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The First Goetheanum: A Centenary for Organic Architecture

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ABSTRACT

A century has elapsed since the inauguration (on 26 September, 1920) of a remarkable piece of architecture, Rudolf Steiner's Goetheanum, headquarters of the Anthroposophy movement, on a verdant hilltop on the outskirts of the Swiss village of Dornach, near Basel. The Goetheanum was an all timber structure, sitting on concrete footings and roofed with Norwegian slate. The building was begun in 1913, and construction progressed through the First World War. Rudolf Steiner's intention was to take architecture in a new and organic direction. On New Year's Eve, 31 December 1922, the Goetheanum hosted a Eurythmy performance followed by a lecture by Rudolf Steiner for members of the Anthroposophy Society. In the hours that followed, despite the fire-fighting efforts of the Anthroposophists and the local fire brigades, the building burned to the ground. The popular narrative is that the fire was arson but that was never proved. A local watchmaker and anthroposophist, Jakob Ott, was the only person to perish in the fire. He was falsely accused (in death) as 'the arsonist' but the evidence is rather that he perished in his brave efforts at saving the Goetheanum. Rudolf Steiner saw the "calamity" as an opportunity "to change the sorrowful event into a blessing". He promptly embarked on plans for a new building, Goetheanum II. This time there was to be "no wood". The short-lived Goetheanum I had served as a placeholder for Goetheanum II. This new Goetheanum, Rudolf Steiner's finest work of organic architecture, is of steel reinforced concrete and today stands on the Dornach hill right on the site of the old Goetheanum.

Keywords: Rudolf Steiner, Anthroposophy, Goethe, Edith Maryon, Jakob Ott, Marie Steiner, fire, arson, disability, Dornach, Switzerland.

INTRODUCTION

The present Goetheanum building, located at Dornach, Switzerland, is one of the great buildings of the twentieth century (<greatbuildings.com>). The world has this building, Goetheanum II, because of three strokes of good luck (karma if you prefer), although they did not appear in that guise at the time. First, was a frustrating bureaucratic denial [1], second, was a catastrophic fire that Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925) described as a "calamity" [2], and third was the arrival of a talented English sculptor who became one of Rudolf Steiner's closest colleagues [3].

The original Goetheanum was opened on 26 September, 1920. It was designed by the New Age philosopher, Rudolf Steiner. The first plan was to build a centre for Rudolf Steiner's Anthroposophy movement in Munich, but the city authorities denied building approval [1, 4]. It was a source of frustration and disappointment at the time, although it was really a stroke of great good fortune. As the Nazi ideology took root in Germany, Rudolf Steiner was unwelcome and threatened in Germany. After two decades of

living in Berlin, Rudolf Steiner relinquished his Berlin apartment in 1923 and never revisited Germany [5].

Alfred Hummel, who served as a member of the Building Office for the Goetheanum, explains of the denial of building approval: "this could be seen as good providence because the building would have run into great difficulties after the outbreak of World War I. Munich would have been a place of great danger after 1933" [4: 2]. If the Goetheanum had been raised in Munich, it would have stood a good chance of destruction during World War II since the city was carpet bombed, including with magnesium incendiary bombs, in Allied raids. Such an alternative reality was never tested because shortly after the Munich denial, Dr Emil Grossheintz offered a site for the Goetheanum in Switzerland and Rudolf Steiner took up the offer [1].

The first Goetheanum was a building of very short life. Opened in 1920, it was burned to the ground at the end of 1922. This was a blow to the aspirations of the Anthroposophists and the multinational contingent of dedicated workers

who had laboured through the war, many as volunteers, to create this unique building. Rudolf Steiner described it as a “calamity” [1]. But, the destruction proved to be a blessing in disguise because it allowed a rethink of the design. In place of the original rather quaint structure of Goetheanum I, there is now Goetheanum II, which is a truly remarkable and timeless masterpiece.

The English sculptor, Edith Maryon (1872-1924), arrived in Dornach a few months before the outbreak of war in 1914, to devote her talents to the service of Rudolf Steiner and his Anthroposophy movement. Here she found her spiritual home and she devoted herself forthwith to ‘the cause’. Goetheanum I was already designed and under construction by the time Edith Maryon arrived in Dornach, but she was the sculptor on hand, and by then established as one of Rudolf Steiner’s close collaborators when Goetheanum II was conceived.

