

Chapter 1

Origins of a Jewish Question (1897–1932)

The time was on the move . . . But in those days, no one knew what was it moving towards. Nor could anyone quite distinguish between what was above and what was below, between what was moving forward and what backward.

—Robert Musil, *The Man without Qualities*

Otto Heller was born into a time that was undeniably “on the move,” as the Austrian writer Robert Musil wrote of Vienna of the early twentieth century. The question was what was moving where, what was declining, and what was ascending. The title Heller chose for his 1931 book, *The Decline of Judaism: The Jewish Question, Its Critique, Its Solution through Socialism*, implies a conclusive answer to this question: Judaism is declining, socialism ascending. But, as it will be shown in the next chapter, Heller’s book is not as unambiguous as it might seem. The sources of ambiguity in *The Decline of Judaism* must be sought in Heller’s life.

On the one hand, Heller became an exemplary communist of Jewish origins, a “non-Jewish Jew.” In this respect, Arthur Koestler’s description of his own autobiography also applies to Heller’s biography: a “typical case-history of a Central-European member of the educated middle classes,” born around the turn of the twentieth century.¹ On the other hand, as a communist who became an expert on the Jewish question, Heller was unique among the “non-Jewish Jews.” By following Heller’s biography until the writing of *The Decline*

of *Judaism*, this chapter aims to explain both his typicality and his uniqueness, as well as the tension between them, in a search for the origins of Heller's own personal Jewish question as a reflection of the Jewish question.

Fin-de-siècle Vienna

Otto Heller was born in Vienna on December 14, 1897.¹ Living in the First District of city, the family must have had considerable wealth.² Otto's father, Franz, was a businessman (*Kaufmann*), who worked for many years for a Swiss-Austrian textile company as an authorized commercial agent (*Procurist*) in Vienna.³ In 1908, he and a partner established a cotton trade business, "Heller & Grundmann." Their office was located in the same district, 100 meters from Heller's home.⁴ Like nearly half of Vienna's Jews, Franz Heller's livelihood came from trade.⁵ This might have stood in the background of Otto's later insistence on identifying Jews with commerce. However, unlike many of them, Franz Heller belonged to the higher stratum of Jewish merchants.

Otto's mother, Maria Heller, née Löwy, was born in the Bohemian town of Jungbunzlau (Mladá Boleslav).⁶ Typically, she arrived at the capital as part of the Jewish and general mass migration from the provinces during the second half of the nineteenth century. If, in 1869, 40,000 Jews constituted almost 7 percent of Vienna's inhabitants, by 1900 they were more than tripled to 147,000, bringing them close to 9 percent of the city's rapidly growing population.⁷ Semi-proletarianized Jewish immigrants, many from Galicia, constituted a third of the residents of the poor Second District, known as "Leopoldstadt ghetto."⁸ Across the Danube canal, in the neighboring haute bourgeois First District, Otto Heller's childhood home, every fifth inhabitant was Jewish.⁹

The Hellers were not an observant Jewish family, as far as the scant evidence reveals. The fact that two of Otto's older siblings, Emma and Ernst, formally exited the Jewish community—the latter marrying a non-Jewish woman—hints at the family's high level of acculturation and integration. Yet Franz and Maria maintained their community membership.¹⁰ Their socioeconomic profile fitted the well-developed network of "religious, charitable, and social organi-

zations” of the wealthy liberal Viennese Jews.¹¹ Thus, the house in which Heller was raised was not detached from Jewish belonging.

Otto was the youngest of five siblings. In their adulthood, Emma, Joanna Hanni, Ernst, and Karl were all “earning well.”¹² The latter is known to have obtained a doctoral degree in law (*Dr. Jur.*).¹³ Ten-year-old Otto had followed the educational footprints of his brothers (there is no information regarding his sisters’ education) by entering a *Realgymnasium*.¹⁴ The elitist and exclusive middle-school system was an obvious path for the upper echelon of Viennese Jewish bourgeoisie. The gymnasium not only offered access to university, and thus to prestigious careers, but it was also a powerful vehicle of acculturation and integration. Nevertheless, assimilation was tempered by the high proportion of Jews in these institutions. Approximately four out of ten of Heller’s classmates came from the same milieu of wealthy Jewish families. Socialization with non-Jewish students was hindered through increasing antisemitism, too.¹⁵ But Heller left no written memory from his schooltime relating to this aspect.

