

## On the Threshold

By PHILIPP KNAB

An Austrian vice-president of the International Union

"PERSONALLY SPEAKING" I am standing on the threshold of what I hope will be another life, as does every man who is past 70. So it is time to draw up the balance sheet and to give some sort of report of one's earthly pilgrimage for the benefit of those who care to read it.

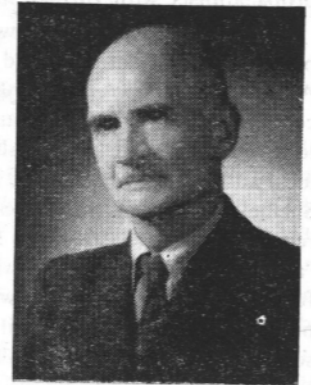
I was born in Vienna in 1889. My parents, who hailed from the Rhine, had established a modest but flourishing business there by dint of hard work and enterprise. Truthfulness and a stern sense of duty was the legacy transmitted from their present ancestors to their children.

My father, who believed in the self made man ideal then in vogue, sent me after I had finished school at 18, first to Berlin and then to London to acquire commercial practice. This proved difficult; there was anti-German feeling even then and for many months I paced the streets of the largest metropolis of the world experiencing the bitterness of unemployment. Finally I found a job with a shipping firm whose owner had bought oil wells in Galicia which was then a part of Austria (now of Poland). My chief was satisfied with my services and during the two years I worked in his concern, I gained not only a first hand knowledge of the oil industry at that time and an impression of the world-wide British trade but lasting friends also. It was a happy time. I met fine people and came to admire English life and character. But the most valuable experience of my stay was that I first heard of Henry George and his teachings.

This was the time when Britain was wide awake to them, when Prime Minister Lloyd George won his general elections on the strength of his namesake's arguments and the Land Song echoed back from every park and square in London. It was tragic that the practical measures following that wave of enthusiasm fell so far short of what was promised and might have been accomplished.

When I returned to England twelve years later I met scepticism when I mentioned Henry George. Of course there had been enormous changes. World War I had shaken civilisation to its very foundations; I had seen death and misery both on the battlefields and as a fugitive while crossing the huge Russian empire then in the convulsions of revolution. From the Far East to the Alps masses were in uproar and the cry for land as a remedy resounded in dozens of languages, from the Chinese squatters in Manchuria and the mushiks on the Volga to the starving proletarians of Central Europe. And yet the globe

seemed practically empty, not only when remembering the infinite plains and forests of Asia but also the vast idle lands of the continent.



Having studied *Progress and Poverty* thoroughly — in the German translation by Gutschow—I thought I had the key to the riddle. My duty seemed clear. It was to help to cure the misery caused by the war and ruinous, so-called peace treaties of Versailles and St. Germain by putting into practice the principles of Henry George. I saw Adolf Damaschke, the leader of the German land reformers and he advised me to work in the housing and land settlement movement as the best approach to this goal.

I followed this advice and for some 40 years I helped to create homes and gardens for thousands of people, homesteads for miners, small holdings for the unemployed, garden suburbs for members of housing co-operatives and building societies. During all this time I never failed to advocate the cause of Georgeism however slow and wearisome progress seemed to be.

A small group of distinguished and devoted protagonists had then gathered in the Austrian League of Land Reformers (*Bund Osterreichischer Bodenreformer*) of whom Heinrich Thausing and Siegfried Sitte were the leading spirits. We used to meet regularly once a week to investigate and discuss the problems attached to the substitution of land-value taxation for the prevailing onerous charges on creative work, thrift and consumption. Especially Siegfried Sitte, the son of the famous town planner, Camillo Sitte, was great in scientifically demonstrating the role imposts, which were not assessed in proportion to the possibility of net proceeds, played in causing depression, unemployment and housing shortage.

Sometimes we seemed on the verge of success when important corporations seconded our proposals and cabinet ministers promised to introduce bills drafted by our league. But the intermittent changes of government which took place in the unsteady first Austrian Republic always prevented actual realisation.

Once Pandit Nehru, when touring Europe in the early 'thirties, came to Vienna and I had to take him to one of our housing estates. When we relaxed in a small cafe I took the chance to ask him about the problems of India. Whilst appreciating the English as individuals and also

their contributions to the technical and hygienic advance of his country, he held them responsible for its bad economic and social state. He afterwards sent me a few pamphlets of Swaraj Bhawan and I presented him with some Georgeist writings in exchange. They do not seem to have left any trace.

