

**Leopold Weiss alias Muhammad Asad:  
Von Galizien nach Arabien 1900-1927**

*Gunther Windhager*

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It is now 10 years that Muhammad Asad, the twentieth-century's most influential European Muslim, left us. But aside from his own biographical writings – the best-seller *The Road to Mecca* (1954) and his 1988 interview with his old employer, the *Frankfurter (Allgemeine) Zeitung* – until recently there was no comprehensive biography of this illustrious man. This lacuna has now been filled – at least up to his official conversion to Islam in Berlin (1926) and Cairo (1927). This covers his quest as a student, film librettist, and journalist “from Galicia [his native Lemberg and Czernowitz] to Arabia,” ending with his preparations for hajj.

The author is an unassuming but enthusiastic research assistant for ethnology at Vienna's Austrian Academy of Sciences. Working like a detective and a good prosecutor (never taking a confession at face value), he has written what promises to become the definite biography of the early Leopold Weiss. His pioneering book is welcome for its set of rare (and mostly unpublished) photographs. Of these, a 1932 portrait makes the front cover hauntingly compelling by showing a Ghandi-like Asad with a shaven head and penetrating yet sensitive black eyes. Even better, it includes a three-page chronology, a complete list of his publications that tracks 45 German newspaper articles, and a three-page list of publications on Asad. And yet, despite its being so uncompromisingly academic, his text reads like a novel.

It is no surprise that the author discovered that some of *The Road to Mecca* is elegantly fictitious and, according to Pola Hamida Asad, essentially a “spiritual autobiography.” (Did not Johann Wolfgang van Goethe entitle his *Fact and Fiction*?) Thus it is now established that his first wife, Elsa Schiemann (née Sprecht) was not 15 but 22 years older than him, that her little son accompanied them on both “Oriental Journeys” (1922-23 and 1924-26), and that Zayd (their Arab companion) was a literary invention.

Windhager reveals other more important facts: details about his mother's Feigenbaum family; the fate of his father, stepmother, and siblings (Dr. med. Heinrich Weiss and Dr. jur. Rachel Weiss) under Nazism, and Asad's attempts to save them from the concentration camps; his days at Vienna University, where he not only studied the history of art and philosophy but

also chemistry and physics with Erwin Schrödinger, a 1933 Nobel Prize winner; and amusing details of Asad's attempts to establish himself among Vienna's intellectual *bohemia* and later in the exciting Berlin of the early twenties.

The author makes several important contributions to understanding Asad's intellectual formation by providing short portraits of the decisive intellectual and political trends before and shortly after World War I (e.g., Freudianism, anti-Semitism, Zionism, exoticism, and antirationism). This contextualization helps situate Asad's biting criticism of the West's cultural and moral decline – just think of Nietzsche and Spengler! However, it does not uncover the role that Vienna's growing anti-Semitism might have played in Asad's later option for the Orient. The author recalls that Theodor Herzl and Asad were both Austrian, assimilated Jews, and journalists. But while Herzl indulged in Marxism and Zionism, a secular version of the arrogant doctrine of "God's Chosen People," Asad rejected Zionism as a racist aberration. After all, he knew first-hand that Palestine was not a "land without people." Thus he recovered his own Abrahamic roots in Islam's equalitarianism and universalism.

Windhager confirms my impression that Asad's early infatuation with the Orient had nothing to do with Islam, but rather with his boundless admiration for all things Arabic. This view is corroborated by *Unromantisches Morgenland* (Unromantic Orient, 1924), Asad's first (but still untranslated) book. Indeed, as late as 1927, Asad still seemed to admire Islam for being the Arabs' religion. Poldi, as his family and friends nicknamed him, led a life so full of events, ruptures, and even contradictions that one may wonder with Professor Gingrich whether this book "really refers to one single human life only."

Should Windhager, as I very much hope, embark upon a second volume, covering Asad's life in Islam (1927-92), this impression of a rich, puzzling life full of ruptures would reemerge. But while this second period of his life was not only extremely adventurous – in Saudi Arabia, Libya, India, Pakistan, the United States, Morocco, and Spain – it also was the time when he developed into a leading visionary scholar of Islam. In order to appreciate the significance of his contribution to almost all of the Islamic sciences, the author would have to enter deeply into Islam as a religion instead of just regarding it from a sociocultural viewpoint, and thus risk becoming a Muslim like his study's fascinating subject.

I also hope that this book will be translated into English in the near future for Asad's many admirers, particularly in India, Pakistan, Britain,

and the United States, for during this period he published almost exclusively in German.

In closing, I should acknowledge that this is a meticulously proofread book, a rarity in the German book market. Another reason for congratulating both the author and his publisher is that their contribution to the intellectual history of post-Enlightenment Europe is extraordinary.

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