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The Autobiography of J. L. Moreno, MD (Abridged)

Jonathan D. Moreno, Guest Editor

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Introduction

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HOW COULD THE PIONEER of psychodrama and sociometry, of role playing and group psychotherapy, of the modern spontaneous theater, of encounter groups and art therapies, and even of a technique for sound recording—how could someone possessed of so great a creative genius with a seminal influence upon contemporary culture—how could such a man be so poorly understood in his own time? This is the mystery of J. L. Moreno's life.

In another time, Moreno might have been a religious prophet or a wizard or a guru; in his own time, he was all of these and a scientist. Whatever his role, he would have sought to heal broken spirits, to mend lives that had no meaning, and to help those who had lost their dreams to dream anew. What pained him most was to see people bereft of confidence in their creative powers and of the spontaneity required to create them. For Moreno, where there is spontaneity and creativity, there is at least hope.

Hence, Moreno loved children more than adults, mental patients more than the sane, and actors more than intellectuals. He could appreciate the child's imaginative play, the psychotic's excesses, and the actor's hunger to take another role. Institutions were for him "conserves" that restricted spontaneity and creativity. Machines were the symbols of the greatest danger facing humankind in the twentieth century: that we would ourselves become robots, unable to develop novel and adequate ways of living with one another.

Yet Moreno was no reactionary hungering for some "purer" past. On the contrary, in his lifetime he became engaged in an astonishing array of eminently modern activities, from designing therapeutic communities to predicting the winners of heavyweight title fights for major newspapers. He traveled and lectured widely and relished opportunities to help the spread of his ideas. Many of these ideas were, he believed, truly revolutionary, presenting the possibility of a far more fundamental change in social life than those of a Darwin, a Marx, or a Freud.

Thus, Moreno's inspiration came less from modern social science and psychiatry—though he was an unflagging scholar of these fields—than it

did from ancient religious traditions, Greek philosophy, and classical drama. Evidently this would set him apart from the scientific mainstream, even as he continued to exert an undeniable influence upon it, usually from without.

Moreno knew that his fierce independence and megalomania, as he himself often described it, would keep him an outsider, but he was ambivalent about this status even as he enjoyed the freedom it gave him. By the time he was 30, he had founded his own religious movement, his own theater, and his own magazine; 25 years later he had his own mental hospital, school, and publishing house. But he realized that total isolation was impossible and self-defeating, so with some ambivalence he offered presentations at professional societies, lectured at universities, and even accepted part-time faculty appointments now and then. Generally he found these contexts stuffy and boring, though he refused to let them stifle his natural spontaneity, sometimes with unhappy consequences.

Decades before the wide acceptance of group psychotherapy or the advent of encounter groups, family therapy, Gestalt therapy, and the rest, Moreno was virtually alone in his advocacy of group methods. His confidence in the healing power of the group was founded upon his faith that, in principle, altruistic human love is an infinite resource. In those days, the prevailing psychoanalytic temper in America reduced human nature to its basest components, an attitude Moreno found one-dimensional and destructive. Frequently, in trying to demonstrate action techniques built upon the present social system of an actual group of professionals, he would be hooted out of the room.

Such experiences consolidated Moreno's natural disinclination to submit to the constraints of someone else's institution. Although his stubborn commitment to his ideas did not degenerate into arrogance, its ultimate effect was double-edged. On the one hand, it enabled him to resist the self-doubt brought on by rejection from peers; on the other, it increased his desire that his ideas be maintained as they sprang from his mind, fearing that their purity would be distorted by others. Not that Moreno cared that his name be attached to his products. On the contrary, as a young man, he published a dozen short books anonymously, and he always believed that ultimately all ideas derive from the same spontaneous-creative source.

Ironically, this protective style brought two sorts of untoward result. Not only was Moreno's name often disassociated from his ideas as they permeated the wider culture, but lacking an "establishment" figure with whom to be identified, they gradually lost their wholeness. Psychodramatic techniques became role playing, drama therapy, or elements of other, later modalities. Sociometric analysis became generic for quantitative methods in sociology and social psychology and was detached from therapeutic

work with small groups. Group psychotherapy lost its systematic connection with psychodrama and sociometry. And the ripples of the impromptu theater dispersed into various versions of so-called improvisational theater.