On the occasion of the centenary of the opening of Goetheanum I, the present paper, considers the dharma of the building, its reception, and its passing

Methods

Goetheanum I is, a century on from the opening, beyond living memory. The present account draws on contemporary documents of the time, to throw light on the building, its reception, and its calamitous demise. Documents drawn on include eye witness accounts, personal published and manuscript accounts, newspaper accounts, correspondence, and Rudolf Steiner’s own comments, explanations and lectures. The original sources are quoted where appropriate.

Results

The Goetheanum with which this paper is concerned is the first Goetheanum, Rudolf Steiner referred to it as the “old Goetheanum”[6], the present paper will refer to it generally as ‘Goetheanum I’. When building approval was denied in Munich [4], a devotee of Rudolf Steiner’s Anthroposophy, the Zürich dentist Dr Emil Grosheintz, offered a site on the outskirts of the Swiss village of Dornach, the site of a famous Swiss battle of 1499 where Swabian invaders were repulsed [7]. Dornach is a brief commute (train or tram, about 15 km) to the city of Basel, which sits in the north west of Switzerland near the junction of three country borders (France, Germany and Switzerland).

The Goetheanum was a project of the New Age philosopher and mystic Rudolf Steiner. He had honed his skills as an orator and lecturer as

leader of the German section of the Theosophy Society [8]. Emerging differences between the Theosophists and Rudolf Steiner led to the establishment of a breakaway movement, the Anthroposophy Society. The Goetheanum was to be the home of the new Society, an administrative centre, and a performance space for Steiner’s Mystery plays.

Rudolf Steiner went on to design various buildings in the growing enclave of Anthroposophists at Dornach [9], but the monumental Goetheanum I was the first venture into Anthroposophical architectural design on a grand scale, and the Goetheanum II was the apogee of Rudolf Steiner’s architectural manifestations .

THE GREAT WAR

An Australian soldier, arriving in Europe in 1916, sent a postcard home: “Dear Dave, We have seen a lot of ruined towns & villages since we have been in France. This must have been a nice building once, now ruins, Keith” [10].

In the Europe of the time, destruction on an industrial scale was the order of the day. However, Switzerland remained neutral throughout, and her neutrality was honoured by all the belligerents for the duration.

Construction of the Goetheanum at Dornach began in 1913. Construction carried on through the years of World War I (1914-1918). The Russian artist, Assya Turgeniev, recalled: “Already at the beginning of hostilities Dr Steiner tried to speak to us about the background to the events of the war ... The stirred up chauvinistic moods of his listeners thrown together from all quarters of the globe (we were from about 17 different nations) that did not allow him to continue” [11: 99].

Marie Steiner wrote that, as the war stretched on, the work force was depleted by call-up notices: “one after another our artists were called away to the scene of the war. With very few exceptions, there remained only those men who belonged to neutral countries, and the women” [in 12: vii].

The Goetheanum was built during the Great War using volunteer and paid labour. They came and went. Amongst the privations and avalanche of news of death and destruction of the war: “the work went on as best it could and as far as our strength allowed” [11: 136]. “From all quarters of the globe people gathered in Dornach to help with the building. It was a motley, many-sided, multilingual company”[11: 57]. “Our carving group grew to about 70 in number, not counting those who put in a short appearance ... All financial affairs were

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attended to by Miss Stinde. For those who needed it she arranged a modest remuneration" [11: 58].

The artist Assya Turgeniev remembered: "we were only a bunch of dilettantes ... Only the knowledge that we were working together on a great future task and Dr Steiner's helping guidance brought order into this chaos. It remains a wonder that the work progresses without any kind of organisation" [11: 59].

With the outbreak of war, "A heavy gloom settled over Dornach ... a European war, was now on our very doorstep [11: 68]. Goetheanum volunteers were called up to return to their respective countries: "Many friends had been recruited and had to depart" [11: 69]. "Our group of wood-carvers grew less and less as further friends were called up" [11: 79].