In 1930 I paid another visit to England. Once more there was a Georgeist revival. The Labour Government was in power and Philip Snowden tried to introduce a land-value taxation bill. But mysterious forces caused a monetary panic and the new "National" government withdrew it.

Hitler, first hailed as the architect of German unity and saviour from unemployment and impending civil war, later execrated as demon of murder and destruction, grafted German taxation methods on to the Austrian system. Although more elaborate the system was fundamentally the same and no less harmful a way of raising public revenue. The Nazi governor of Nether Austria, impressed by the logic of land-value taxation, arranged an inquiry into its merits with more than a dozen experts attending. They passed a resolution recommending it which was sent to Berlin and Munich, but was turned down on the alleged ground that it was impossible to carry out a basic reform of taxation in war time. This well-meaning sponsor of Georgeism later committed suicide.

After the great collapse in 1945 there was a period of utter disruption, but as soon as it was over we patiently resumed work. Sitte had died, but Paul Geppert and Richard Frank in Salzburg. RICHARGE FERGE in Upper Austria, Josef Schwarzl, Johannes Meissner and a few more in Vienna kept writing articles, addressing meetings, and canvassing politicians and competent officials. Thus we influenced many and as a modest but tangible result the Valuation Law of 1955 made a distinction between land and improvements, as a starting point for future distinction in taxation also. The next step will be to obtain an amendment of the land tax enabling the local authorities to do this. Then the way will be free for a campaign similar to the present drive in Britain for land-value rating and which we sincerely hope will be successful.

In 1955 I went for a last visit to England. I made the personal acquaintance of Arthur W. Madsen, who had been the great flag bearer of Georgeism so long, and of Messrs. V. H. Blundell and P. R. Stubbings, his devoted assistants. My object was to establish a contact between the building societies, land planners and Georgeists, considering that they had so many common interests. In Austria we were able to arrive at some state of mutual understanding between the three groups.

Our great handicap is the lack of young people to help us and to succeed us. Of course our system of taxation is so complicated and people, although they continually complain about its vexations and gross injustice, are so con-

fused and at the same time fed up with it, that it is difficult to find listeners to proposals of reform. Even more so to find devoted and steady supporters. Still we have succeeded in acquiring a few younger members whose quality makes up for quantity.

Vested interest, skilfully entrenched in pseudo-scientific political economy and reaching from the large land-owners to the ill-advised small farmers and allotment gardeners, from *latifundia* convents to trade unions and communists, is of course on its guard. But ignorance is our greatest enemy.

This sounds discouraging. But, as I stand on the threshold to another life, as said before, I can see our movement standing on a threshold also. On the threshold to success. Its two predecessors and adversaries, monopolistic capitalism and communism are furnishing glaring evidence of their absurdity every day, threatening to annihilate mankind in their life and death struggle. Humanity is yearning for a new line of thought which will reconcile the individual with society. A new generation is growing up looking out for new solutions. This is our chance. We old ones have kept the torch aflame and I think we have made some progress in making our doctrine more exact and more palatable by using more simple and more concise language. There are thousands of new adepts in the U.S.A. as well as in Great Britain some of whom I have met with heartfelt delight at the Hanover Conference last year. There is Heinrich Richard, Martin Pfannschmidt and Erich Zinke in Germany, Daudet-Bancel, Max Toubeau, Pavlos Giannelias and Gabriel Stampfer in France. There is the hopeful Danish example and there is, last not least, *Land & Liberty* and its fine team of undaunted practical idealists. No doubt the day is near when truth and reason, so long, so ably and so persistently voiced, will ultimately triumph and pave the way to justice, freedom and peace for all nations.

#### RATEPAYERS' UNION UNDECIDED

To the Editor of *Land & Liberty*.

Sir,—You report the National Union of Ratepayers' Associations as having "decided not to aid the Rating Reform Campaign". With due respect I wish to point out that this is misleading.

The information given to you over the telephone on June 23 was that at its Executive Council Meeting on the previous afternoon **NO DECISION HAD BEEN REACHED** whether to support your Campaign in favour of Land-Value Rating.

I feel sure your sense of fairness will cause you to find an opportunity to correct the statement to which I am objecting.

Yours faithfully,

(Mrs.) I. Nichols, Acting General Secretary,  
National Union of Ratepayers' Associations.

London, S.W.1.