It would be wrong to conclude that Moreno was an unrecognized prophet in his lifetime. Certainly there were honors enough that I shall describe, though perhaps they were not adequate to his achievements. But there is the tragic element of his story, tragic in the classical sense in which a hero's hubris is his worst enemy. Curiously, Moreno's unique brand of hubris did not manifest itself as disdain for others, but as a limitless confidence in the human potential. Those who did not share this confidence, or who were threatened by the way he pursued its logic, were those who could not abide him, while those who did share it or who needed to believe it found in him a powerful father.

The essence of Moreno's life story, I think, is his relentless pursuit of his faith in the potential in every person. In going down this path, he undertook his own psychodrama.

The existential dilemma that occurred to Moreno early in his twenties, though it had been prefigured in earlier events, was this: What is this "I," this "me"? Is it an insignificant nothing, a momentary speck in an infinite and eternal wilderness, finally without meaning? Or is it all there is and can be, the greatest thing that there is, the cosmos itself? Exercising a variant of what another philosopher-physician, William James, called the will to believe, Moreno chose the latter option. Why not? Why choose the least you can be instead of the most you can be?

Of course, many people have asked themselves this question throughout the ages and in every land. What has differentiated them are the ways they have given shape to their choice, and these have partly been reflections of their cultural circumstances, the traditions, images, and metaphors to which they had access. Moreno was descended from a line of Sephardic Jews, scattered in waves that extended from Spain to Turkey. The name Moreno had been in the family for many generations (though he was born Jacob Moreno Levy) and is an ancient and distinguished one in that part of the Jewish world. His immediate ancestors were scholars and businessmen; none, so far as is known, were physicians.

Frequently subject to vicious attacks, inquisitions, and pogroms in their adoptive homes, these people had as their greatest single spiritual preoccupation the problem of the messiah. Mysticism was an everyday part of their rich folklife, and the universe was seen as a mysterious and, in the literal sense, awful place. Pockets of religious enthusiasm sprang up here and there, and several very influential "false messiahs" appeared. One of these, probably the most prominent, surfaced in Turkey and is mentioned

in Moreno's text. Sabbatai Zwi's career created an extraordinary, convulsive reaction among the Jews and seems even to have threatened the stability of the sultan's rule. When it ended with Sabbatai's apparently forced conversion to Islam, the community was a shambles.

Moreno's father was a Turk and, therefore, in accord with contemporary practice, he was considered a Turk even though he was born in Rumania. It is not known for how many generations the family had lived in Turkey, but it is apparent that they were very much a part of that milieu. Moreno's description of his mother suggests that she was the medium of these mystical traditions in the household.

The messiah role was therefore intimately familiar to the young Moreno. It gave form to his expansive, gregarious, and compassionate personal style and to the tendency for others to admire him for his charisma. He said in retrospect that he could have descended into true psychosis at this time, but from the fact that he did not, he gained the conviction that there is not necessarily anything pathological in messianic preoccupations. Rather, they can be seen as expressions of hyper-creativity. Anticipating recent "anti-psychiatric" movements, Moreno's goal in therapy was never the achievement of some fictional (and dull) normalcy, but training in still higher levels of spontaneity so that, when ready, the protagonist could discard this role for another.

Moreno was unwilling to disassociate himself from these early insights. They were too much a part of him to be ceded or made "respectable" for his less imaginative colleagues. The simplistic tag ("That Moreno really thinks he's God") followed him throughout his career. Moreno could not or would not point out the next crucial step in his reasoning: if one wants to be truly loving and good, one must play God, for no other role can approximate the transmission of these qualities in their fullness. Anyone who strives for the perfection of these qualities must be a Godplayer.

In understanding Moreno's personal psychodrama, his identification with the Godhead, one must see him as a surrogate for all humankind. But Moreno was too busy pursuing his *ideé fixe* to explain it to others. That is why we all need auxiliary egos, he would have said, to give us a hand when we need it; that is why we should help God in the work of the cosmos by being auxiliary egos for God. There is so much misery and suffering in the world, even God seems unable to heal it all alone, so we must share responsibility.

In that spirit I write this introduction—as my father's auxiliary ego. This is a traditional role for children to undertake, the oldest that there is. To be a good auxiliary ego, I must reverse roles with him, even though he is dead. The fact that he is dead need not matter in role reversal, so long as I am

spontaneous enough. Parents are able to reverse roles with their babies and attend to their needs even when those needs cannot be uttered by an infant; when parents age and become infirm, their children effectively role reverse with them.