Retrospectively, Heller wished to leave the impression of being a not-too-disciplined pupil. At fifteen he joined the youth movement “‘Free Wandering Bird,’ Oppositional Free-German Organization [‘Freier Wandervogel,’ oppositionelle, freideutsche Organization].”¹⁶ Having no information on that specific local organization and considering the strong antisemitic tendency of the mainstream Wandervogel movement, it could be assumed that Heller entered some kind of alternative youth association.¹⁷ Though a “bourgeois” movement, as Heller apologetically admitted, he did claim that his membership brought him “in conflict with the school management.”¹⁸ It can be imagined that Heller’s school experience did not differ much from that portrayed by Stefan Zweig, who attended a Viennese gymnasium a few years earlier, as “a constant and wearisome boredom, accompanied year after year by an increased impatience to escape from this treadmill.”¹⁹

As an emblem of pre-World War I Europe, Zweig referred to Vienna as the “world of security.”²⁰ But, already when Heller was born, the foundations of this world began to tremble. In the same year of Heller’s birth, 1897, Vienna was shaken by a row of substantial turbulences in almost every sphere of public life. The Social-Christian leader Karl Lueger, an outspoken antisemite, was nominated as mayor of the Habsburgian capital. Lueger’s growing popularity, especially

among the petite bourgeoisie, coerced the reluctant Kaiser, Franz Josef, to ultimately approve his election. Simultaneously, the question of nationalities reached a breaking point, predominantly in the Austrian half of the empire. In Moravia and Bohemia, where the Hellers had roots and probably relatives, the conflict between Czech and German nationalists collided, making the Jews targets for antisemitic attacks from both sides.²¹

Following those developments, the Social-Democratic Workers' Party (Sozialdemokratische Arbeiterpartei [SDAP]) of Austria-Hungary discussed the Jewish question for the first time at its 1897 congress in Vienna, attempting to confront the success of antisemitism without slipping into so-called philosemitism.²² A more central issue in that congress was the national question, which brought the SDAP to conclude that "there is no longer a single Austrian social-democracy, but a united party composed of different nationalities."²³ This congress saw the birth of Austro-Marxism, which provided the nationally divided working-class of the Austro-Hungarian empire with a materialistic foundation for the concept of nation, and a socialist legitimization for a federalistic vision of national autonomies.²⁴

In the very same year, a Viennese Jewish journalist, formerly an exemplar of Jewish assimilation, Theodor Herzl, established the Zionist movement in Basel; and a Viennese Jewish doctor, Sigmund Freud, introduced the Oedipus complex.²⁵ Antisemitism and the Jewish question, social-Catholicism and socialism, nationalism in general, and particularly Zionism, as well as psychoanalysis, were only some of the symptoms that brought historian Carl Schorske to diagnose 1897 as the "formal close" of "the era of classical liberal ascendancy in Austria."²⁶ Those entangled phenomena will accompany the life trajectory of the 1897-born Heller as leitmotifs.

Heller's childhood coincided with the downfall of liberalism, the decay of which worsened during the course of his youth. Industrialization, urbanization, and *laissez faire*, while liberating from the fetters of the past, called forth the revolutions of the future.²⁷ Herzl feared that, "pressed against the wall" by antisemitism, Jews "will have no other alternative than Socialism."²⁸ Many examples proved him right. Some even tried to forsake their Jewish origins altogether through baptism, including the founding leader of Austrian social-democracy, Victor Adler.²⁹ Herzl himself contemplated complete assimilation through a collective mass conversion as a solution to the Jewish

question.³⁰ Some Austrian Jews followed Herzl's later and preferred solution, Zionism. And yet most Jews, especially the wealthier, found neither socialism, baptism, nor Zionism desired solutions. Instead, they maintained their faith in dying liberalism that had paved their way to emancipation and prosperity—its last devoted champions.³¹ This was the case for Heller's parents.

Years later, in several apologetic *curricula vitae* submitted to Comintern authorities, Heller had to admit his bourgeois origins, trying to temper them with some liberal-democrat revolutionary traditions: "My parents are bourgeois, of German-Jewish descent, democratic family, with political traditions (1848)."³² And elsewhere: "My father was a merchant, [. . .] politically affiliated with German-Jewish-Liberal bourgeoisie, friended with Pernerstrofer and Ofner."³³ Engelbert Pernerstorfer and Julius Ofner were both Austrian politicians. Ofner was a left-wing liberal, who was supported by the Social-Democratic Party, although he was not affiliated with it. He enjoyed great popularity among the impoverished *Galizianer* (Galician Jews) of Leopoldstadt, who elected him as their representative to the Reichstag.³⁴ How likely was a rich merchant like Heller's father to befriend such a radical democrat and a working-class hero? Though unlikely, it was not impossible. Even if true, why did Heller, as a communist, specifically choose to mention this contact with a nonsocialist?

