

Autobiography

This is the earliest autobiography of Rudolf Steiner known

RS for Edouard Schuré

in Alsace at Baar, September 9, 1907

The following has been "excerpted" from [The Golden Blade, 1966](#).

From the Introduction to [Philosophy, Cosmology and Religion](#)

Thus, Schuré already had begun to play an important part in Steiner's life before he met him personally when he came to Paris in 1906 to give some lectures at a Theosophical Congress. On that occasion he was tremendously impressed by the man he was willing to admit was the first modern initiate he had known, and he wrote an enthusiastic introduction to Steiner's work *Christianity as Mystical Fact* which appeared at this time in a French translation. Meanwhile Marie von Sievers translated Schuré's esoteric dramas, the first of which, *The Mysteries of Eleusis*, was presented by the German Theosophists at their Congress in Munich in 1907. Immediately after the Congress Steiner and Marie von Sievers were guests of Schuré at his property in Barr, in Alsace, and Schuré persuaded him to write an autobiographical sketch of his life and spiritual development, which is **the oldest such document known** (printed, together with Schuré's introduction in the [Golden Blade of 1966](#)).

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Autobiographical Sketch

Rudolf Steiner

Written for Edouard Schuré at Baar in Alsace
on September 9, 1907¹



Anthroposophy, a way of thought rather than a body of dogma, springs from the work and teaching of Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925). He spoke of it as “a path of knowledge, to guide the spiritual in the human being to the spiritual in the universe.”

The aim of this Annual is to publish writings which bring the outlook of Anthroposophy to bear on questions and activities relevant to the present time.

The title derives from a reference by Rudolf Steiner to an old Persian legend. “Djemdid was a king who led his people from the north towards Iran, and who received from the God, whom he called Ahura Mazdao, a golden dagger, by means of which he was to fulfil his mission on earth. . . . It represents a force given to man whereby he can act upon and transform external nature.”

I WAS directed very early to Kant. In my fifteenth and sixteenth years I studied Kant intensively, and before entering the Vienna college (*Hochschule*) I occupied myself intensively with Kant's orthodox followers, belonging to the beginning of the nineteenth century, who are entirely forgotten by the official history of learning in Germany and are hardly mentioned any more. Then was added a thorough study of Fichte and Schelling. Into this period fell—and this belongs already to the external occult influences—full clarity about the conception of Time. This knowledge was in no way connected with my studies and was directed entirely from occult life. It was the knowledge that there is an evolution going in a backwards direction, interfering with that which goes forwards; the first is the occult, astral evolution. This knowledge is the condition for spiritual perception.

Then came the meeting with the representative of the M. (*dem Agenten d.M.*).

Then an intensive study of Hegel.

Then the study of more recent philosophy, as it had developed in Germany since the fifties, and in particular the so-called theory of knowledge in all its branches.

My boyhood passed, without this being intended externally by anyone, in such a way that nobody brought to me any superstition; and if in my environment anyone spoke of superstitious matters, it was never otherwise than with an emphatic rejection. I came indeed to know the ritual of the Church, as I was brought into ritual acts as a so-called server; but there was nowhere real piety or religious feeling, even among the priests I met. On the contrary, I saw continually certain shadow-sides of the Catholic clergy.

I did not at once meet the M., but first someone sent by him who was completely initiated into the mysteries of the effects of all plants and their connection with the universe and with man's nature. For him, converse with the spirits of nature was a matter of course, which he described without enthusiasm, thereby awakening enthusiasm all the more.

¹ Translated by permission from *Nachrichten der Rudolf Steiner-Nachlassverwaltung*, Dornach, No. 13, Easter, 1965. The genesis of this “Autobiographical Sketch” is described by Dr. Robert Friedenthal in a postscript (p.6).