By the time I came on the scene, my father was 63. The vigorous adventurer described in these pages was only sporadically present during my childhood, so I came to know my father in his prime much as the reader will. Like most sons, I was my father's most persistent critic as well as his most passionate defender. And, like most sons, I took little interest in the life he had before I came along. This began to change around the time I entered college, and, true to the proverb, I came home to find how much wiser and more interesting he had become. One morning I sat in rapt attention for 3 hours while he reminisced about his own years in the university, hearing for the first time many of the same stories set down in his autobiography. I began to urge him to put it all down, and, to my immense pleasure, he started to do so shortly thereafter.

The text itself is a *tour de force* of the cultural life of the twentieth century as well as an account of a spiritual journey. But the journey is described from "inside," not as an historical record. The reader will want to know more about actual historical circumstances, particularly in my father's last years. Such an account can only be provided sketchily here; it awaits the hand of a biographer.

I think that it is fair to say that, by 1950, Moreno's reputation in America was at its peak. His theories about the social reconstruction of communities, especially as represented in *Who Shall Survive?*, had attracted a great deal of attention in civilian and military circles during the war. President Roosevelt himself had asked to meet Moreno in Hyde Park and complimented sociometry as a "progressive sociology." The journal *Sociometry* was popular in the social scientific establishment and published the major figures in energetic articles and discussions. John Dewey had copies of *Who Shall Survive?* and *Sociometry, Experimental Method and the Science of Society* in his personal library and, with Margaret Mead, served on various of Moreno's editorial boards. So did the dean of American psychiatry, Adolf Meyer of Johns Hopkins. William Alanson White and Winfred Overholser had instituted psychodrama at St. Elizabeths Hospital in Washington, D.C., and admired its clinical power. What was then the Harvard department of social relations was peppered with Moreno's friends and collaborators, including Pitirim Sorokin, Samuel Stouffer, and Robert Freed Bales. Henry Murray in the psychology department was a close friend and remained so until my father's death. The psychodrama training center in Beacon was a hotbed of activity for young professionals looking for alternatives to psychoanalysis; the mental hospital in Beacon

catered to patients found "untreatable" elsewhere, and it seemed that nearly every school district in the country had some counselor designated a "sociometrist" to help organize a social environment conducive to learning.

Moreno could not resist remaining the *enfant terrible* of American psychiatry, even as mainstream acceptance presented itself. When he ran for president of the American Psychiatric Association, he said he was doing so because the APA had never elected a genius as president. In fact, the psychiatric community never fully embraced him, at least not in the United States, although the story was somewhat different in sociology and clinical psychology. Moreno often scorned the prestige that automatically attaches to the holder of a medical degree in America, and sociologists were less formal and responsive to new techniques for the application of their young science. In clinical psychology and psychotherapy, the story was more complex.

Moreno considered himself, with much justification, the *pater-familias* of action methods of therapy. But his standards of loyalty frequently jeopardized relationships with promising students. Kurt Lewin had been a protegé for a time, for example, and Moreno felt somewhat abandoned by the subsequent course of Lewin and his followers. But the most bitter break for some years was between Moreno and the founder of the American Group Psychotherapy Association (AGPA), Sam Slavson. Moreno's American Society of Group Psychotherapy and Psychodrama reflected his freewheeling manner, and credentials were irrelevant to qualify for membership. The AGPA was oriented more toward professionals holding doctorates, an irony since Slavson himself held no degree. During the 1950s, the rivalry between Moreno and Slavson sometimes descended into the absurd, as when Slavson charged that psychodrama was invented by a Swede named Jorgenson and imported to the United States by a pretender named Moreno. I have no doubt that my father was not himself blameless in these affairs. But time is a salve, and it is fortunate that recent years have seen much cross-fertilization between the two societies.

While the 1950s saw psychodrama and sociometry under strain in America, Europe proved to be fertile ground. Moreno was not a good traveler by nature, but my mother, Zerka Moreno, had a genius for organization that smoothed his way back to the Continent on a series of busy tours. To his delight, Moreno found that his ideas were greeted with curiosity and enthusiasm by his European colleagues, hard at work in the post-war environment with complex social psychological problems. There he was welcomed as a kind of returning native son and hero, and he took his place as the leader of the international group psychotherapy movement. As founder of the International Association of Group Psychotherapy, he was also able to effect something of a *rapprochement* with the AGPA at home.