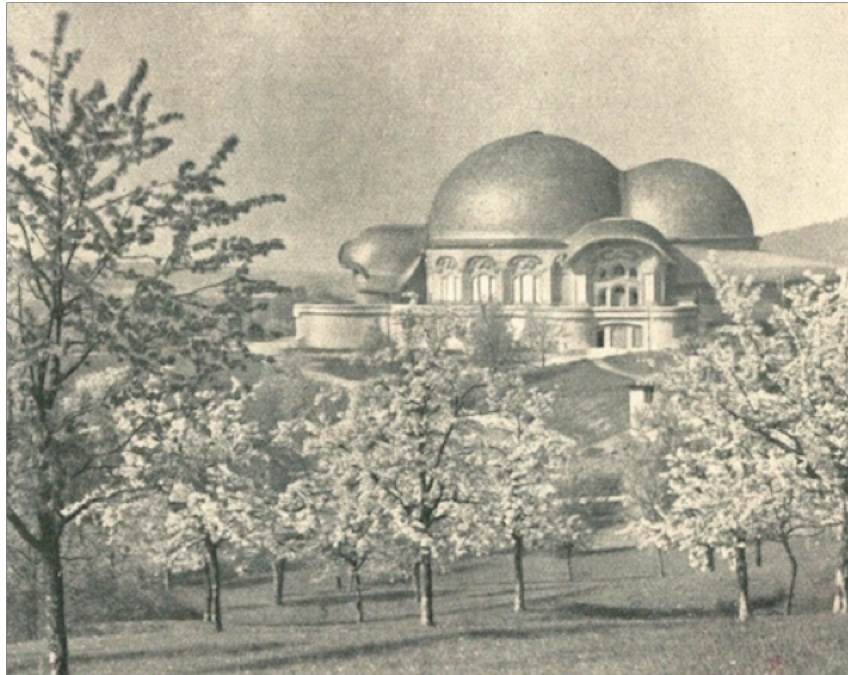


Figure 1. *View of the Goetheanum with blossom trees [source: 13].*

A NEW STYLE OF ARCHITECTURE

Rudolf Steiner spoke of the Goetheanum, "The Dornach Building", in a lecture to Anthroposophists at The Hague in February 1921: "I have said that the style of this Goetheanum has arisen out of the same sources that gave birth to spiritual science. The endeavour to create a new style of imperfections which must accompany such architecture is accompanied by inevitable risks, by all the a first attempt" [14: 150]. Steiner elaborated: "there is not a single symbol, not a single allegory, but rather we have attempted to give everything a truly artistic form [14: 151].

Organic Architecture

Rudolf Steiner explained his Goetheanum as a manifestation of a new organic architecture: "Concrete and wood are both employed to give rise to an architectural style that may perhaps be described as the transition from previous geometrical, symmetrical, mechanical, static-dynamic architectural styles into an organic style" [14: 153]. The plinth was concrete and the superstructure was timber.

The Goetheanum was organic but not imitative of nature: "Not that some sort of organic form has been imitated in the Dornach building. That is not the case" [14: 154]. Rudolf Steiner informed his audience that: "The least and the greatest in an organic whole has its place in the organism, its absolutely right form. All this has passed over into the architectural conception of the Dornach building" [14: 154]

Rudolf Steiner acknowledged the German writer and polymath, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749 -1832): "it has been my aim, in accordance with Goethe's theory of metamorphosis, to steep myself in nature's creation of organic forms, and from these to obtain organic forms that, when metamorphosed, might make a single whole of the Dornach building. In other words, organic forms of such a kind that each single form must be in precisely the place it is" [14: 154].

Windows, as all the elements of the Goetheanum, were conceived of as part of an organic whole: "we are handing over this auxiliary building [the Glass House, Glashauss] ... in order that they

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may create something that in the fairest sense may be a living member in the whole organism of our building” [12: 15].

Rudolf Steiner was aware already that not all would be won over to his organic architecture: "I well know how much may be said against this organic principle of building from the point of view of older architectural styles. This organic style, however, has been attempted in the architectural conception of the building at Dornach ... You will therefore find in the Dornach building certain organic forms... carved out of wood, as embodied in the capitals of the columns at the entrance” [14: 154-6]

THE OPENING

The Italian artist Ernesto Genoni, who later spent a year with Rudolf Steiner at Dornach (in 1924) [15, 16] and was a member of Rudolf Steiner’s First Class, wrote two (somewhat cryptic) accounts of his first visit to the Goetheanum on the occasion of the inauguration (26 September, 1920).

In one account Ernesto Genoni relates: “In Milan I came in touch with the Anthroposophical Society where I took part for a whole year in the study of Anthroposophy. Then my sister Mrs [Rosa] Podreider, for certain business reasons, sent me to Lausanne and said ‘While you are there you can go as far as the Goetheanum’. Eventually I arrived in Dornach at the inauguration of the first Goetheanum. There Mrs [Charlotte] Ferreri introduced me to Dr Steiner and I was received by him with great warmth. Unfortunately he was speaking in German which I did not know, but by his long handshake

and smiling expression of the face I could feel his sincere welcome. Here I would like to add this - That was the only time among all the people I met at the Goetheanum that anyone gave me a feeling that I was truly welcome ... So much did I feel this isolation that I decided to return to Italy” [17: 7].

