



## *The Autobiography of J.L. Moreno M.D. (Abridged).*

By Jacob Levy Moreno  
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Association, UK.  
2011 Edition. Lulu Prints.

Reviewed by Neil Hucker

This 2011 Edition of Moreno's autobiography brings together works previously published in the *Journal of Group Psychotherapy, Psychodrama and Sociometry* in the Spring and Summer of 1989<sup>1</sup>. As noted by Jonathan Moreno in his erudite foreword to the 1989 version, it was an edited 124 page version of Moreno's five hundred page original autobiographical reminiscences, written several years prior to his death in 1974. This current edition has been re-edited by Zerka Moreno. We are indeed lucky to have this recording and editing of his autobiography by Jonathan Moreno his son and Zerka T. Moreno, his second wife.

I enjoyed reading the book and found it interesting, enlightening, informative and challenging. A very personal disclosure of the wide range of social relationships, experiences and influences that warmed up Moreno's creativity. In comparison to Moreno's *Preludes to My Autobiography*, which focuses more specifically on the 'scientific' development of his work, this autobiography shares with us more of Moreno's intimate living out of the foundation stones and development of Sociometry and Psychodrama. The chapters as written provide an adequate chronological sequence to the many parallel themes and experiences that Moreno was involved in during his life. The book covers the whole period of Moreno's life from his birth in 1889 to the years just before his death in 1974.

In the beginning Moreno describes significant events in his early years, from his birth in 1889 to his settling back in Vienna in 1904, which are very intriguing and exotic. Growing up in a prosperous, supportive, extended Sephardic Jewish family provided plenty of scope for Moreno's innate charisma, intelligence and creative genius. Bolstered by his "independent air; difficult to manage, self-willed" (p. 32) temperament, Moreno's adaptability to live fully in the situations he encountered and created is shared very openly and needs to be seen in the context of the times.

Moreno's description of moving from Bucharest to Vienna to Berlin, Istanbul and back to Vienna around the turn of the century gives a very vibrant picture of the different cultures he had to adapt to and the importance of the support he got from his original social atom. Nevertheless in the background the impact of anti-Semitism is never far away.

Choosing to move back to Vienna when he was 14 and enter fully into the philosophical, theological, theatrical, psychological and political revolutionary fervor of the pre-WWI Europe, was a wonderful warm up for Moreno to be in creating mode on all fronts. In particular was his religious focus on the spontaneous creating function of God. To warm up to this in himself, Moreno played out the role of God on the first day of creation as he perceived it.

Moreno's reflections on this time indicate an adequate degree of self-objectivity which accords with his view that he was able to rein in any megalomania to a 'megalomania normalis'. "The only way to get rid of the God syndrome is to act it out" (p.47). This theme, of the extent to which his playing the role of God the creator could at times overwhelm him, comes out through the book.

Moreno attracted a group of friends in Vienna who supported him developing a 'religion of the encounter'. This group provided social support for groups of refugees and gave freely, "committed to sharing the anonymity, of loving and giving, living a direct and concrete life in a community with all we meet" (p.51). Very involved in the social changes of the times, his foundation premises for sociometry, group functioning, spontaneity-creativity, spontaneous enactment and the importance of love, all blossomed out of his underlying 'contention' to try religion again, but this time "improved by the insights which science has given us".

Chapter 5 outlines Moreno's early medical career which was influenced by the advent of WWI. Not allowed to enlist he describes eventually working in refugee camps, where opportunities emerged for the developing social scientist, the sociometrist, to trial new ways to assist the refugees to group and enhance their social relationships.

