

LUDWIG GUMFLOWICZ

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A great sociological light was extinguished when, on August 20 last, Ludwig Gumplowicz ceased to exist. The double suicide of this remarkable man and his accomplished wife, Franciska, is now well known to the world. It was a deliberate act on the part of both, without any brain-softening or the slightest tinge of an unbalanced mental state on the part of either. They were a devoted couple, and his prolonged sacrifice for her during so many years of her invalid life would form the subject for a romance of heroism, could it be written. Life for either without the other was impossible, and the dread malady would soon, as both knew, have left her alone. Simultaneous death was far preferable. Nietzsche says that the suicide displays such heroism that he almost deserves to live. Never was this more true than in the present case.

As one of the certainly very few Americans who knew Gumplowicz personally, it seems to me to be almost a duty to join in the general expression of regret at his loss. But his work was certainly done, and his tragic end only prevented a far sadder one by a few months at most. He had passed his seventy-first year, and even good health would not have preserved him for science many more active years. There is, therefore, reason for being reconciled to the fact as it has transpired.

The readers of this *Journal* know¹ that I took special pains to journey from Vienna to Graz in 1903 on purpose to meet him and thresh out face to face some of the problems that we had long been discussing in letters. He has been called a pessimist, and perhaps deserved the name, but one passage in the article of his to which I have just referred, well describes himself; and never will it be more appropriate to repeat it than now. He says:

When we speak of "pessimists," we think of morose growlers who are always cursing and never satisfied; while we mean by "optimists" people

¹ See the issue of March, 1905, p. 645.

who are content with themselves and the world. This association of ideas is far from exact. On the contrary, the facts are precisely the reverse. The pessimist in world-philosophy is usually an optimist in life. The troublous course of the world does not surprise him; he expects nothing better; he knows that the world is evil, that it cannot be otherwise. Thus he has no ground whatever for being unsatisfied with life; it is as it always was, and always will be. He enjoys *des Lebens Unverstand* as a comedy of nature. The case is different with the optimist in world-philosophy. Convinced that things may be better if man will only better himself, he stumbles against rude disappointments at every step, and he is constantly complaining that men, and with them life itself, is ever failing to make improvement. In eternal expectation of better times, he experiences constantly new disappointments and falls from one despair into another. The optimist in world-philosophy usually presents to us in life the picture called up by the word "pessimist."²

Conformably to this general description I found him the gentlest of men, the type of kindly suavity and apparent contentment with his lot, which was hard even then, as he was absolutely confined to Graz and to the tender care of his beloved invalid wife. As to the latter, I was unable to see her on that occasion, as her health did not permit, but three years later, when I again visited Graz and enjoyed a second prolonged interview with Gumpłowicz, I was so fortunate as to meet her a few minutes in the park and converse with her. She was a highly cultivated and refined lady with a well-stored mind and charming manners, speaking French without the slightest accent. I could well understand his devotion to such a person.

It was he who had prevailed upon the Wagner Publishing House in Innsbruck to publish Mrs. Johanna Odenwald-Unger's German translation of my *Pure Sociology*, and had also volunteered to correct the proofs. I visited Innsbruck in 1906 while the work was in press, and went thence to Graz. He saw the work through and in his many letters evinced a profound interest in my views, though often so much opposed to his own.

Toward the end of 1907 his health began to fail, and in a letter dated November 15, 1907, he mentions it and says: "The doctor describes my condition as 'nervous prostration in consequence of a nervous shock,' " but he did not intimate at that time

² *Ibid.*, pp. 643, 644.

anything more definite, although it seems that a council of doctors had pronounced his case one of cancer of the tongue. In another letter dated February 1, 1908, he writes:

My seventieth year is giving me some very unpleasant experiences, but I am not sick, and moreover I am a perfectly free man. . . . I have promised myself now to make up something of what I have been neglecting during the last ten years in the domain of sociology—and therefore, first of all, to occupy myself with your sociology (which is really a cosmology) is something that I greatly desired. The correction of the proofs is a very agreeable (and now almost my only) occupation.

It was in his letter of October 24, 1908, that he first explained to me the nature of the “nervous shock” of a year previous. In that letter he says:

Things are going better with me now, and they were really bad only in the opinion of the doctors, who appear to have been mistaken. This is the way it was: At the end of 1907, in consequence of a wound made by the sharp corner of a tooth there was formed a small scar and swelling on the tongue. The physicians suspected a *carcinoma* and advised an operation. I could not reconcile myself to it, and was resolved to take my life in case the opinion of the doctors should be proved correct. However, such was not the case. Since the vote of the doctors ten months have elapsed and no single symptom of *carcinoma* has shown itself—on the contrary the swelling has diminished, and I find myself quite well.

Alas! it was he who was mistaken.

My last letter from him is dated March 28, 1909. *Pure Sociology* was out (the German edition), and he had offered to revise the manuscript of Mrs. Unger's German translation of *Applied Sociology*, not yet finished. At the end of the letter he says:

I regret that I shall not survive the appearance of your *Angewandte Soziologie*, for I am in a bad way—my wife also, who thanks you heartily for your friendly words, is very poorly, so that we are both thinking more of the other side (*an's Jenseits denken*), and life is a burden to us. I am sorry that I must close this letter with such bad news about myself, but I do not consider my situation as at all tragic, for I have already reached my seventy-second year. I have also the satisfaction of seeing my *Rassenkampf* appear in the second edition (after 26 years!), and before my departure I shall leave to the world still another little *Sozialphilosophie*—my swan song.

The new *Rassenkampf* with all his early papers appended, in which he first set forth his great theory in 1875, reached me on May 27. This work, as he told me at the beginning of our correspondence contains his "system." His other numerous works are only amplifications of it. No one understands Gumplowicz who has not read his *Rassenkampf*. The *Schwanengesang* I have not yet seen. I acknowledged the former with hearty congratulations, but I was then just leaving for Europe, and I received no further word from him. Mrs. Unger, however, received a short pathetic note from him dated August 8 (twelve days before the fatal act) which she has kindly allowed me to see. He tells her that it will be his last letter to her and that he writes it with great effort. He makes a suggestion regarding the English translation of the *Rassenkampf* (undertaken by Mrs. Unger some time ago from the original edition, but not completed), sends his greetings to her, and in a postscript, to me.

At the banquet of the Bern Congress of the International Institute of Sociology on August 21, a postal card to him was circulated and packed with signatures of admiring friends. I made mine so plain that he could not overlook it.

Thus has passed from our midst a striking figure, which, whatever may be the fate of his theories and original ideas, will ever stand as a prominent landmark in the history of sociology. The heaviest obligation under which sociologists now rest, and the one which is most neglected, is that of recognizing, appreciating, and utilizing the work of their fellow-sociologists, and that of Ludwig Gumplowicz deserves this honor as fully as any other work done in this field.