

Man of Many Shapes and Shadows

By JOHN GROSS

Few Hungarian Jews can have been ordained as both Anglican clergymen and Buddhist monks. Few Presbyterian missionaries can have gone on to promote dubious oil companies in the Balkans and serve as advisers to Chinese warlords. It is unusual, to say the least, for a former British Member of Parliament to escape from jail in Brooklyn, face a possible charge of high treason in Austria and help organize a right-wing Putsch in Berlin.

Yet these are only some of the parts played by a single man — originally called Ignacz Trebitsch, though he was to use many other names as well — in the course of his improbable career. A notorious figure in his day, Trebitsch (who died in 1943) has been largely forgotten since; but now, thanks to the exemplary detective work of Bernard Wasserstein, we can follow his progress step by step, from the small town south of Budapest where he was born in 1879 to his final incarnation in China as the Abbot Chao Kung.

In the foreword to "The Secret Lives of Trebitsch Lincoln," Mr. Wasserstein, who teaches history at Brandeis University, describes the long quest that began with his casual browsing in an index of British Foreign Office papers and led him on to explore archives in a dozen countries. A diary in the Royal Copenhagen Library, a rare Rumanian magazine (tracked down in the Haifa Institute of Technology), the files of the Shanghai Municipal Police — he has drawn on a dizzying variety of sources. At the same time, he has largely set aside, with good reason, the autobio-

The Secret Lives of Trebitsch Lincoln

By Bernard Wasserstein

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Notman Photographic Archives

Trebitsch Lincoln in 1901.

graphical writings of Trebitsch himself.

Trebitsch's father was a prosperous Jewish merchant who lost his money in a stock-market crash. His own original ambition was to be an actor, but he left Hungary in a hurry at the age of 18 (he had taken to stealing watches) and made his way to England. After being converted to Christianity, he immigrated to Canada, where he labored as a missionary — first on behalf of the Presbyterians, then the Anglicans — among the Jews of Montreal.

Returning to England, he became successively a curate in a rural par-

ish, a research worker for a sociologically minded philanthropist, Benjamin Seebohm Rowntree, and — in large measure through Rowntree's influence — a member of the House of Commons. He was elected under the name by which he was to remain most widely known, Trebitsch Lincoln.

After less than a year, he lost his parliamentary seat and switched his attention to the oil industry in Eastern Europe. His financial maneuvers eventually led to bankruptcy, flight and his extradition from the United States: he was convicted of fraud and served three years in a British prison.

By this time he had already proclaimed that he was a German spy, and on his release from jail in 1919 he made his way to Germany, nursing dreams of taking some kind of huge revenge on the British Empire. Once in Berlin, he insinuated his way into the counsels of the proto-fascist plotters who organized the so-called Kapp Putsch: during the brief period when they took control of the city he made himself intensely unpopular as a bullying censor of the English-language press.

Next he became involved in the schemes for undoing the work of the Versailles Treaty in Central Europe that were being hatched by a group of rabid reactionaries, the "White International." But when he realized that his new colleagues were planning to murder him, he set about trying to peddle their secrets to the appropriate European governments instead.

In 1922 he showed up in China. Not the least of that country's attractions, as Mr. Wasserstein points out, was that it was one of the few places left where he wasn't liable to be picked up by the police. But he also felt the pull of Eastern religion, and it was as a Buddhist that he finally came to rest.

As far as his beliefs went, that is. In other respects he remained the same turbulent spirit, weaving fantasies about saving the world from war, exercising dictatorial power over a group of converts he had recruited on a journey back to Europe and approaching the Gestapo representative in Shanghai (who took him seriously) with a proposal for putting Hitler in touch with the all-wise "sages of Tibet."

It is a fascinating story, and Mr. Wasserstein makes the most of it, tracking down his quarry with wit and verve. But are there any larger conclusions to be drawn?

In many respects Trebitsch's adventures were remarkable for variety rather than quality. For all his manias, he comes across as a curiously lackluster character, and there are times when he simply sounds like a commonplace swindler. But taken as a whole, his career was plainly that of someone driven by demons.

Trying to put him in historical perspective, Mr. Wasserstein draws a comparison with the 18th-century Jewish pseudomessiah Jacob Frank. Some of the parallels he cites are almost startlingly apt, and there seems little doubt that Trebitsch's final Buddhist phase simply brought to the surface "a messiah complex," as Mr. Wasserstein calls it, that had been brewing for a long time.

Mr. Wasserstein's second suggestion is that Trebitsch's crazier ambitions were a kind of parody of the forces let loose "in a period of lost ideological, social and spiritual bearings" — the period that culminated in Hitler. But this seems to me too vague to be very helpful.

It might have been better to pursue the messianic clue a little further, and in particular to ask what strange kink prompted Trebitsch to throw in his lot with the vicious anti-Semites of the Kapp conspiracy and the White International. Mr. Wasserstein tends to fight shy of psychological explanations, but it is in the realms of psychopathology that the answers to the murkier riddles of Trebitsch's career must surely lie.

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