My official studies were concerned with mathematics, chemistry, physics, zoology, botany, mineralogy and geology. These studies offered a much surer basis for a spiritual conception of the world than I could have gained, for instance, from history or literature, which in the German academic world of that time had no definite method and no significant prospects. During my first years at the college in Vienna I came to know Karl Julius Schröder. First I heard his lectures about German poetry from the time of Goethe's first publications onwards, about Goethe and Schiller, about the history of German poetry in the nineteenth century, and about Goethe's *Faust*. Then I took part in his "exercises in lecturing and composition." This was a special seminar, resembling that instituted by Uhland at Tübingen. Schröder had worked at German linguistics, and had made significant studies in the German dialects of Austria; his research was done in the style of the brothers Grimm, and in literary research he revered Gervinus. He had been, earlier, a director of the evangelical schools in Vienna. His father was the poet and outstanding educationalist, Christian Oeser. At the time when I came to know him, he was entirely concerned with Goethe. He wrote a widely read commentary on Goethe's *Faust*, and also on Goethe's other plays. Before the decline of German Idealism he had studied at the universities of Leipzig, Halle, and Berlin. He was a living incorporation of the finest German culture. His humanity attracted people to him. Soon I grew into friendship with him and was often in his house. With him one found an idealistic oasis in the dry desert of German materialism. In external life this period was filled with the struggle of the nationalities in Austria. Schröder himself was remote from the sciences concerned with nature.

I worked from the beginning of 1880 onwards at Goethe's studies in natural science.

Then Joseph Kürschner founded the comprehensive collection, "German National Literature," for which Schröder edited Goethe's dramas, with introductions and commentaries. Kürschner, on Schröder's recommendation, gave me the task of editing Goethe's scientific writings.

For this Schröder wrote a foreword, introducing me to the literary public.

For this collection I wrote introductions to Goethe's Botany, Zoology, Geology and Theory of Colour.

Anyone who reads these introductions can find in them theosophical ideas in the vesture of a philosophic Idealism. A discussion of Haeckel's ideas is also in them. My "Theory of Knowledge," worked out in 1886, is a philosophic rounding off of these.

Then I was introduced, through my acquaintance with the Austrian poetess, M. E. delle Grazie, who had a fatherly friend in

Professor Laurenz Müllner, into the circle of theological professors in Vienna. Marie Eugenie delle Grazie wrote an epic, "Robespierre," and a drama, "Shadows."

At the end of the eighties I became for a short time editor of the "German Weekly" in Vienna. This gave an opportunity for an intensive concern with the folk-souls of the different Austrian nationalities. A leading thread for a spiritual-cultural policy had to be found.

In all this there could be no question of the publication of occult ideas. The occult powers standing behind me gave me only the counsel: "Everything in the clothing of Idealistic philosophy."

Simultaneously with all this my work as a teacher and private tutor went on, lasting for more than fifteen years.

The first contact at the end of the eighties with theosophical circles in Vienna had to remain without any external effect.

During my last months in Vienna I wrote my short essay, *Goethe as the Father of a New Aesthetics*.

Then I was called to the Goethe and Schiller Archives in Weimar, which had then been founded, in order to edit Goethe's scientific writings. I had no official position at the Archives; I was simply one of those working at the great Sophie edition of Goethe's works.

My next aim was to give out the foundation of my understanding of the world in a purely philosophical form. This was done in the two books, *Truth and Science*, and *The Philosophy of Spiritual Activity*.

The Goethe and Schiller Archives were visited by a long series of learned, literary and otherwise outstanding personalities of Germany and other countries. I came to know many of these personalities, because I soon became friendly with the director of the Goethe and Schiller Archives, Professor Bernhard Suphan, and was often in his house. When Suphan had visitors to the Archives, he often invited me. On one such occasion I met Treitschke.

A close friendship developed at that time with a German mythologist, Ludwig Laistner, author of *The Riddle of the Sphinx*, who died soon afterwards.

I had many conversations with Hermann Grimm, who spoke often to me of his work which was never carried out, a "History of the German Imagination."

Then came the Nietzsche episode. I had actually written, not long before, opposing Nietzsche.

My occult powers directed me to introduce into contemporary development in an inconspicuous way that which would lead towards the truly spiritual. One does not attain to knowledge by insisting absolutely on one's own point of view, but through willingness to immerse oneself in alien spiritual streams.

So I wrote my book about Nietzsche, entirely adopting Nietzsche's point of view. For this reason it is perhaps the most objective book about Nietzsche written inside Germany. Nietzsche's opposition to Wagner, and to Christianity, is given its due there.

For a time I was regarded as an unconditional follower of Nietzsche.

At this time the "Society for Ethical Culture" was founded in Germany. This Society wished for a morality entirely unconcerned with any conception of the world. A complete cloud-castle, and a threat to education. I wrote *against* this foundation a critical article in the weekly journal, "The Future."

Strongly critical replies followed. And my previous concern with Nietzsche brought the consequence that a pamphlet appeared against me: "Nietzschean Idiots."

