

## JOHANNES HOHLENBERG

THE author of this article knows of only one person who was a disciple of both Sri Aurobindo and Rudolf Steiner, and in each case had direct personal contact with them, namely Johannes Hohlenberg, a Danish artist, dedicated publisher and distinguished author, who was also the general secretary of the ‘Anthroposophical Society in Denmark’ for eight years, from its inception in 1923 up to 1931.

Johannes Hohlenberg (1881-1960) was born into the cultured family of a Copenhagen pastor. He enjoyed an early musical education at home, but as a young man he at first pursued the greater interest he felt for the arts. The study of Art led him to Paris in 1905, where he soon made the acquaintance of Mirra Alfassa — at that time Mirra Morisset — and her later husband Paul Richard. At that time Mirra Alfassa was holding a regular Salon where artists and spiritual seekers from many different backgrounds met. Reminiscing, she once mentioned that Johannes Hohlenberg “used to come and see me almost every evening”<sup>1</sup> during his time in Paris. The beginning of their acquaintance coincided with the time of Mirra Alfassa’s most intense collaboration with the occultist Max Théon, alias Aia Aziz, whom she had by then visited twice (in 1906 and 1907) in his home in western Algeria, in the Sufi-influenced city of Tlemcen, in order to get initiated into his methods and teachings. Hohlenberg too must have engaged with the teachings of Théon, at least in their theoretical aspects, because Mirra Alfassa had the following to say about him: “He had read all of Théon’s stuff and was well up on everything, and very earnest about it.”<sup>2</sup> After she herself had decisive experiences of consciously leaving the body, Johannes Hohlenberg, following her return to Paris, seems to have been very eager for her to introduce him to these practices too. She said: “He absolutely insisted. [. . .] So I taught him how to do it, and what’s more I was there, he did it in my presence. And [. . .] the moment he went out of his body, he was thrown into such a panic! The man was no coward — he was very courageous — but it terrified him so! Sheer panic. . . . So I said, ‘no, no, no’.”<sup>3</sup>

Johannes Hohlenberg’s close contact with the Richards then continued for about five years, until Hohlenberg travelled to Egypt to pursue his interest in the Pyramids. His biographer writes: “Hohlenberg was fascinated by the mysterious and monumental architecture of the Pyramids. For six months he pursued intensive studies in Gizeh, which soon bore fruit in literary form.”<sup>4</sup> That a strong connection must have existed not only to Richard but also to Mirra is evident from a postcard of 21<sup>st</sup> September 1911 sent from Cluses, in which Mirra enquires about his whereabouts:

My dear Hohlenberg,

Here, while awaiting a letter, is something to re-awaken in your memory our fine evenings in Paris and our long philosophical conversations. . . . I hope it will also evoke your enthusiasm and your hopes. . . . Never forget that you are carrying them always within you, and that they are waiting beneath your outer awareness for you to let them come to life outwardly too.

We send you our best thoughts, in all affection.

M. P. Richard

Don't be so silent. We would be happy to have news of you. We return to Paris in a few days.<sup>5</sup>

We may assume from this that already in 1910 Johannes Hohlenberg must have taken an active interest in Paul Richard's reports from South India, where he had his first meeting with Sri Aurobindo. These had immediately inspired in Mirra the wish to go to Pondicherry herself as soon as possible.<sup>6</sup> It is also known that the Richards could realise this plan only in 1914, which then led within a few months of their arrival to the establishment of the monthly journal *The Arya*, which continued to appear for six and half years. In 1914 Johannes Hohlenberg received an invitation from the Richards to join them in Pondicherry and collaborate in editing the journal. But, "Then came the war and therefore my departure was postponed for almost a year. I could start only in the spring of 1915."<sup>7</sup>

By this time the Richards had already left India. "Nevertheless I made the journey and met Aurobindo"<sup>8</sup> he wrote. His stay extended to only a little over a month, since because of his regular contact with Sri Aurobindo Hohlenberg soon became politically suspect and was deported back to Europe; such were the times of war. During those few weeks in Pondicherry however, he made a famous photograph of Sri Aurobindo — standing in profile — as well as sketches for an oil-painting, which he would execute later in Denmark. In addition, Sri Aurobindo granted Hohlenberg daily evening interviews, which started with meditation followed by intensive instruction in yogic philosophy. In later years Mirra Alfassa reported Sri Aurobindo's words about that time as follows: "[. . .] there also came a Danish painter who did a sketch of me. At the end of every meditation, he used to say, 'Let us now talk of the Ineffable!'"<sup>9</sup> After returning to his native country, Johannes Hohlenberg not only did the oil-portrait,<sup>10</sup> but also wrote about his experiences of the yogic-philosophical evening talks with Sri Aurobindo. From these notes emerged his first literary work *Yoga i dens betydning for Europa*, which appeared simultaneously in Copenhagen and Christiania (Oslo) in 1916. To the third edition of this book Hohlenberg added in 1952 an informative new preface, in which he emphasised the connection of the text to Sri Aurobindo, to whom he had also dedicated it. In this

form the book was also eventually published in German translation in 1954:

The preconditions for this book were created during my stay in India in 1915, in daily talks with a man to whom it is also dedicated: Sri Aurobindo Ghose. He was then about thirty years of age and already known all over India as a thinker and mystic.<sup>11 12</sup>

This book by Hohlenberg provides a revealing early insight into the contents of what Sri Aurobindo was writing during those years in the series of articles that was later published in book form under the title *The Synthesis of Yoga*. The subdivision of the Integral Yoga into Karma, Jnana, Bhakti and Purna Yoga that characterises this book also unmistakably appears in the major parts of Hohlenberg's work.

Towards the end of the First World War Johannes Hohlenberg first heard of Anthroposophy through the Copenhagen businessman Carl Vett (1871-1956), with whom he worked intensively to formulate the theory of 'Social Threefolding'.<sup>13</sup> In 1920, when he visited the first Anthroposophical High School course on *Grenzen der Naturerkennntnis* (Boundaries of Natural Science)<sup>14</sup> in Dornach (Switzerland), he met Rudolf Steiner for the first time in person and became his disciple. When the international anthroposophical work was reorganised in 1923 and a national anthroposophical society was established in Denmark, Johannes Hohlenberg was elected as its first general secretary. In this capacity he then also took part in the Christmas meeting of 1922/23 in Dornach for the establishment of the General Anthroposophical Society. As editor and publisher of the anthroposophical magazine *Vidar* (1926-1940), he revealed himself in the 1930s as a pointed critic of the lack of discrimination on the part of some officials of the Anthroposophical Society towards the growing Nazi movement, which finally led him to resign all positions in the Society. He concentrated entirely on his work as a publisher, from 1933 onwards also in the Norwegian cultural magazine *Janus*. Impelled by his social interests he became one of the first theorists in the anthroposophical sphere of universal basic income, two essays by him on this topic appearing in the magazine *Janus* in 1934 and 1937. Now less involved in anthroposophical work, Hohlenberg plunged into the existential philosophy of Søren Kierkegaard, on whom he published a much acknowledged monograph in 1940.<sup>15</sup> After the Second World War he published a new magazine which appeared in Copenhagen under the name *Øjeblikket* ("Glimpse") from 1947-1954.<sup>16</sup> Just as in the last numbers of *Vidar* he published serially the whole of the *Bhagavad Gita* in Danish translation, in the last year of the *Øjeblikket* he also printed there two essays by Sri Aurobindo and a selection from his work *The Life Divine*, obviously using his own Danish translation.<sup>17</sup> Both these actions may be interpreted as an indication of a conscious return to the beginnings of his literary career. Even though for over twenty years no hints on eastern spirituality had appeared, these later references to the *Bhagavad Gita* and the work of Sri Aurobindo, as well as the

later dedication of his book on Yoga to him, seem to show that the short but intense contact in 1915 had a stronger impact on him than had so far been supposed.

The later General Secretary of the Anthroposophical Society in Denmark, Oskar Borgman Hansen, retired incumbent of the chair of philosophy at the University of Aarhus, recalled a talk he had with Johannes Hohlenberg. In it, Hohlenberg mentioned a meeting with Rudolf Steiner during which Hohlenberg's spiritual development in the time before his contact with Anthroposophy had come up amongst other topics. Hansen reports that Hohlenberg was already undergoing a kind of occult training before he came across Anthroposophy towards the end of the First World War. In the said talk he had asked Rudolf Steiner whether, now that he had found Anthroposophy, he had to give up his earlier practices, to which Steiner replied that this was not necessary.<sup>18</sup> From this it is clear that the founder of Anthroposophy must not only have been well aware of Hohlenberg's earlier practices and their origin, but also that in this spirituality — namely Sri Aurobindo's — he could not have seen anything that would have stood in the way of Hohlenberg's anthroposophical orientation.