In another account of his Goetheanum inauguration visit, Ernesto Genoni writes: “In autumn 1920 Rosa sent me to Lausanne for selling some opossum skins and then I went to Dornach. What a strange impression I received from the first view of the Goetheanum building ... The short conversation with Fräulein Vreede ... chilly! Frau Ferreri ... the meeting with the Doctor ... the bewildering impression of the interior of the Goetheanum. I could not enter in such saturated life of the spirit and after a few days I left ... the reproach from Miss Maryon. In the following years it was a painful search to find my way in life” [18: 19] (author’s note: ellipses are in the original handwritten manuscript).

ART OF THE TOUR

Rudolf Steiner wanted the art of the Goetheanum to speak directly to the viewer without intermediary explanations: “Sometimes I had occasion to show visitors the Goetheanum personally. Then I used to say that all ‘explanation’ of the forms and colours was in fact distasteful to me. Art does not want to be brought home to us through thoughts, but should rather be received in the immediate sight and feeling of it” [1: 3]. The photographs in the present paper offer an insight into the experience of Steiner’s visitors (Figs. 1, 2 & 3).

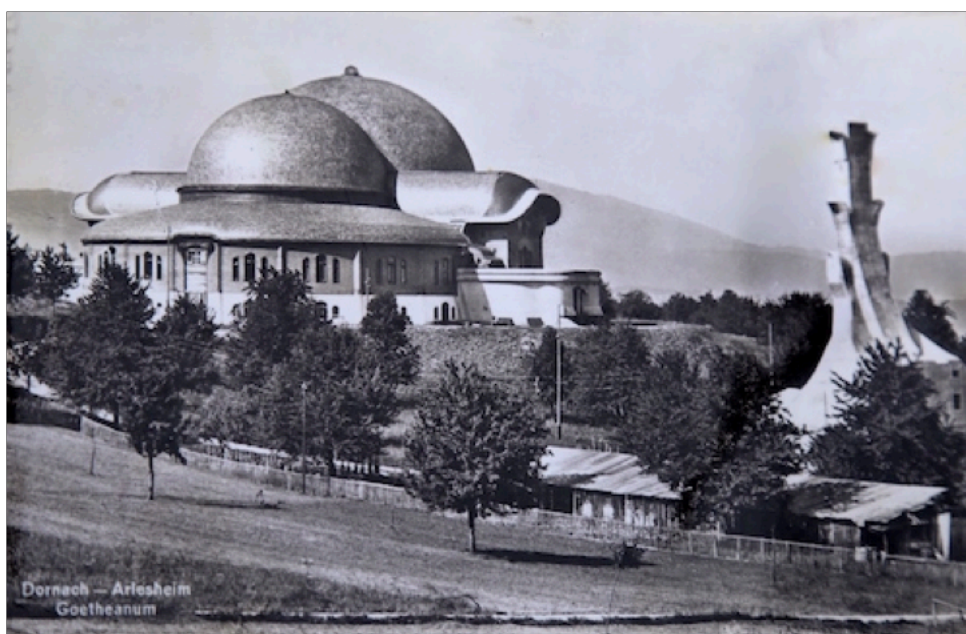


Figure 2. Rear view of the Goetheanum with Heizhaus to the right (postcard)

NEWS IN THE ANTIPODES

The Register newspaper in Adelaide, Australia's city of churches, informed its readers in 1925 about Rudolf Steiner and the Goetheanum: "a man who built a building large enough to contain an audience of a thousand people, roofed by intersecting domes, the larger of them slightly greater span than St Peter's, earned a title of serious consideration from all who profess the art of architecture. The building owed nothing to traditional styles. No effect was made by its designer to present an intellectual conception of what the temples of ancient Greece could contribute to the art of modern Europe, nor were the forms of medieval Gothic borrowed and adjusted. In no sense was it a drawing board design." [19].

The Register continued: "It was conceived and designed, as architecture should be and must be, in three dimensions, and it had to be seen in three dimensions to be understood ... as a first effort in a new presentation of architecture it has probably no rival in the history of art" [19].

Readers in South Australia were informed that the Goetheanum: "was built on the summit of one of the foothills of the Jura mountains, near the village of Dornach, standing out against a background of rugged hills and rocky cliffs ... He deliberately discards the limitations of squares, and one feels that his construction is organic rather than static" [19].



Figure 3. Interior of the Goetheanum [source: 13].

The Name

Even the name of the Goetheanum apparently drew offence. 'Wokeness' is not such a twenty-first century phenomenon as some might suppose. Rudolf Steiner explained: "Many people were scandalised at the very name, 'Goetheanum', because they failed to consider the fundamental reason for this name, and how it is connected with all that is cultivated there as Anthroposophy ... this Anthroposophy is the spontaneous result of my devotion for more than four decades to Goethe's world-conception" [2: 1].