The occult point of view requires: "No unnecessary polemics," and "Where possible, do not defend yourself."

I wrote in peace my book, *Goethe's World Conception*, which formed the conclusion of my time at Weimar.

Immediately after my article in "The Future," Haeckel approached me. Two weeks later he contributed to "The Future" an article in which he publicly adopted my view that ethics can develop only on the ground of a conception of the world.

Not long afterwards was Haeckel's sixtieth birthday, which was celebrated as a great festivity in Jena. Haeckel's friends invited me. I then saw Haeckel for the first time. His personality is enchanting. He is personally the entire opposite of the tone of his writings. If Haeckel had ever studied philosophy, even a little (in this he is not only a dilettante, but a child), he would certainly have drawn the highest spiritual conclusions from his epoch-making phylogenetic studies.

In spite of all German philosophy, and in spite of all the rest of German culture, Haeckel's conception of phylogenesis is the most significant fact of German spiritual life in the second half of the nineteenth century. There is no better scientific foundation for occultism than Haeckel's teaching. The teaching of Haeckel is great, but Haeckel is the worst commentator upon it. One does not help civilisation by pointing out Haeckel's weaknesses to his contemporaries, but by demonstrating to them the greatness of his ideas about phylogenesis. This I did in the two volumes of my *Conceptions of the World and of Life during the Nineteenth Century*, which are dedicated to Haeckel, and in my booklet, *Haeckel and his Opponents*.

In fact, the time of German spirituality lives on only in Haeckel's conception of phylogenesis. Philosophy is in a condition of the most miserable infertility; theology is a network of hypocrisy without the remotest conception of its own untruthfulness; and the

sciences, in spite of their great empirical development, have fallen into the bleakest philosophical ignorance.

From 1890-1897 I was in Weimar.

In 1897 I went to Berlin to edit the "Magazine for Literature." The writings, *Conceptions of the World and of Life in the Nineteenth Century* and *Haeckel and his Opponents*, belong to my time in Berlin. My next task was to be: to bring into being an effectual spiritual stream in the literature of the time. I put the Magazine in the service of this task. It was an old, respected organ, having existed since 1832 and passed through very different phases.

Gently and gradually I led over into esoteric paths. Carefully but definitely: while for Goethe's 150th birthday I wrote an essay, *Goethe's Secret Revelation*, containing no more than I had already indicated in a public lecture in Vienna about Goethe's fairy-story, *The Green Snake and the Beautiful Lily*.

In the nature of the case, a readership gathered only slowly for the direction I was giving to the Magazine. It gathered indeed—but not quickly enough for the publisher to find the financial prospects satisfactory. I wanted to give spiritual foundations to the young writers' movement, and was indeed in the most lively contact with the most promising representatives of this movement. But on the one hand I was let down; on the other this movement soon sank into nothingness or naturalism.

Meanwhile a connection with working men had developed. I had become a teacher at the Berlin Workers' Educational Institute. I taught history and also natural sciences. My thoroughly idealistic historical method and my way of teaching soon became acceptable and well understood among the workmen. The number of students increased. I had to lecture almost every evening.

The time came when I could say to myself, in harmony with the occult powers which stood behind me:

You have provided a philosophical foundation for your conception of the world;

You have shown understanding for contemporary thought, treating it as it could be treated only by someone who accepted it fully;

No-one will be able to say: this occultist speaks about the spiritual world, because he does not know the philosophical and scientific achievements of the age.

Now I had reached my fortieth year, before which no-one should appear publicly as a teacher of occultism, according to the intention of the Masters. (Everywhere, when someone taught earlier, a mistake was made.)

Now I could devote myself publicly to Theosophy. The first consequence was that on the insistence of some leaders of German Socialism a general meeting of the Workers' Educational Institute was called, with the task of deciding between Marxism and me. But

I was *not* ostracised. In the general meeting all the votes except four were in favour of retaining me as a teacher.

But the attacks of the leaders brought the consequence that after three months I had to resign. In order not to compromise themselves, they made the excuse that the Theosophical Movement claimed so much of my attention that I had not enough time for the Workers' Institute.

Almost from the beginning of my Theosophical activity Fräulein von Sivers was at my side. She saw, too, the last phases of my relationship with working men in Berlin.