A faint reflection of a mutual awareness of each other between Rudolf Steiner and Sri Aurobindo can possibly be discerned in the biography and work of the Indian spiritual teacher. In April 1920 Sri Aurobindo wrote a long letter in his native Bengali language addressed to his brother Barin, who at that time had just been released from political imprisonment. In this letter he gave an overview of his inner development since his own imprisonment in Alipore. But he also dwelt upon "India's weakness", and stressed that he saw its cause neither in subjection and poverty nor in a lack of spirituality, but rather in the fact that one could deplore a "diminution of the power of thought, the spread of ignorance" everywhere in India and this "in the birthplace of knowledge". In Europe this would be different, for there existed a great culture and discipline of thought and striving after knowledge. The revolutions and catastrophes happening in Europe he considered not as heralds of destruction but as "the first stages of a new creation".<sup>19</sup>

But there is a fatal limitation to the power and thought of Europe. When she enters the field of spirituality, her thought-power stops working. There Europe sees everything as a riddle, nebulous metaphysics, yogic hallucination — "It rubs its eyes as in smoke and can see nothing clearly."<sup>20</sup>

But it need not remain so, Sri Aurobindo continued: "But now in Europe not a little effort is being made to surmount even this limitation."<sup>21</sup> <sup>22</sup> Could Sri Aurobindo have had Rudolf Steiner in mind here? Numerous spiritual and esoteric movements were already in existence in early 20<sup>th</sup> century Europe. But only in the anthroposophical spiritual science (*Geisteswissenschaft*) of Rudolf Steiner was and is such a unique and unmistakable stress laid on thought and the striving after knowledge as

might have been in the mind of the clear-sighted letter writer in Pondicherry, when he referred to “not a little effort”. Awareness on Sri Aurobindo’s part of Rudolf Steiner’s immense achievements in knowledge seems easy to explain if we assume that Johannes Hohlenberg still remained in correspondence with the great Yogi for some time, even after the date when the Dane, approximately three years after he had left Pondicherry, discovered Anthroposophy in central Europe.

KLAUS J. BRACKER<sup>23</sup>

## Notes

1. Sujata Nahar, *Mother’s Chronicles. Book Three. Mirra — The Occultist*. Paris 1989. Chapter 25 “Hohlenberg”.

2. *Ibid.*

3. *Ibid.*

4. Terje Christensen, “Hohlenberg, Johannes” in: Bodo von Plato (ed.), *Anthroposophie im 20. Jahrhundert. Ein Kulturimpuls in biografischen Porträts*. (Anthroposophy in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. A cultural impulse in biographical portraits.) Dornach 2003.

5. “Two Postcards” in *Sri Aurobindo – Archives and Research*. Vol. 13, No. 1, April 1989. Pondicherry. The formulation “[...] something to call to your memory [...]” relates to a portrait of Paul Richard on the front cover of the postcard. “M. P. Richard” signifies Mirra and Paul Richard.

6. Cf. Sujata Nahar, *Mother’s Chronicles. Book Three*. Chapter 2, “Mirra, *The Arya* and the Ashram”.

7. Johannes Hohlenberg, “Letter to Judith Tyberg”. July 21, 1948. From the archive of Terje Christensen, the Norwegian biographer of Johannes Hohlenberg, which was kindly made available to the author.

8. *Ibid.*

9. Sujata Nahar, *Mother’s Chronicles. Book Three*. Chapter 25 “Hohlenberg”.

10. With the assistance of Hohlenberg’s widow Eli, this oil-painting reached the Sri Aurobindo Ashram in Pondicherry many years later. This can be seen from her letter of 1978 to a prominent Ashram member, Jayantilal Parekh, who in 1973 had initiated the Sri Aurobindo Archives. She wrote, “I hope the portrait and the pencil sketches will reach you safely and I would be grateful to receive a few words informing me of their arrival.” The portrait, which had been purchased from Eli Hohlenberg by German friends of the Integral Yoga, was restored in Germany and then later brought to Pondicherry.

11. Johannes Hohlenberg, *Der atmende Gott. Yoga und der europäische Mensch*. [The Living God, Yoga and European Man] Hamburg 1954. “Vorwort zur dritten Auflage” [Preface to the third edition]. In fact Sri Aurobindo was then 42 years old.

12. In 1920 in Sweden Selma Lagerlöf had important yogic experiences inspired by the book of Hohlenberg, which had also soon appeared in Swedish.

13. For more information on this anthroposophical theory see [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social\\_threefolding](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_threefolding)

14. Rudolf Steiner, *Grenzen der Naturerkenntnis* (Limits of the Knowledge of Nature). Dornach 1981. Lectures, 27<sup>th</sup> September to 3<sup>rd</sup> October 1920. In addition to the specific High School course, two lectures were added on 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> October 1920, in which Rudolf Steiner dwelt on the one hand on the meaning of oriental mantras, and on the other, traditional yoga. Here one could justifiably wonder whether in these lectures Steiner specifically intended to refer to Hohlenberg's experiences in South India.

