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GERMANS IN THE TREETOPS, WAY UP HIGH

By JERROLD SEIGEL; JERROLD SEIGEL, WHO TEACHES EUROPEAN INTELLECTUAL HISTORY AT PRINCETON UNIVERSITY, IS THE AUTHOR OF "BOHEMIAN PARIS" AND "MARX'S FATE."

MOUNTAIN OF TRUTH The Counterculture Begins: Ascona, 1900-1920. By Martin Green. Illustrated. 287 pp. Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England. \$19.95.

AT the beginning of the 20th century, advocates of a free life made an especially deep impact on German-speaking Europe with visions based on feminism, sexual liberation, nature worship, the rejection of authority, vegetarianism and cultural renewal. It was a heady brew, whose ingredients have been drawn on many times since, though not always happily. One of the problems Martin Green confronts in his engaging group portrait of figures and movements from the German counterculture is that, along with innocents and victims, there appear not a few whose ideas contributed to Nazi practice, and even some who were willing to cooperate with it.

The drama boasts a remarkable cast. Leading it in Mr. Green's "Mountain of Truth: The Counterculture Begins: Ascona 1900-1920" is a trio consisting of Otto Gross, the brilliant, magnetic early follower - and pursuer - of Freud; Arthur (Gusto) Graser, the Naturmensch and dropout whose naive yet self-conscious simplicity was a model at the time for a life free of compulsion and responsibility; and Rudolf Laban, the high priest of modern dance. A promoter of sexual liberation, Gross was the first therapist to see psychoanalysis as a revolutionary indictment of civilization for making us all mentally ill (his drug addiction and his psychotic fear of his own body were tied up with his long, unresolvable struggle with his father). Even artists like Hermann Hesse could admire Graser's way of life, though they could not embrace it if they were ever to produce any artistic work. Laban made dance into a cult of natural, healthy but often dissonant self-expression and a school for living - and he also abandoned a whole series of women and the children they bore him.

The lives that crisscrossed theirs included the remarkable sisters Else and Frieda von Richthofen and the men drawn to them (notably D. H. Lawrence, who married Frieda, and Max Weber); the great dancer Mary Wigman; Munich's celebrated heroine of free love, Franziska zu Reventlow; and a legion of nature curers, feminists, mystics, vegetarians and anarchists.

Mr. Green, who teaches English at Tufts University, presents his book as the story of Ascona, a beautifully situated little village in Italian-speaking southern Switzerland. In 1902, a nature-cure sanitarium opened there and was called Monte Verita, or Truth Mountain. The sanitarium, the setting, the presence of Gusto Graser, the arrival in 1904 of a well-known German anarchist, Raphael Friedeberg - all contributed to making Ascona a magnet and meeting place. It is only as a rendezvous, a Treffpunkt, that earlier writers have seen it. Mr. Green makes it more, a spirit, an idea, a loom from which emerged an exemplary countercultural tapestry. He has good reasons for his view: modern dancers saw Ascona as a perfect setting for their projects; various people wrote stories, articles or pamphlets about the place; the diverse currents of thought and ways of life that passed through it made a whole in some people's minds.

But it would be wrong to think of it as a unified community. Of the three figures Mr. Green considers representative, only Graser lived steadily in Ascona; Gross mostly inhabited the Munich artists' quarter of Schwabing, coming to Ascona irregularly (his many attempts to cure his drug addiction and mental troubles took place in institutions elsewhere); and Laban only arrived in 1913, shortly before World War I disrupted the place's ability to bring people together. None of the three seems to have spoken about the others, and there is no evidence, as Mr. Green admits, that they ever spoke to each other. Because none of these separate personalities and programs grew or changed in response to their shared attachment to Ascona, presenting them all as "Asconan" adds little to what might be said about them from some other point of view. Indeed, what Mr. Green says about some of them here merely reshuffles material - stories and themes - from his earlier books, "The Von Richthofen Sisters" and "Children of the Sun." HOWEVER fascinating Mr. Green's subjects are as individuals, their common revulsion against ordinary society only veils the ultimate incompatibility of their separate projects. Such countercultural meeting points as Ascona often temporarily unite people or groups who end up far apart. Boundaries are more permeable here than in ordinary social life, perhaps because one of the things rebelled against is society's claim to give boundaries to individuals in the first place. That generates its own dilemmas: the rebellion that can be clarifying when directed against the restraints of bourgeois life and patriarchy loses its bearings when, as in Otto Gross's case, it can no longer accept the limits of ordinary physical existence. The claim that art should be, as Laban wished, a school for life, can mean various things. Art gives form to a matter that imposes its own limits on the artist - to believe instead, as Laban did, that "all dreams of paradise are fulfilled in festivals" is to anticipate the Nazi corruption of politics by esthetic pretense, substituting a fantasy of fulfillment for the real needs and conflicts of everyday existence.

Slighting these problems, Mr. Green ends up curiously divided about his subject. He argues for Ascona's importance by trying to show its influence on a long string of sometimes distant figures, extending as far as Henry Miller, George Orwell and F. R. Leavis. But the relationship to Nazi culture moves him to conclude that the most heroic and exemplary Asconan is Graser, "partly because he had much less impact on his contemporaries than Gross or Laban." Mr. Green might have avoided this contradiction had he sought less for heroes. The lessons of the alternative life lie in its demonic potential as well as in its liberating promise; it can no more transform reality into the product of artistic imagination than can the ordinary life it rejects.