Of the name, Rudolf Steiner explained: "this Goetheanum was first called 'Johannesbau' by those friends of the anthroposophical world-conception who made it possible to erect such a building ... for me this building is a Goetheanum, for I derived my world-view in a living way from Goethe ... I have always regarded this as a sort of token of gratitude for what can be gained from Goethe, an act of homage to the towering personality of Goethe ... the anthroposophical world-view feels the deepest gratitude for what has come into the world through Goethe" [2: 2].

Second Thoughts

Less than a year after the opening of the Goetheanum, and even while the building remained incomplete (it was never entirely completed), Rudolf Steiner revealed that he was thinking of a Goetheanum Mark 2.

At a lecture in Berne on 29 June 1921 titled 'The Architectural Conception of the Goetheanum' Rudolf Steiner told his audience that: "Naturally one can criticise in every possible way this architectural style which has been formed out of spiritual science. But nothing that makes its first appearance is perfect, and I can assure you that I know all its flaws and that I would be the first to say: If I had to put up this building a second time, it would be out of the same background and out of the same laws, but in most of its details, and perhaps even totally, it would be different" [20: 42]. As events played out just eighteen months later, it proved to be a remarkably prescient statement.

Bad Timing

For sheer bad timing (and perhaps prolixity), a fund raising letter dated 25 December 1922 by the British Anthroposophical Society in London would be hard to beat. The letter explained that: "the Goetheanum expresses in a language of line, form and colour those thoughts and ideas which a knowledge of higher spiritual worlds

produces in the artist. As a work of art the Goetheanum can only be compared, in its tendency to the supreme artistic achievements of humanity, for it produces in the onlooker the perception of that interpenetration of object and idea of which the true world of art is the outcome, while it raises him to that point within his inner being where an ideal spiritual world is felt to be born into physical reality”.

Then the fund raising letter gets to the point: “The Goetheanum still remains to be completed. The funds at Dr Steiner’s disposal are drawing to an end. Money is urgently needed to carry on the work. The work MUST NOT STOP ... Let each give what he or she can. In the old days ladies sold their jewellery to enable the foundation stone to be laid” [21].

Just six days after the date of the London fund raiser letter, the Goetheanum burned to the ground (on the night of 31 December 1922). Rudolf Steiner described the occurrence as a “dreadful calamity”. He reminded his audience of “The terrible catastrophe of last New Year’s Eve, the destruction by fire of the Goetheanum, which will remain a painful memory” [2: 1].

Rudolf Steiner explained that the Anthroposophical Society was misunderstood and that there was calumny afoot: “That dreadful calamity was just the occasion to bring to light what fantastic notions there are in the world linked with all that this Goetheanum in Dornach intended to do and all that was done in it. It was said that the most frightful superstitions were disseminated there, that all sorts of things inimical to religion were being practiced; and there is even talk of all kinds of spiritualistic seances, of nebulous mystic performances, and so on” [2: 1].

The Fire

A local newspaper, the Basler Nachrichten reported the news of the New Year fire at the Goetheanum: “The Goetheanum in Dornach-Arlesheim is on fire, was the terrible alarm message that flew like wildfire ... just before the bells sounded in solemn ringing ... On New Year’s Eve ... at 7 pm , the Goetheanum had a presentation of Eurythmy and a lecture by Rudolf Steiner ... The last audience had left the lecture hall by 9.45 pm ... immediately after the seriousness of the situation was clear, the calls for help were despatched to the surrounding villages and to Basel ... The Dornachers were the first to arrive at 11:45 pm, followed by the Arlesheimers a quarter of an hour later ... Because of repair work, there was scaffolding where the fire was first seen” [22].

Rudolf Steiner put the fire as starting between 5:15 pm and 6:20 pm [23].

Rudolf Steiner related that: “one hour after the last word had been spoken, I was summoned to the fire at the Goetheanum. At the fire of the Goetheanum we passed the whole of that New Year night”. He stated that it was “exactly at the moment in its evolution when the Goetheanum was ready to become the bearer of the renewal of spiritual life”[6].

A newspaper gave an account of the events: “When the double cupolas fell in, there shot up heavenwards a giant sheaf of fire, and a torrent of sparks threatened the whole neighborhood so that fire-men had to be sent in all directions to prevent the spread of disaster” [24]. Later, on New Year’s Day “The sky was veiled in clouds as if to check the great outpouring of people which took place from Basel and its neighborhood. For nearly the whole population there was one urge: Off to Dornach! Hour after hour unbroken streams of people climbed the muddy roads and slippery fields, whilst other streams, equally unbroken, flowed down again” [24].

