

VICTOR TAUSK - (1919)

Among the sacrifices, fortunately few in number, claimed by the war from the ranks of psycho-analysis, we must count Dr. Victor Tausk. This rarely-gifted man, a Vienna specialist in nervous diseases, took his own life before peace was signed.

Dr. Tausk, who was only in his forty-second year, had for more than ten years been one of the closer circle of Freud's followers. Originally a lawyer by profession, he had for some considerable time been acting as a magistrate in Bosnia when, under the stress of severe personal troubles, he abandoned his career and turned to journalism, for which he was peculiarly suited by his wide general education. After working for some time as a journalist in Berlin, he came to Vienna in the same capacity. Here he became acquainted with psycho-analysis and soon decided to devote himself to it entirely. Although he was no longer a young man and was the father of a family, he was not deterred by the great difficulties and sacrifices involved in yet another change in profession, and one which must necessitate an interruption of several years before he could once more earn his living. For he embarked on the tedious study of medicine only as a means to enable him to carry on a psycho-analytic practice.

Shortly before the outbreak of the World War, Tausk had obtained his second doctor's degree and set up in Vienna as a nerve-specialist. Here, after a relatively short time, he had begun building up a considerable practice and had achieved some excellent results. These activities promised the rising young doctor full satisfaction as well as a means of support; but he was all at once violently torn from them by the war. He was called up immediately for active service and soon promoted to senior rank. He carried out his medical duties with devotion in the various theatres of war in the North and in the Balkans (finally in Belgrade), and received official commendation. It is also greatly to his honour that during the war he threw himself wholeheartedly, and with complete disregard of the consequences, into exposing the numerous abuses which so many doctors unfortunately tolerated in silence or for which they even shared the responsibility.

The stresses of many years' service in the field could not fail to exercise a severely damaging psychological effect on so intensely conscientious a man. At the last Psycho-Analytical Congress, which we held in Budapest in September 1918 and which brought analysts together once more after many years of separation, Dr. Tausk, who had long been suffering from physical ill-health, was already showing signs of unusual nervous irritability. When, soon afterwards, in the late autumn of last year, he came to the end of his military service and returned to Vienna, he was faced for the third time, in his state of mental exhaustion, with the hard task of building up a new existence - this time under the most unfavourable internal and external conditions. In addition to this, Dr. Tausk, who has left two grown-up sons to whom he was a devoted father, was on the brink of contracting a new marriage. He was no longer able to cope with the many demands imposed on him in his ailing state by harsh reality. On the morning of July 3rd he put an end to his life.

Dr. Tausk had been a member of the Vienna Psycho Analytical Society since the autumn of 1909. He was well known to the readers of this journal from his numerous contributions, which were distinguished by sharp observation, sound judgement and a particular clearness of expression. These writings exhibit plainly the philosophical training which the author was able so happily to combine with the exact methods of science. His strong need to establish things on a philosophical foundation and to achieve epistemological clarity compelled him to formulate, and seek as well to master, the whole profundity and comprehensive meaning of the very difficult problems involved. Perhaps he sometimes went too far in this direction, in his impetuous urge for investigation. Perhaps the time was not yet ripe for laying such general foundations as these for the young science of psycho-analysis. The psycho-analytic consideration of philosophical problems, for which Tausk showed special aptitude, promises to become more and more fruitful. One of his last works, on the psycho-analysis of the function of judgement, which was delivered at the Budapest Congress and has not yet been published, gives evidence of this direction taken by his interest.

In addition to his gift for philosophy and attraction towards it, Tausk possessed a quite exceptional medico-psychological capacity and produced some excellent work in that field too. His clinical activities, to which we owe valuable researches into various psychoses (e.g. melancholia and schizophrenia) justified the fairest hopes and gave him the prospective appointment to a University Lectureship for which he had applied.

Psycho-analysis was particularly indebted to Dr. Tausk, who was a brilliant speaker, for the courses of lectures which he gave over a period of many years to large audiences of both sexes and in which he introduced them to the principles and problems of psycho-analysis. His audiences were able to admire the clarity and didactic skill of his lectures no less than the profundity with which he handled individual topics.

All those who knew him well valued his straightforward character, his honesty towards himself and towards others and the superiority of a nature which was distinguished by a striving for nobility and perfection. His passionate temperament found expression in sharp, and sometimes too sharp, criticisms, which however were combined with a brilliant gift for exposition. These personal qualities exercised a great attraction on many people, and some, too, may have been repelled by them. No one, however, could escape the impression that here was a man of importance.

How much psycho-analysis meant for him, even up to his last moments, is shown by letters which he left behind, in which he expressed his unreserved belief in it and his hope that it will find recognition at a not too distant date. There is no doubt that this man, of whom our science and his friends in Vienna have been prematurely robbed, has contributed to that aim. He is sure of an honourable memory in the history of psycho-analysis and its earliest struggles.