A Note on the "Autobiographical Sketch"

THE foregoing document is important for knowledge of the course of Rudolf Steiner's life. It is here published in full for the first time. Rudolf Steiner wrote this sketch when he and Marie von Sivers were staying with Schuré in September, 1907. It was at Barr in Alsace, where Schuré lived in summer; his home was otherwise in Paris. The sketch was written because Schuré wanted to write a lengthy introduction for his own French translation of *Christianity as Mystical Fact*.¹ For this he needed information about Rudolf Steiner. So Rudolf Steiner wrote the foregoing text by hand on ten pages. It was not intended for publication as it stood, but only as a basis for Schuré's work. Schuré already knew a good deal through his correspondence with Marie von Sivers, and must have learned much from Dr. Steiner by word of mouth as well, since his Introduction covers sixty-three printed pages—though these are indeed partly his own comments. This Introduction is a significant work and of considerable value, in spite of some inexactitudes and mistakes. Surprisingly, it has never appeared in German.

The pages of the document are headed, in Schuré's own handwriting: "Autobiographical Account of the Life and Spiritual Development of Rudolf Steiner (born in Upper Austria, 1861), written by himself at Barr, Alsace, September, 1907."

The text contains most important things in a pregnant form. Of the exceedingly rare consecutive accounts by Rudolf Steiner about himself and his life, this is the first. For a second time he gave a description of his youth and his spiritual development, following in many points the foregoing text, in a lecture of

¹ Schuré's Introduction does not appear in English editions of *Christianity as Mystical Fact*. It was, however, translated into English by Max Gysi and used (in a slightly shortened form) to introduce his translation of the first part of Rudolf Steiner's *Wie erlangt man Erkenntnisse der höheren Welten*, published under the title of *The Way of Initiation*, soon followed by the second part, called *Initiation and its Results*. Eventually both parts were combined in one volume, called *Knowledge of Higher Worlds and its Attainment*, and Schuré's Introduction was omitted. Since this Introduction is probably unknown to many readers today, we are reprinting Max Gysi's translation of it as the next article in this issue.

February 4, 1913, in Berlin, which has been printed in the first volume of his *Letters*. The occasion was then the need to reply to slanderous statements. Rudolf Steiner spoke for the third time about himself in his autobiography, *The Story of My Life*, which he wrote at the very end of his life. It breaks off at the year 1907; its completion was prevented by his death.

It is noteworthy that Rudolf Steiner mentions, as one of the earliest discoveries in spiritual knowledge which came to him, the perception of the retrograde movement of time in the Astral. Indications about this problem continue through his entire life, and the fact of the two streams is illuminated from ever new sides in numerous lectures.

The other particularly significant point is that he writes here about the "Master," who is otherwise mentioned only in the Berlin lecture. The "agent" or "envoy" of this Master was the herb-gatherer who appears in the Mystery plays as Felix Balde and whose conventional name was Felix Koguzki. Emil Bock has reported interesting things about him in his book, *Rudolf Steiner: Studien zu seinem Lebensgang und Lebenswerk* (Stuttgart, 1961).¹ In the above-mentioned lecture Rudolf Steiner says of the Master: "He knew how to stimulate in the soul of the boy, who stood indeed within the spiritual world, those regular and systematic things of which one must be aware in the spiritual world." This "outstanding man," whose outer calling was just as inconspicuous as that of Felix, directed him to Fichte. His name is unknown.

Besides the autobiographical sketch printed here, there are two other so-called Barr documents. One, which is quite short, deals with the origins of Rosicrucianism. This had the purpose of creating a balance between the initiation of the East and that of the West. Rosicrucianism was founded in the first half of the fifteenth century and had to preserve spiritual truths in secret until external science had reached a preliminary solution of certain problems. These were: the material unity of the universe; the natural evolution of living beings; conditions of consciousness other than the ordinary waking day consciousness. Since these discoveries were made in the nineteenth century, certain Rosicrucian principles which had been held secret could be made public. The general content of this document is reproduced by Schuré. The third document contains a history of the Theosophical Movement with reference to the occult powers standing behind it, not unlike the later account given by Rudolf Steiner in his 1915 lecture-course, "The Occult Movement in the Nineteenth Century."

The fortieth anniversary of Rudolf Steiner's death on March 30, 1965, provides an occasion for making the Autobiographical Sketch known. Further, the three documents will be published in the Collected Edition at an appropriate time.

Robert Friedenthal.

¹ See "The Search for Felix," in the *Golden Blade*, 1961.

Source: Waldorf Library



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