Rudolf Steiner later referred to “the pain for which there are no words” [1: 7]. However, on the day, as Albert Steffen relates, Rudolf Steiner kept his nerve and declared the continuance of the New Year’s programme: “In the morning Dr Steiner ... was still there ... ‘We will go on with our lectures as notified’, he said, and gave instructions that the pools of water in the ‘Schreinerei’ (the temporary shed used for lectures) and the dirt carried in by muddied shoes should be removed” [25: 13].

Seat of the Fire

Albert Steffen (1884-1963), Anthroposophist, writer and editor, wrote of the seat of the fire: “Unfortunately a scaffolding, necessary for certain work, had been put up just in the place where the fire was first noticed” [25: 12]. A local Basel newspaper had reported likewise: “Because of repair work, there was scaffolding where the fire was first seen” [22].

Ninety nine years later, accounts of the Notre Dame Cathedral fire of 2019 are reminiscent of accounts of the Goetheanum fire. “The fire began at about 18:43 local time on Monday (15 April). Pictures show flames shooting up around the spire, shortly after the doors were shut to visitors for the day. The blaze spread rapidly along the wooden roof as onlookers gathered on the ground below” [26]. Another account states

that: “Flames that began in the early evening burst through the roof of the centuries-old cathedral and engulfed the spire, which collapsed, quickly followed by the roof” [27]. Builder’s scaffolding for repair work are also a part of the Notre Dame story: “Much of the roof was covered in scaffolding as part of a big renovation programme, which is being investigated as a possible cause of the blaze” [26]. Two leading candidates for the cause of the Notre Dame fire are identified: “The catastrophic fire at the Notre Dame Cathedral could have been caused by a burning cigarette or an electrical malfunction, French prosecutors said ... Prosecutors are now looking at the possibility of negligence” [28].

Of the Goetheanum fire, a Basel newspaper reported: “Dr Steiner ... According to him, who will probably know his way around the construction of the building, the fire must have started between 5:00 and 7:00 in the evening The smoke was noticed a little after 10 pm in the so-called ‘white room’ on the third floor” [23]. The room, the apparent seat of the fire, was used by one or some Eurythmists as a change room [23]. It was reported that “there were no electrical systems at the fire site” [22]. A discarded cigarette butt, a neglected candle or a portable camp stove or heater (the outside temperature would have been hovering around 0° C), or a flimsy Eurythmy costume draped carelessly on a hot light bulb are candidates as potential ignition sources.

The Goetheanum was insured for CHF 3,800,000 and with a further CHF 500,000 for furniture and equipment [22]. A proof of contributory negligence would have voided or severely prejudiced an insurance claim. This, combined with the prevailing persecution complex of the Anthroposophists, was a great motivation for fuelling suspicions of arson. To this day, the cause of the Goetheanum blaze remains an open question [29]. The timely payout of the insurance facilitated the rebuild of the Goetheanum, and the local Building Insurance Act was revised “to protect the state institution against such disasters” [30].

Jakob Ott

One person lost their life in the fire. That was Jakob Ott, a watchmaker from nearby Arlesheim, and a member of the Anthroposophy Society.

Assya Tergeniev recorded that: “When the glowing ashes had cooled, some days later, a human skeleton with a deformed spine was found therein. This deformity was the same as

that of a watchmaker who had disappeared at the time of the fire. It was officially announced that he had come to grief while helping with the rescue work” [11: 129].

A Basel newspaper reported that “Human remains were found in the rubble of the burned-down Goetheanum on Wednesday [10 January]. It is not yet certain whether it is the missing watchmaker Ott ... These are the bones of a single person, who presumably fell from the floor of the dome into the depth of the basement. The skull was smashed ... no one apart from the watchmaker Ott has been missing since that fateful night ... the bone remains were almost completely covered with slate residue from the roof of the dome. The casualty must have plunged into the stage basement below the collapsing dome at 12 midnight. Although all fire-fighting teams had withdrawn at 11:30 pm in view of the building, which was at risk and could no longer be saved, it is easily possible that, due to the thick smoke, a person who might already have been stunned had not been noticed” [31].