Franz Heller's other alleged friend, Pernerstorfer, raises even more questions. In both of his books on the Jewish question, without disclosing any personal connection to him, Heller attributed to Pernerstorfer the coining of the famous socialist slogan, which defined antisemitism as "socialism of the fools."³⁵ This was a popularization of the classical Marxist interpretation, which characterized antisemites as confusing the true cause for their suffering—capitalism—with a false one—the Jews. This confusion was, in turn, used by conservative politicians to distract the pauperized masses from their real exploiters and to channel their fury against the Jews. Though traditionally attributed to the German social-democrat August Bebel, who used it in an interview in 1894, nowadays, most scholars agree that it was expressed earlier, in 1890, by the Viennese democrat politician Ferdinand Kronawetter.³⁶ He himself might have adopted it from anonymous Vienna coffeehouse witticisms circulating during the 1880s or even 1870s, against the backdrop of growing popularity of antisemitic leaders such as Lueger and the pan-Germanist Georg von Schönerer.³⁷

Indeed, in the 1897 social-democratic congress, Pernerstorfer spoke in that spirit on “these stupid masses,” who were suddenly “made Catholic” and voted for Lueger instead of voting for social-democracy. But so did Adler and many others.³⁸ No one besides Heller has ever attributed “socialism of the fools” to Pernerstorfer. Heller’s claim is very unlikely, since Pernerstorfer became a social-democrat only in 1896, and, before that, was himself a close political associate of the provocative antisemitic demagogue von Schönerer. Why did Heller repeatedly affiliate himself with a former reactionary? It should be doubted whether mentioning Pernerstorfer, as a friend of the family or even as a socialist thinker, would have helped Heller’s reputation in communist circles.

Pernerstorfer was a peculiar social-democrat. He was not a Marxist, but rather an “aesthetic socialist,” who rejected the Marxist view of nationalism as a bourgeois ideology. He even rejected mainstream Austro-Marxism, because, though more receptive for nationalism, it denied Jewish nationality. Unlike leading Austro-Marxists, such as Otto Bauer and Adler, both of Jewish background, the non-Jewish Pernerstorfer had been Zionist sympathizer ever since Nachman Syrkin’s first socialist-Zionist manifesto of 1898.³⁹ In 1916, Pernerstorfer published an unequivocal statement in favor of Zionism in Martin Buber’s Zionist periodical *Der Jude*. He explicitly negated the hope for a decline of Judaism through assimilation: “With the extinction of the Jewish people important cultural elements of a special kind would disappear. Admittedly, they would not be wholly lost through absorption by other nations, but they would be diluted and in Western Europe at any rate, they would probably disappear altogether. The enhancement of mankind cannot be achieved through external mingling but only by inner differentiation.”⁴⁰

Why, then, did Heller insist on relying on an antisemite, who became a non-Marxist socialist and, eventually, a Zionism advocate, thus undermining all of Heller’s own beliefs? Since this name clearly had no apologetic value for Heller, it can be inferred that his father truly was friends with Pernerstorfer. In that case, the attribution of such a consensual socialist catchword to him might have been Heller’s desperate attempt to improve the reputation of one of his family’s only possible connections to socialism. This says less about Heller’s actual family history than about the meaning that “social origin”

acquired in Communist Parties in the 1930s. In Koestler's words, under communism, "social origin" was "as decisive [. . .] as racial origin was under the Nazi regime."⁴¹

Vienna of the early twentieth century served as a hub not only to Central European socialist and Jewish politicians, but also to leading figures of various East European political streams—such as the two main fractions of Russian social-democracy: the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks, as well as the General Bund of Jewish Workers in Lithuania, Poland, and Russia. The latter, also known as the Jewish Labor Bund, was established in the same decisive year, 1897, not in Vienna, but rather in Vilna. A year later, the Bund played a key role in the foundation of the Russian Social-Democratic Party. In the years to come, the main principle advocated by the Bund, national autonomy for the Jewish workers—namely, autonomy within Russian social-democracy and in the future socialist state—became a constant controversy, in which Vienna also played a role.

In 1912, while Heller was a gymnasium student, representatives of the Bund convened in Vienna with Trotsky and other Russian social-democrats, to announce the Menshevik fraction as an independent party that acknowledged the Bund as its autonomous Jewish section.⁴² As a Bolshevik response against this Russian far-reaching version of Austro-Marxism, in 1913, Lenin sent Stalin to Vienna to study the question of nationalities in the Habsburg monarchy.⁴³ The result was Stalin's *Marxism and the National Question*, which fiercely debated both the Bund and Austro-Marxism and which will be extensively used by Heller.⁴⁴ Despite all of their differences, both Austro-Marxists and Bolsheviks denied the Jews the title of a nation.⁴⁵ Vienna, where Heller grew up, epitomized the intersection of two main roads in both Jewish and socialist history, between which Heller continuously oscillated: nationalism and internationalism.

Not only did the future bitter rivals, Stalin and Trotsky, reside in Vienna at this time, but so did the young Adolf Hitler. Although it is doubtful that the future German Führer was already an antisemite during his Vienna years (1908–1913), the city's antisemitic political currents must have impacted his later lethal form of antisemitism.⁴⁶ As an admirer of Schönerer and Lueger, Hitler "studied" antisemitism in Vienna, even if he was not yet practicing it.⁴⁷ Antisemitism was another aspect of Heller's hometown that preoccupied him throughout his life.