15. Johannes Hohlenberg, *Søren Kierkegaard. Eine philosophische Biographie* (A philosophical biography). Basel 2011.

16. Reference: Bodo von Plato (editor), *Anthroposophie im 20. Jahrhundert. Ein Kulturimpuls in biografischen Porträts*. (Anthroposophy in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. A cultural impulse in biographical portraits.) Dornach 2003. *Op. cit.* Terje Christensen "Hohlenberg, Johannes".

17. "Naturen og Udviklingslæren" in: *Øjeblikket*, 7. aargang nr. 1, 1. January 1954; in the English original: Selection from "Man and the Evolution" in: Sri Aurobindo, *The Life Divine. Op. cit.*; "Overmenneskets Idé" in: *Øjeblikket*, 7. aargang nr. 2, 1. April 1954; in the English original: "The Superman"; contained in: Sri Aurobindo, *Essays in Philosophy and Yoga. Op. cit.*; "Om Menneskets Frie Villie" in: *Øjeblikket*, 7. aargang nr. 3, 1. July 1954; in the English original: "All-Will and Free-Will"; contained in: Sri Aurobindo, *Essays in Philosophy and Yoga*.

18. Communication by letter from Oskar Borgman Hansen to the author, Skagen, 15<sup>th</sup> July 2012.

19. Sri Aurobindo, *Bengali Writings – Translated Into English*. Pondicherry 1991. Chap. X, 2, "A Letter to Barin".

20. *Ibid.*

21. *Ibid.*

22. There is a strong agreement with Sri Aurobindo's stand on the importance of thought and knowledge for spiritual development, in what the Anthroposophical Waldorf-Teacher as well as founder and first head of the Max Mueller Bhavan (Goethe) Institute in Bombay, Heimo Rau, wrote on the Indian: "Thus Sri Aurobindo sees in the development of thinking consciousness the path of humanity towards the spirit and to further evolution. He agrees in this with Rudolf Steiner, who pointed out and presented the training of thought towards the knowledge of higher worlds as the path that suits the current state of human consciousness. Aurobindo has taken up the heritage of India and transmuted it for modern thinking humanity." Heimo Rau, *Indiens Erbe – Illusion und Wirklichkeit heute* (India's Heritage: Illusion and Reality Today). Stuttgart 1982.

23. Translation by Shradhdhavan on the basis of a draft by Nishtha Mueller of the 3<sup>rd</sup> appendix of Klaus J. Bracker, *Veda und lebendiger Logos. Anthroposophie und Integraler Yoga im Dialog*. ("The Veda and the Living Logos: Anthroposophy and Integral Yoga in Dialogue") Frankfurt (Main) 2014.

Klaus J. Bracker, born 1956 in Berlin, first came into contact with Auroville at the age of 15, when he read in the magazine *Planet* a report on the City of Dawn. Later he met some sadhaks of the Integral Yoga living in northern Germany. In 1976 he set off for India, but had to cut his journey short after catching a dangerous fever in Afghanistan. At that time he began reading Rudolf Steiner's *Philosophy of Spiritual Activity* and decided to give Europe

another chance. In the next years he trained in Eurythmy, Curative Eurythmy and Waldorf Education and worked at three different Waldorf Schools in Germany. The year 2000 brought a very strong re-encounter with Sri Aurobindo's Integral Yoga, which led him to attempt a broad-based comparison of Rudolf Steiner's Anthroposophy and Sri Aurobindo's Integral Yoga. This was published in 2014 under the title: *Veda und lebendiger Logos. Anthroposophie und Integraler Yoga im Dialog* ("The Veda and the Living Logos: Anthroposophy and Integral Yoga in Dialogue") Frankfurt (Main) 2014. This article is a translation of the third appendix of that monograph. Since 2006, Klaus has participated in the Bremen Study Group of 'Auroville International — Germany', and he and his wife Dagmar had a happy visit to Auroville in the summer of 2009.

*The Shastras use the same word for man and the one divine and universal Being — Purusha — as if to lay stress upon the oneness of humanity with God. Nara and Narayana are the eternal couple, who, though they are two, are one, eternally different, eternally the same. Narayana, say the scholiasts, is he who dwells in the waters, but I rather think it means he who is the essence and sum of all humanity. Wherever there is a man, there there is Narayana; for the two cannot be separated. I think sometimes that when Christ spoke of himself as the Son of Man, he really meant the son of the Purusha, and almost find myself imagining that anthropos is only the clumsy Greek equivalent, the literal and ignorant translation of some Syrian word which corresponded to our Purusha.*

*Sri Aurobindo*

*(Essays Divine and Human, CWSA, Vol. 12, p. 7)*