It was in Europe, then, that Moreno received his greatest recognition as he aged. The University of Barcelona awarded him a doctorate *honoris causa* in 1968, and the University of Vienna gave him its "golden doctor" diploma for 50 years of service since receiving his MD there in 1917. Bad-Vöslau outside Vienna, his home from 1917 to 1925, held a ceremony in 1968 in which a plaque was placed on the house where he lived as medical officer for the district. There he enjoyed his richest creative period and developed his basic ideas for psychodrama, sociometry, and group psychotherapy, the plaque notes. It was common for local newspapers to celebrate his visit to the city as that of a famous dignitary, as when an Amsterdam newspaper called him the "Freud of Group Psychotherapy" in a headline during the International Congress of Psychodrama in 1971.

Today, psychodramatic activity in Europe is vibrant. Psychoanalytic psychodrama is a major force in France and half a dozen institutes of psychodrama operate in West Germany, as well as others in Scandanavia, England, and elsewhere in Europe. In Eastern Europe, too, psychodrama is practiced regularly. Moreno's ideas also penetrated the Southern Hemisphere, especially South America, where large societies of psychodramatists have sprung up.

But at home, the recognition was sporadic. In the late 1950s, Alexander King published his memoirs, centering around his bout with drug addiction because of a kidney disease, and had glowing things to say about his treatment at Moreno's hands in the Beacon hospital. In 1962, John Kobler wrote an article for the *Saturday Evening Post* that brought some rare major media attention to psychodrama and Moreno. But the 1960s were increasingly characterized by preoccupation with the new encounter movement. In *Please Touch*, Jane Howard offered a somewhat caustic sketch in which she described Moreno in unflattering terms. It was typical of his experience of that period, in which he watched the cannibalization of many of his ideas with much ambivalence.

Still, Moreno insisted on his priority, and not without results. Though he and Fritz Perls, who had been a devotee of psychodrama sessions in New York, had open quarrels, Perls, without referring to Moreno explicitly, acknowledged his debt to "psycho-drama" in his memoirs, *In and Out of the Garbage Pail.* From a very different corner, Viktor Frankl noted that the full insight that led to logotherapy came in a psychodrama session he was conducting. Often the compliments came as the sincerest form of flattery, as in the case of Ivan Janov's "primal scream" therapy. Psychodramatists had been practicing the technique of regression for years with their patients, but not the exclusion of any other intervention as was the case with primal therapy. Janov, though, figured himself to be a critic of psychodrama.

suffered from some well-publicized excesses. Psychodrama already excited enough suspicion on its own. Meanwhile, psychodrama retained its place in clinical contexts, settings in which the "turn-on" and "growth" modalities could not take root, and without which they could only be passing fancies of sixties culture.

Thus, the force of Moreno's creative genius was such that his ideas penetrated the society, even if his reputation remained marginal, appreciated mostly by those in the know. His resistance to conserves worked against him, I believe, in two crucial ways. First, he refused to seek commercial publication of his books, insuring that only those already disposed to follow his ideas would be likely to take the trouble to be exposed to them. Second, he declined the sort of association with a major university that would have resulted in a generation of influential students who would perpetuate his work in the academy.

I offer these views as explanatory, not by way of second guessing. Compared with Moreno's vision, any discussion of tactics must be trivial. I am too close to this text to know if that vision shines as brightly as it should, as it does every time a trained psychodramatist brings it to life in a session, or when a sociometrist exposes the hidden social reality of a group. These words were, after all, composed by a man at the end of his life, full of nostalgia and sentimentality. Can they be trusted?

I have already mentioned my role in our household as my father's closest critic. It was his fate to have a son who scoffed at his seeming exaggerations, though this great man who had done and experienced so much took seriously the cautionary advice of an 8-year-old. No wonder, then, that even as I read his recollections with delight after his death, I held some skepticism about some of the more dramatic moments related. In a single memorable visit to Vöslau, his spiritual home, in 1984, my views were changed greatly.

I visited Vöslau with Gretel Leutz, one of my father's best-loved students, who is described in this memoir. While there, we inquired as to the whereabouts of Marian, Moreno's closest companion in those early days. It turned out that she had died 6 months earlier, but, to our delight, her younger sister was still living. A meeting was arranged.

For several hours on a hot summer day just outside Vienna, I was treated to a trip in time back to the colorful and romantic era my father describes in the early chapters of the autobiography. A round-faced, energetic lady in her late seventies regaled us with stories about the period, told us about the *Wunderdoktor* who would treat the peasants for whatever they could afford and tell the children fairy tales. "Did you know my father's friends," I asked, "like Peter Altenberg, the poet?" Oh yes, she replied. She knew them all. He would go to Vienna twice a week to the cafés or to

conduct the theater of spontaneity, and return to find people from kilometers around on his doorstep, waiting for a physical examination. He had the first X-ray machine in the area, she said, and she still had it in her attic because her brother helped him to run it. Her brother was the one with whom Moreno invented radio-film, the invention that took them both to America. She even showed us pictures of my father we had never seen before. For a son whose father was as a young man unknown, this was an extraordinary occasion.