The year 1914 was also decisive both for the Empire ruled from Vienna and for the Heller family. In the summer, Austria-Hungary embarked on what was to become the First World War. In the Fall, Franz Heller died at the age of sixty-two.⁴⁸ The death of his father can be seen as a departure point for Heller's subsequent revolt against his family's heritage. It was following the loss of his own father that Freud introduced the Oedipus complex. As this is not a psychoanalytical biography, I mention this context following Schorske's precedent, who pointed out the political dimension of Freud's theoretical breakthrough, which is also relevant in Heller's case. The revolt against liberalism was a collective generational rebellion against liberal fathers. Only in the absence of his father could Freud give his generation "an a-historical theory [. . .] that could make bearable a political world spun out of orbit and beyond control."⁴⁹ In 1914, this world completely lost control.

Paradoxically, in Heller's case, the war might have only postponed his own "oedipal revolt." In March 1915, the gymnasium student who had three years earlier confronted his school management over his membership in a "free" youth movement, left school amid his last year to volunteer in the Imperial Army.⁵⁰ On the one hand, it was the least rebellious deed, as it reflected not only mainstream patriotic enthusiasm, but also the distinguished loyalty to the supranational empire prevalent among Jews, who perceived the crown as their protector from nationalist and antisemitic threats and as allowing for their prosperity.⁵¹ Volunteering prior to the obligatory recruitment age became so ubiquitous (at least among bourgeois gymnasium students) that only three pupils remained in eighth grade at Heller's school that year. The rest, including Heller, quit in order to serve their homeland and kaiser. This sweeping voluntary mobilization became known as "*Kriegsabitur*" (war graduation).⁵² On the other hand, it could be seen as a latent revolt, expressing the "increased impatience to escape from this treadmill" of the gymnasium, in Zweig's words.⁵³

Heller's more explicit revolt occurred only on the front lines, where he became increasingly critical of the war and the society from which it emerged. In the fall of 1915, Heller was placed in an artillery battery based in Southern Tyrol and sent to the Isonzo front against Italy. There, he attended illegal antimilitarist lectures by the socialist poet and educator of Jewish origins Josef Luitpold Stern, who invoked in Heller a "strong pacifist and anti-Austrian mood."⁵⁴ A friend from

his unit remembered Heller, later a deputy-battery-commander, as “full of self-irony” and “mockery” toward the military formalities. And yet, he was an “exemplary soldier and excellent comrade,” affectionately called by his fellow soldiers “*der kleine* [little] Heller.”⁵⁵ Again, a mixture of discipline and subversion appears in Heller’s personality.

Another revolutionary year was 1917, in both the histories of socialism and Zionism, and in the life of twenty-year-old Heller. Russia saw two revolutions in that year: in February, a liberal one (with strong socialist support) and, in October, the Bolshevik communist revolution. In the same week (in November, according to the Gregorian calendar), the British government published the Balfour Declaration, acknowledging the right of the Jewish people to have “a national home” in Palestine. Interestingly, in that same year, Heller was also attracted by these two different, though at that time still frequently overlapping, political paths: socialism and nationalism. His early interest in nationalism, though not particularly of a Jewish kind, is quite peculiar, as it was never mentioned by Heller himself, only by his wife. Emma Heller’s posthumous biographical memoir begins with Otto’s acquaintance on the front line with Yugoslav and Czech officers, who introduced him to their irredentist “ideas of independence of their countries.” She described this “environment” as “decisive for his political development.”⁵⁶ As a communist, an older Otto might have tried to obscure such nationalist inclinations, but years after her husband’s death, Emma had no reason to conceal them. However, since she was not a nationalist, she also had no reason to overstate them.

Heller’s other 1917 revolution, the socialist one, is more comprehensible in light of his future political trajectory. He recalled that his interest in socialism was sparked by the assassination of the Austrian minister-president Graf Stürgkh by the socialist Friedrich (Fritz) Adler, the son of Victor Adler, in October 1916.⁵⁷ During the next year, Heller delved into the writings of Karl Marx, an experience that he retrospectively described as a rebirth: “I began to live for the second time, truthfully for the first time, because I began for the first time to understand life altogether.”⁵⁸ In October 1917, still a soldier, Heller illegally joined the Socialist Workers’ Youth of Austria.⁵⁹ In November, during a vacation from the front line, he participated in a large illegal peace demonstration. Simultaneously, he joined the Social-Democratic

Party, probably under the influence of Stern.⁶⁰ Heller's social rebellion coincided with his revolt against his Jewish origin. Around the same time, he officially abandoned the Jewish religion.⁶¹ Unlike his older siblings who left the Jewish community but maintained their bourgeois liberal legacy, Heller's postponed oedipal revolt was directed both against his Jewish and "social" origins.

In 1918, the "January-strike-movement" against the war broke out in Austria-Hungary. In these tumultuous days, Heller was still a soldier. One evening, he was supposed to give a "class" in his battery. Instead, according to his own account, he dared to deliver an anti-militarist speech.⁶² For that, he was reprimanded and subsequently dismissed from his unit. He was later placed at the Verdun front in France, where, in October, he was severely poisoned in a gas attack.⁶³ The injured Heller returned home in late November, namely, after the capitulation of the Central Powers. He described early 1919 as the time of his recovery.⁶⁴ However, recurring lung illnesses throughout his life, especially in stressful times, might have resulted from the Verdun injury.