Conspiracy theorists of the day, and later commentators, have attributed the fire to arson, but that is not proven, and even named the supposed arsonist as Jakob Ott, and that is proven false. Research of Günther Aschoff has established: “the 28-year-old watchmaker Jakob Ott from Neu-Arlesheim had died in the fire. But he could not have been the arsonist, because he was home all New Year's Eve, then in the evening at a choir rehearsal and at the year-end service in the Reformed Church. (He was a member of the Reformed Church and of the Anthroposophical Society, he procured many advertisements for the magazine “Das Goetheanum” and had also collected signatures for the naturalization of Rudolf Steiner). At about 22.30 he was on the tram on the way home. When he saw the clouds of smoke at the Goetheanum in the moonlit night, he ran up the mountain, to help, which he used to do whenever he was needed. He was present when the fire was extinguished in the small dome at the top of the building, but when the others had already retreated because of all the smoke”. Jakob Ott failed to evacuate likely because he was overcome by smoke or that he lost his footing [32].

Jakob Ott was reportedly just 1.5 metres tall, and a hunchback with “a backbone curvature due to an accident” [31]. Another account simply stated: “Ott had a hump” [30]. He was a man of modest means and lacking influential friends. As a disabled figure, Jakob Ott was a

ready candidate for ‘othering’ and he made a convenient scapegoat for the smug. A Basel newspaper reported: “Dr Steiner, whom we also interviewed regarding Ott ... He himself has no suspicion of Ott” [23]. Rudolf Steiner subsequently attended Jakob Ott’s funeral [33].

It appears that Rudolf Steiner never referred to the fire as ‘arson’. Albert Steffen wrote of ‘The destruction of the Goetheanum by fire’, he did not write of ‘by arson’ [25]. Arson does not rate in the top ten causes of house fires [34]. Arson does not rate as one of the nominated “leading causes of warehouse structure fires” [35]. If the arson conspiracy theory fails, then the quest for ‘the arsonist’ is extinguished.

The demonising of Jakob Ott has been an unworthy episode propagated by some who should have known better. One hysterical account about Jakob Ott appears to be mere flights of fancy, ungrounded in fact, and owes more to a fertile imagination than sound research [e.g. 36]. It appears that Marie Steiner has fuelled conspiracy theories: “One of the suspects was the watchmaker Jakob Ott from Allesheim, whose skeleton was found ten days after the fire in the ashes of the Goetheanum which had burned down. It was identified by a spinal defect. Later Marie Steiner wrote ‘From a skeleton that was discovered, it can be established that the arsonist was burned’” [quoted in 33: 904].

Jakob Ott (1895-1923) died a miserable death by incineration, in a worthy cause of trying to save the Goetheanum. Whether he was overcome by smoke and/or lost his footing, the action of entering a burning building is the act of a brave man.

A Blessing

Exactly a year on from the fire, Rudolf Steiner reflected on the events of New Year’s Eve, 1922, at the Goetheanum. The venue for the lectures was now the much less salubrious (and cold) Schreinerei, the carpentry workshop, adjacent to the site of the remnants of the fire [37].

Rudolf Steiner referred to the “painful memory” of the final lecture that he had delivered at the Goetheanum, what he now called “our old Goetheanum” [6]. Remembering the night, Rudolf Steiner reminded his listeners that; “the flames burst from our beloved Goetheanum ... but out of the very pain we pledge ourselves to remain loyal to the Spirit to which we erected the Goetheanum, building it up through ten years of work” [6].

Changing tack, Rudolf Steiner urged his audience to move on from the “tragedy” and offered them the recipe for doing just that: “if we are able to change the pain and grief into the impulses to action then we shall also change the sorrowful event into a blessing. The pain cannot thereby be made less, but it rests with us to find in the pain the urge to action ... Let us carry over the soul of the Goetheanum into the Cosmic New Year, let’s try to erect in the new Goetheanum a worth memorial to the old!” [6: 4].

Beyond Wood

Goetheanum I was an all-timber construct. One of the building officers related that: “our first director had implored us not to use any iron nail, coach screw or sheet metal in the main wooden structure. These artificial building materials were not to be brought in connection with the noble organic timber” [4: 15]

A few months after the fire, Rudolf Steiner, writing in the April 1923 issue of the periodical ‘Anthroposophy’, was quick to rule in a rebuild, that was never in doubt in his mind, while at the same time he ruled out rebuilding in timber: “In rebuilding the Goetheanum we shall probably need to think on different lines ... There can, of course, be no question of a second Building in wood” [38: 38].