But one anecdote in particular must be mentioned. He was famous for his eccentricities, she said, like the time he was in a café with some friends. Someone at another table said, as the Viennese still say for emphasis, "Great God!" at which point Moreno got up, looked around, and shouted, "Somebody call me?" True to his project, he was always ready to stand in for God when it appeared necessary, and everyone accepted this Godplaying as sincere, but still with some amusement.

My moving experience in Vöslau transformed my attitude toward my father's recollections. They are not only romantic reveries, but sharp and wise accounts of extraordinary times and people. Little wonder Moreno's favorite exhortation in a psychodrama group was for everyone to "get into action," for he lived amid and through a whirl of action that would leave most of us breathless.

A few years ago in her autobiography, Elisabeth Bergner, perhaps the greatest actress of German stage and film, recalled her girlhood tutor, the young man who introduced her to spontaneous play and gave her life as an artist. She was fascinated by his beard. "In those days, only very old men had beards. My father had a mustache. Moreno had a Christbeard, as I recognized much later. He was tall and slender, had grippingly beautiful blue eyes that always smiled, and dark hair. I believe he was wondrously beautiful. I still believe that today. Most fascinating was his smile. That was a mixture of mockery and kindness. It was loving and amused. It was indescribable."

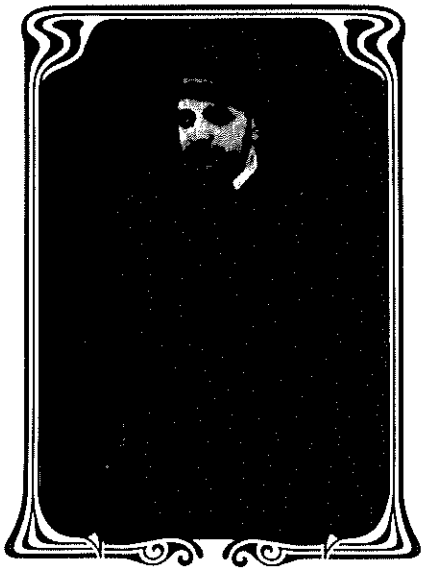
To many people, it seemed that Moreno had been born a wise old man, but in his last years he reassessed the megalomania that was such an essential part of his being. It was not that he was becoming more wise; rather, in the true spirit of wisdom, he learned from aging what could not be learned in youth. For Moreno the Godplayer learned late in life how great was his debt to others, that Godplayers depend on auxiliary egos no less than God. Well into his eighth decade, Moreno displayed an intellectual courage and honesty that gave his lifework new poignancy and meaning.

When my father lay dying, it was not like Moses alone on the mountain, but as a pioneer surrounded by his most devoted companions. And he did not wait for the dying to begin, for, in refusing to eat, he set the process in

motion. Moreno's was what Nietzsche called a "free death," coming at the right time and thereby affirming the life he loved so much. As he died, he reverted to his German. Perhaps he was remembering the children in the Vienna gardens who taught him role playing, or the little prophet he discovered in Bucharest 80 years before. When Moreno went to God, it was as an old friend.

Jonathan D. Moreno

Foreword



J. L. Moreno, ca. 1915, in uniform of the Tyrolean regiment.

DURING THE SEVERAL years prior to his death in ~~1984,~~ 1974 J. L. Moreno prepared a large amount of autobiographical material. Although much of it was written in an aphoristic style and remains unpublished, the manuscript of about 500 pages was clearly intended as a traditional autobiography. Unfortunately, this work lacks the coherence Moreno might have been able to give it had he had more time and not been of such an advanced age. Apart from redundancy and irrelevance, the original manuscript is marked by a pronounced concentration on the years before his emigration from Austria to the United States.

Although the entire manuscript contains these limitations, it nevertheless has seemed to those who have had the opportunity to read it that portions contain material of great historical and philosophical interest. Much of it is also charming and provocative, potentially constituting a "good read," but not one that would be of commercial value.

Thus, my goal as editor was to reduce the manuscript to a leaner document without depriving the reader of its pleasures. Stylistically, this meant retaining Moreno's sometimes awkward Germanic English but deleting passages that circled around the same point. Where words or passages are deleted, ellipses (. . .) appear. Editorial clarifications in the text are bracketed.