Heller entered the University of Vienna in the summer semester of 1918, probably between the time of his dismissal from Tyrol and his new military post in France. After the war, he continued his studies in the faculty of philosophy, focused on German and French literature, for three more semesters. One course worth mentioning that he took was "the materialistic concept of history," taught by the Marxist philosopher Max Adler.⁶⁵ There, Heller might have encountered his future critic, Raphael Mahler, who also studied history and philosophy in Vienna between 1919 and 1922, and cited Adler in an article a few years later.⁶⁶ It is unsurprising that Mahler, who was from Galicia, a region densely populated with Yiddish-speakers, would become a Zionist socialist, while the Viennese Heller would become an assimilated socialist.⁶⁷

Retrospectively, Heller wished to present his professional track as part of his revolt against his origins: "Following father's death, [despite] no resources, [I] rejected trading profession."⁶⁸ His registration at university as "*konfessionslos*" signified his rejection of his father's religion. Heller's choice of humanistic studies instead of law, the usual path to a business career, revealed his rejection of his father's vocation. Nevertheless, his university studies themselves show that he did not completely rebuff every expectation of him as a bourgeois

Viennese Jew. As a student, Heller lived with his mother, now in the also-respectable Ninth District of Vienna.⁶⁹ A friend from the army remembered from his visits how worried Otto's mother was that her youngest son did not follow his brothers' path, but rather became "a journalist to the bone [*mit Haar und Haut*]." Yet, she was "even more worried of his political tendencies."⁷⁰

As a student, Heller must have infrequently attended his classes. Alongside his military duties and injury, his political activism must have been a distraction. The "January [1918]-strike-movement" was an overture to the Austrian workers-councils movement. Strike committees, assembled in different parts of the country, continued functioning beyond the strike as revolutionary organs, not only protesting, but also providing workers' daily needs, such as food and accommodation.⁷¹ In early 1919, Heller was elected to the "Workers-Council of Vienna [District] 1," as a representative of the university.⁷² Simultaneously, he joined the newly founded Social-Democratic Party of Austria (Sozialdemokratische Arbeiterpartei Deutschösterreichs [SDAP; sometimes mentioned in the sources as SPÖ]) and was involved in the socialist association for children, "children-friends" (Kinderfreunden).⁷³ In the new Austrian Republic, under a government led by the social-democrat Karl Renner, the workers' councils still fulfilled an important role. After the end of the war, they were joined by soldiers' councils. Unlike in Russia, the Austrian council movement was dominated by the social-democrats, which caused increasing frictions between radical forces within the councils and the Party leadership.⁷⁴

In the second government of Renner, formed in March 1919, the social-democrat Julius Deutsch was nominated as state secretary for Army Affairs (Staatssekretariat für Heerwesen). In order to strengthen the social-democratic influence on the soldiers' councils and on the Austrian People Army (Volkswehr) as a whole, Deutsch established a military Education Office (Reichsbildungsamt). The office organized lectures, exhibitions, libraries, and sport activities, all directed toward a "revolutionary" and "Marxist" education, to develop "class consciousness" among the soldiers. The head of this office was Joseph Stern, known to Heller from the Italian front.⁷⁵ Heller worked as Stern's secretary from March 1919, until Heller left the country in January of 1920.⁷⁶

Heller's year in the Education Office was characterized by constant tension within the army, which reflected the situation in the state.

The revolutionary “left wing” of the Viennese soldiers’ council, led by Josef Frey, tended to communism and aspired to shape a proletarian army, following the model of the Red Army. Against him stood Julius Braunthal, who represented the formal Party line, in favor of a general popular army, recruited from all classes. Braunthal maintained that Frey’s direction would throw the country into the chaos of civil war.⁷⁷ Which side did Heller support? In a later autobiographical report, he claimed to be a member of the “left block.” Yet he stressed that his work with Stern was “under Julius Braunthal.” Heller tried to take a middle position: “Always on the left wing [missing word] but definitely against KPÖ [Kommunistische Partei Österreichs, Communist Party of Austria].” It was probably for his leftist tendency that Heller was eventually “denied access to active state-service” and thus had to leave the army and “worked briefly in the SPÖ Party archive.”⁷⁸

Heller’s loyalty to social-democracy was also reflected in his first journalist publication from that time. In a public speech celebrating “One Year for the Republic,” published on the front page of the social-democratic journal for education, Heller sounded like an enthusiastic social-democratic reformist: “We [the SDAP] could not storm forwards . . . [to achieve] a social republic. But we could achieve work that would set the stage for the time to come. During this year we turned our state into a commonwealth . . . [and] by means of social policy, we have significantly exceeded political democracy [so] that it can become the base of the [future’s] social-democracy.” He concluded his speech by combining national and proletarian patriotism: “November 12, 1918 [the formation date of the Austrian Republic] had awakened the workers to new life.”⁷⁹

It was only much later, after he had already switched to communism, that Heller retrospectively recalled an experience from the same time, November 1919, as one that invoked his doubts and critique toward Party leadership. According to his story, as a representative of the Education Office, Heller went to meet the Party leader, Chancellor Renner. From the very beginning, Heller’s description of the socialist chancellor’s office was negative: “a servant in a tailcoat, secretaries, that were still there from Stürgkh times.” In the meeting itself, as Heller reported, Renner handed him an envelope containing a substantial sum of money, “for the fight against the Bolsheviks in the *Volkswehr*.”⁸⁰ Heller depicted this incident as a milestone on the road that eventually led him to communism.