Chapters 6 and 7 detail parallel themes in Moreno's life during and after the end of WWI. Chapter 6 focuses more on his life in Vienna where Moreno continued to fully immerse himself in the rich intellectual and artistic changes occurring at the time. Reading Moreno's remembered creating process is illuminating, as he recalls being influenced by his reading on religion and philosophy, particularly existentialism and his reactions to Marxism and psychoanalysis. Becoming actively involved in spontaneous drama through his Stegreiftheatre "with its goal of one hundred percent spontaneity" (p.83), all fed into his creating process. But Moreno was forced to realize that his impromptu theatre had its limitations for both the actors and the audience. This disappointment was instrumental in Moreno diverting his energy and creativity into the "therapeutic theatre" (p.84) and the development of psychodrama.

Publishing and editing his and others writing in the existential journal *Daimon* and producing his own books anonymously, brought Moreno in contact with many creative people.

In Chapter 7, Moreno describes his move to live in Vosslau after the end of WWI. Getting way from Vienna allowed him to continue practicing as a doctor anonymously. He maintained contact with his friends in Vienna as the violent

political battles between National Socialism and Communism escalated and increasingly targeted creative freedom and whipped up anti-Semitism. Eventually this spread to Vosslau. In Moreno's reminiscence of his time in Vosslau, we are again privy to the more personal journey he was on, exploring his intimate and loving relationships with women.

Foreseeing the coming Holocaust, Moreno wisely decided to leave Europe and make his way to the USA in 1925. Gaining entry to the USA was helped by Moreno bringing a radio device that was eagerly anticipated and eventually provided helpful royalties. Moreno's description of his personal warm-up and the acceptance and integration of his sociometric and psychodrama works into the USA, highlights the many influential people he was able to inspire and the many creative relationships he established. The development of Sociometry, his method to measure social relationship functioning that had productive social outcomes, was taken up and explored on a large scale. Supporters in psychiatry, the forensic system, the military, educational institutes and other support organizations were able to incorporate his integrated work/research method.

I found it rather breathtaking, the amount of clinical work, research, social involvement, promotion and writing Moreno was able to produce and co-create with a wide range of professionals. Along the way there was also antagonism from many other professionals, particularly certain psychoanalysts which is described in ways that highlight the self-willed power of Moreno's own convictions. His reflections indicate awareness that his personal style could antagonize others and that this may have lessened the acceptance of his work by a broader spectrum of the professional community in America. On the other hand without his strong entrepreneurial style and belief in his sociometric findings, the conserved forces arraigned against creative change may have destroyed Sociometry and Psychodrama.

The final chapters focus on the central people in his evolving social atom. In his "The Search for a New Muse", this highlights the creating protagonist's need for auxiliaries, the co-creators. Moreno acknowledges the many helpers along the way but in particular in terms of a muse he expresses his gratitude to his brother William, his first wife Florence and of course his most expansive co-creator his second wife Zerka.

Of particular importance was the help provided to convert his spontaneous productions into readable, grammatical English and German. This certainly required deeply involved and committed co-creating auxiliaries, as this autobiography attests to. At certain points throughout this autobiography, Moreno states that he had carried an underlying disappointment that all of his work had not achieved the worldwide spontaneity that he had hoped for. But he did have hope that those who had experienced the creative genius within and interpersonally would continue to create and live the 'Godhead'. On page 62 he states, "the religious tenets I have always held, when removed from their metaphoric shell, contain the most revolutionary kernel of my work". Later he

concludes that “one of the first blueprints might have been a universal axio-normative order of the universe” (p.62), from which would follow the ‘ingredients’ of the sociometric system: the idea of proximity and the metric, the love of the neighbor and the idea of the meeting, in addition to the factors of spontaneity and creativity.

I have found that reading this autobiography led me into a fuller doubling of Moreno’s personal creating experience which I think provides an exciting integrative experience of the locus and status nascendi of his creating genius. It also gave me a deeper understanding of the ‘godhead’ concept — being fully the creators we are.

### Footnote

- <sup>1</sup> The Autobiography of J.L. Moreno, MD (Abridged) Vol 42. No. 1, Spring 1989 and Vol. 42, No. 2, Summer 1989

### REFERENCES

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