In 1923 Rudolf Steiner wrote to the Central Administration of the local Swiss Canton Solothurn: “The new building will stand directly on the site of the old. With regard to the construction of the building as a whole, we bring to your attention that it is to be executed as a solid structure and that all its structural parts, all floors and bearing walls, as well as the roof trusses will be carried out in reinforced concrete. We plan to employ a purely steel construction for the support of the floor of the main stage alone. Timber will be used nowhere as a constructional element in the new building, but exclusively for doors, windows, flooring and floor construction over solid slab floors, for rafters and for fixtures and cladding. As roof material the same Norwegian slate as was used on the old Goetheanum is to be employed. ... We are convinced that the entire building, when completed in this type of construction, will be able to meet all requirements as to fire safety to an unusual degree” [39: 52].

Concrete

By the time of Goetheanum II, Rudolf Steiner already had some experience of reinforced

concrete as a building medium. The rather fanciful Heizhaus (Boiler House) of 1914 [9], located nearby the Goetheanum, and still standing today, is a creative exercise in concrete. Rudolf Steiner described it as “a remarkable structure” and so it is [14] (Fig.2).

Rudolf Steiner was well aware of criticism of his first adventure in concrete, the Boiler House. He proffered this rejoinder: “This is what is subject to the most severe criticism from some quarters ... I undertook to create ... a shell of concrete - a material which is extremely difficult to mould artistically. Those who criticise this structure today do not pause to reflect what would stand there if no endeavour had been made to mould something out of concrete - a material so difficult to mould. There could be nothing but a brick chimney. I wonder if that would be more beautiful than this, which of course is only a first attempt to give a certain style to something made of concrete. It has many defects, for it is only a first attempt to mould something artistic out of materials such as concrete” [14: 157].

Edith Maryon, Sculptor

Edith Maryon (1872-1924) stepped into Rudolf Steiner’s life in 1914. It was just before the outbreak of World War I and she quickly became one of his closest confidants. Edith Maryon was an English sculptor trained at the Royal College of Arts in London.

As a trained and skilled sculptor, Edith Maryon brought new skills into the inner sanctum of Rudolf Steiner’s bevy of talented women, which included the mathematician Elizabeth Vreede and medical doctor Ita Wegman. Goetheanum I was already under construction when Edith Maryon arrived at Dornach. Edith Maryon however quickly proved her skills in collaborative architectural design not just of sculptural elements within Goetheanum I. Together they created the Eurythmy Houses I, II and III (Eurythmiehäuser), a little way down the Dornach hill from the Goetheanum [9].

Edith Maryon brought a feminine influence and a sculptor’s panache. Under the collaborative influence of Edith Maryon, Rudolf Steiner was liberated from the overt Freudian features of his earlier creations with his phallic Boiler House and the double-breasted Glass House (Glashaus) and Goetheanum I.

The clay models for Goetheanum II were constructed during 1923, the year of closest

collaboration between Rudolf Steiner and Edith Maryon. At the end of the year, at the Christmas Conference of 1923 Rudolf Steiner appointed Edith Maryon as the head of the Sculpture Section (plastic arts) of the School of Spiritual Science of the Goetheanum [40]. Sadly, by then her health was deteriorating and she passed away four months later. Rudolf Steiner’s own health took a blow at the close of the Christmas Conference on 31 December 1923. He struggled on through nine months of 1924, before retreating to his sick bed in September, and he passed away six months later.

It could be regarded as fortuitous that Goetheanum I was destroyed during Rudolf Steiner’s own lifetime and that he and Edith Maryon had developed a close collaborative working embrace that could bring the clay sculptural models of Goetheanum II quickly to fruition. Goetheanum II is Rudolf Steiner’s final contribution to his portfolio of Anthroposophic buildings and to organic architecture, and more than any of his prior works, it is a monumental and masterful work of sculpture.

CONCLUSION

The first Goetheanum was both success and failure. It was a bold experiment in organic design, a proof of concept that such a vision could be translated into reality, that despite the disruption of war, work could proceed, funds could be raised, a distinctive building could be manifested, and the enthusiasm and talent of a multitude of volunteers could be harnessed. However, an all timber building is a conflagration waiting to happen, it is just the timing of the conflagration that is the uncertainty. In the case of Goetheanum I, the conflagration came quickly, before even the building was completed, before a Mystery Play was ever performed in the space, remembering that a dedicated performance space for such plays had been a large part of the rationale for the building.

The dharma of Goetheanum I was to serve as a placeholder for Goetheanum II. The new Goetheanum took the money from the insurance of the demise of the old Goetheanum, and embraced the lesson that an all-timber construction is not a recipe for longevity. Goetheanum II harnessed the sculptural skills by then on hand, and brought them to the fore to create what is not only a magnificent sculpture in concrete, but is also a functioning building and a delight to work in. Flushed away is the quaintness of Goetheanum I. The new Goetheanum is a bold twentieth

century building worthy of the twenty first century and beyond.

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