Heller's revolt against his deceased father and everything he stood for took a political shape, in accordance with Schorske's distinction. In his later apologetic pleas to the Comintern, Heller attempted to minimize this revolt by presenting his path to socialism as a continuation of his family roots: "[I] joined the social-democrats [. . .] known to me through a brother and the father, a friend of Pernerstorfer."⁸¹ Even if one of Heller's brothers once leaned toward socialism, eventually, as Heller himself disclosed in another such curriculum vita, his "siblings (two brothers, two sisters) *belong without exception to the bourgeoisie*, they live in Vienna, Warsaw and Zürich."⁸² Emma unequivocally asserted that his family "did not accept" his political position.⁸³ Why was it only Otto, of all his siblings, who became a socialist? Perhaps as the youngest, who came to maturity after their father's death, it was easier for him sever his legacy. Heller's older siblings had more of an opportunity to experience the still-flourishing liberalism and could thus cling onto it. For 1897-born Otto, the fin-de-siècle decay of Viennese liberalism became an obvious reality. He belonged to the generation that experienced the horrors of the Great War as the final collapse of "the world of security," and returned to a different, revolutionary, red Vienna.

Czechoslovakian Bohemia

When Heller left Vienna, in January 1920, he was still a social-democrat. It is unclear exactly why he moved to Czechoslovakia. Heller once mentioned that it was "suggested by [Ferdinand] Skaret, the secretary of SPÖ," to send him as an education activist to the German Socialist Workers Party of Czechoslovakia (Deutsche sozialdemokratische Arbeiterpartei der Tschechoslowakei), which, until recently, had been a part of the Austrian Party.⁸⁴ According to Emma, "under strong pressure of his family, who did not accept this political position, he left the university of Vienna to continue his studies in Prague (Faculty of Law)."⁸⁵ Heller, indeed, did not graduate from his studies in Vienna, but the reasons are unclear. Did he choose to leave Vienna in order to escape his family pressure? Or did his family pressure him to relocate his studies to Prague to distance him from socialist activity and, at the same time, to put him on track to a business career through studying law? If the latter was the case, this plan clearly failed, as Heller does

not appear in the University of Prague's student register. However, removed from his family's supervision, Heller's political activity only intensified, soon to become extremely radicalized.

The Austro-Marxist ideal of a socialist federation of national autonomies that would replace the Habsburgian monarchy collapsed with the division of the East-Central European empires into a mosaic of nation-states: Austria, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Poland, and others. Already in early 1918, the SDAP was preparing itself for such a scenario, deciding that each national section will continue fighting within the framework of its own nation-state against its respective national bourgeoisie.⁸⁶ After the dismantling of the Austro-Hungarian empire, a certain fluidity of activists existed between the Socialist Parties in its successive states. It is against this context that Heller's move to Bohemia should be understood.

The question of nationalities was far from settled by the formation of the new nation-states, which themselves encompassed substantial national minorities, whose rights were acknowledged in a row of international minority treaties. In the northwestern regions of Czechoslovakia lived a large German-speaking minority, later to be renowned as the Sudeten Germans, who stood at the center of an acute international crisis in the late 1930s. In the young Czechoslovakian state, social-democracy was not consolidated in one unified party, but was rather split into several national parties: Czech, Slovakian, German, and others. As a German-speaker, ignorant of the Czech language, Heller was integrated into the German Socialist Workers Party of Czechoslovakia, centered in northern Bohemia.⁸⁷ In early 1920s, he settled in Teplitz-Schönau (Teplice-Šanov), as head of the Party's educational activity, editor of its youth journal, and secretary of the Party's leader Josef Selinger.⁸⁸ Like the Austrian Social-Democratic Party, its German-speaking counterpart in Czechoslovakia was also experiencing a bitter internal conflict between the reformist right and the revolutionary left. In the beginning, Heller took "a centralist position," following his patron Selinger.⁸⁹

In a public speech toward the elections to the Czechoslovakian national assembly, Heller's centralist position took the shape of revolutionary rhetoric, serving reformist ends.

The German social-democracy in the Czechoslovakian Republic [. . .] does not deny any instrument of revolution-

ary class struggle. The elections for the national assembly push one of these instruments into our hand. The German class-conscious workers can take the legislation and administration of this state in a socialist direction; [to that end] they must strive to elect as many as possible of their candidates to the Nationalities-Parliament in Prague [and] to work also from there for the liberation of the proletariat.

