expression to a particular view of the world and of life—without making concessions in any direction—and to serve the arts and public life accordingly. In pursuing these aims, I never employed any means but the inner strength of that view, in which I believe and to which I will continue to devote my life. Trying to make an impression by recruiting “illustrious” names or exploiting sensational events has always been abhorrent to me. From the beginning it has been my intention in this journal to stand up for the cause I represent, as long as this could be done through substance alone. Introducing new, striving and, in my view, worthwhile talents to the public and, above all, giving a chance to speak to the solitary fighters who had little opportunity to do this elsewhere was more important to me than the “illustrious” names. When I started my editorship I was fully aware that my intentions, if they were to be realized, would require all kinds of sacrifices and could, under the prevailing circumstances, not be achieved without severe struggles. I can say that for three years I made these sacrifices and took on these battles willingly. I had support from a number of people whom I esteem, but I do not have the energy to continue making these sacrifices.³³

Das Magazin

für Litteratur.

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An die geehrten Abonnenten!

Mit der vorliegenden Nummer beschließt unsere Zeitschrift das III. Quartal des laufenden Jahrgangs. Die verehrlichen Postabonnenten werden um schnelle Erneuerung des Abonnements ersucht, damit sie Zufriedenheit ohne Unterbrechung erfahren. Die geehrten Abonnenten, die „Das Magazin für Litteratur“ durch den Buchhandel beziehen, erhalten das Blatt fortlaufend zugesandt, es sei denn, sie bestellten es ausdrücklich ab.

Nach dem 5. Oktober können Abbestellungen nicht mehr berücksichtigt werden.

Berlin, im September 1900.

Der Verlag des „Magazin für Litteratur“.

Zum Abschiede.

Länger als drei Jahre habe ich die Redaktion dieser Zeitschrift geführt. Ich ging im Juli 1897 mit den besten Erwartungen an meine Aufgabe. Meine Absicht war, ohne jede Konzession nach irgend einer Richtung hin, einer bestimmten Welt- und Lebensanschauung Ausdruck zu geben, und der Kunst und dem öffentlichen Leben der Gegenwart im Sinne dieser Anschauung zu dienen. Es widerstrebte mir, zur Erreichung meiner Ziele mich anderer Mittel zu bedienen als der inneren Kraft dieser Anschauung selbst, an deren Wert ich glaube und für die ich immer mein Leben einsetzen werde. Besonders widerstrebte es mir, Wirkung zu erzielen durch Gewinnung „langvoller“ Namen, die beim Publikum gut eingeführt sind, oder durch Ausnutzung sensationeller Vorkommnisse. Es war von vornherein meine Absicht, im Rahmen dieser Zeitschrift so lange für die von mir vertretene Sache einzutreten, als das durch deren Inhalt allein möglich ist. Höher als „langvolle“ Namen stand mir, neu aufstrebende, nach meiner Ansicht berechtigigte Talente in die Öffentlichkeit einzuführen; einen besonderen Wert legte ich darauf,

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Only two days later, the writer, lawyer, and later mayor of Berlin, Georg Reicke, wrote a very personal letter to Rudolf Steiner, expressing his disappointment:

I just heard to my surprise—nay consternation—that you are resigning as editor of the *Magazin*. Joining the many people who will regret this sincerely, I would like to let you know that I have always followed your courageous and unbiased fight for spiritual freedom and your search for a new worldview with the greatest interest. I shall miss your articles in the columns of a journal of which I have grown very fond. I sincerely hope that I and all those who think like me will soon have opportunity to meet you elsewhere.³⁴

Just before the turn of the century Rudolf Steiner apparently decided on a different path. He was not interested in securing a bourgeois occupation and he no longer looked for a lectureship in philosophy. He had to find ways of supporting himself financially, but his most important endeavor was to make his spiritual intentions heard. In a way, his essays on Goethe’s *Tale of the Green Snake and the Beautiful Lily* and on “Morality and Christianity” (written in the summers of 1899 and 1900, respectively) prepared his departure from the *Magazin*. It was around the time when the last issue he edited came out that he spoke for the first time esoterically of Goethe’s *Tale*, at the Brockdorffs’ house. Although this was most likely a coincidence, it was relevant to his journey and to his future. He had left behind the *Magazin* and the discussions on “anarchistic individualism” but not the “courageous and unbiased fight for spiritual freedom” or his search for a new worldview.