If earlier in Vienna he expressed mild patriotic admiration for the German-Austrian state, in the Czechoslovakian context his nationalist tone became even bolder: “The Germans as a defeated people are ruled and administrated by the dictatorship of the victor.” Soon enough, Heller will replace this negative nationalist connotation of “dictatorship” with a positive internationalist one, “the dictatorship of the proletariat.” Meanwhile, his German nationalism was tempered only to some extent with proletarian internationalism: “The German workers know that the struggle between the Germans and Czechs is the struggle between German and Czech entrepreneurs; the Czech worker is not the enemy of the German worker. He can be indeed used as a tool [for dividing the working-class through nationalist propaganda], but above all he is a *worker!*” And yet, “the victory must be obtained first by the workers of the individual nation; then the International will have won.” Hence, the conclusion was: “vote for the German Socialist Workers Party.”

Still a social-democrat, in his speech Heller praised the role of intellect in socialism: “For the proletariat knowledge is not only a means but also an end. [. . .] The way to a socialist culture goes through workers’ libraries, schools, lectures. [. . .] We must create libraries.”⁹⁰ This raises doubts regarding his retrospective, communist-styled, apologetic anti-intellectual self-depiction: “I was lucky to live among industrial workers for many years. I learned what a powerful force Marx, Engels, and Lenin have triggered. I have seen how Marx was understood by workers, indeed more difficultly, but always more deeply and truly than by easy reading intellectuals.”⁹¹ In Bohemia, Heller had indeed “lived among industrial workers,” as this region, rich with coal and iron mines, was an important industrial center. Besides Teplitz, Heller worked in Aussig (Ústí nad Labem), a town of chemical industry, and primarily in Reichenberg (Liberec), an important textile center.⁹² Already before the war, Reichenberg’s

socialist workers inclined toward the radical left.⁹³ Bohemian Jews stood out in both the bourgeois and proletarian camps. Jewish entrepreneurs were salient among the Bohemian industrialists. A local newspaper in Austria once denounced many of “the leaders of the German-Bohemian social-democracy” as coming from Jewish bourgeois families. Heller’s “parents” (though his father was no longer alive) were mentioned in that list as “heavy shareholders of sugar mills.”⁹⁴ Although the journalist was wrong to count Heller, by then already a communist, as a social-democrat, the information regarding his family seems reasonable, since Jews had a prominent role in developing the sugar refineries of Bohemia, and Heller’s mother had family roots in that region.⁹⁵

Heller’s election speech well-reflected the atmosphere among German socialist circles in the new state of Czechoslovakia—vacillating between social-democracy and communism, nationalism and internationalism. The radicalization of German-speaking socialists in Czechoslovakia was inseparable from their new minority position. The “Reichenberg left,” which had responded enthusiastically to the October Revolution, was to become the nucleus of the future German section of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (Komunistická Strana Československa [KSČ]). The same group took a German nationalist stance, demanding self-determination and accusing the rightist socialists of succumbing to the “Czech bourgeois chauvinists.”⁹⁶ As in other East-Central European emerging nation-states, a major source of recruitment for the communist cause was disaffected minorities, who wished to overcome the disadvantages imposed on them as minorities through affiliation with an international egalitarian movement.⁹⁷ Belonging to the German and, at least by default, also to the Jewish minority, Heller’s turn to the left was typical.

The minority complex in Czechoslovakia aroused a distinct “Czechoslovakian problem” in the Comintern. The establishment of a unified Communist Party took longer here than in other countries and was accomplished as late as mid-1921. The German-speaking leftist socialists were the first to form a Communist Party in the country in March. When the KSČ was founded in May, the German faction did not immediately join it. The split between German and Czech communists in Czechoslovakia became a key issue in the third world congress of the Comintern, which took place in Moscow during June and July of 1921. The congress saw a bitter conflict between the

Czech Party leader Bohumír Šmeral, who also represented the right, and the spokesman of the German communists in Czechoslovakia, Karl Kreibich, who led the left. The latter, blaming the former of “social-democratic opportunism,” was backed by senior members of the Comintern department for nationalities: Béla Kun, Mátyás Rákosi, and Gyula (Julius) Alpári—all former leaders of the short-lived 1919 Hungarian Soviet Republic (the first two were of Jewish origins). The matter was settled only with the intervention of Lenin, who required the unification of all ethnic sections in Czechoslovakia into one party as a condition for membership in the Comintern.⁹⁸

Heller integrated himself into the “Reichenberg left.” As early as May 1920, he was among those social-democrats who “flitted” to the Comintern, and in March 1921, he was one of the twenty-five founders of the German communist faction, alongside his friend Siegfried (Friedel) Fürnberg, who also came from a Jewish background.⁹⁹ Heller attributed this track to the influence of Kreibich and his Hungarian supporters in the Comintern. Besides working closely with Kreibich himself, Heller mentioned “the impression” that Alpári and Rákosi made on him.¹⁰⁰

In the Communist Party, Heller continued with his former focus on education, organizing a Party-affiliated school. Already in 1920, he published a booklet calling on the socialist youth to join the world of the revolution: “What differentiates us from the social-democrat youth leaders is the acknowledgement that the proletarian youth today can no longer be educated in preparation for struggle, but—following the social revolution, which is constituting with full power—[should be educated] only for the struggle itself.”¹⁰¹ This was a clear break from social-democratic mild evolutionism. Heller joined the Communist Youth International, where he became acquainted with his future patron, the German communist Willi Münzenberg (1889–1940), the organization’s first president.¹⁰² The youth circles in Bohemia, in which Heller took a leading part, contributed to the establishment of the communist movement in Czechoslovakia as they created, already in January 1921, the Communist Youth Union.¹⁰³ Heller was remembered from that period, at least by two of his disciples, his future wife and her sister-in-law, as a “distinguished orator,” to whom “all the young comrades listened with full attention.”¹⁰⁴

In June 1921, soon after the establishment of the united Communist Party, Heller moved to Reichenberg, where he was officially

registered as working in a bookstore.¹⁰⁵ That must have been a legal cover for receiving a residence permit. Heller's political activity would have not left time for another permanent job. From mid-1921 until early 1926, he filled various leading functions in the Communist Party there: trade union representative, region secretary, member of the Party's central committee, and editor of its newspaper *Vorwärts* (Forward), the well-known mouthpiece of the Reichenberg left ever since 1914.¹⁰⁶

In August 1922, Heller married Emma Krause (see figure 1.1), who was born in 1903 in Friedland (Frýdlant), not far from Reichenberg. Emma came from a non-Jewish German family of handworkers. On their marriage certificate, they both announced themselves as confessionless. Otto and Emma had met within the communist circles in Reichenberg. According to all existing evidence, their marriage was founded on mutual love and shared beliefs. And yet, those would not be undermined by the assumption that, through his choice of a life companion, at least unconsciously, Heller had also concluded his revolt against his ethnic and class origins. By marrying Emma, he assimilated out of Judaism and into the proletariat. In April 1924, the couple's only daughter, Lily, was born (see figure 1.2). A few months later, the family moved to Ruppertsdorf (Ruprechtice), a suburb in the northern outskirts of Reichenberg.¹⁰⁷

Heller's years in Czechoslovakia were accompanied by a series of rivalries between constantly varying fractions within the Communist Party, which would later haunt him. One main controversy was over the question of trade unions. In 1921, the trade union leader Josef Hais led some communist-dominated unions to spilt from the national trade unions organization, which was ruled by the social-democrats.¹⁰⁸ That was considered an "ultra-leftist" deviation from the Comintern's policy, which at the time stood for a unified unions' movement.¹⁰⁹ Regarding that dispute, Heller later claimed, he "opposed the Syndicalist-opportunist politics of the men around the later traitor Hais."¹¹⁰

The trade union question was followed by the national question, which erupted in 1924. This time, under leftist pressure from the Comintern, the left wing of the party called for the "separation of the oppressed peoples" from Czechoslovakia, while the rightist leadership was accused of supporting the "new small imperialist state."¹¹¹ Against this background came the "Bubnik affair," named after the old-guard "rightist" secretary of Prague, who was expelled from the Party by a group of young leftists, appointed to the central committee



Figure 1.1. Emma Krause. Courtesy of the Papineau-Heller Family Archive (PHFA), Paris.



Figure 1.2. Lily Heller. Courtesy of the Papineau-Heller Family Archive (PHFA), Paris.

under pressure by the Comintern. Kreibich, who meanwhile turned rightward, joined with Šmeral in an attempt to hinder a leftist takeover of the Party. As a result, they were both dismissed from the central committee and distanced to remote positions by the Comintern.¹¹² In this regard, Heller maintained: “I conducted in *Vorwärts* the sharpest campaign against Šmeral and Kreibich.”¹¹³ Generally, he claimed to stand “in the left wing,” which eventually prevailed.¹¹⁴ And thus, as one historian from the German Democratic Republic (GDR or East Germany, 1949–1990) portrayed him, “as journalist and functionary [Heller] disputed from the beginning against any opportunist rejections of the party-line,” namely, of the emerging Stalinist line.¹¹⁵ At that point, it was also a nationalist line.

In early 1926, Heller traveled for the first time to the Soviet Union, as a member of the Czechoslovakian delegation to the plenum of the wider Executive Committee of the Communist International (ECCI).¹¹⁶ In Moscow, he fell badly ill with pneumonia, possibly aggravated by his past gas poisoning, and could not participate the plenum. As the illness delayed his return trip, his Czechoslovakian travel pass expired, and he could not return home. As an Austrian citizen, Heller lived in Czechoslovakia with a temporary residence permit. As he interpreted it: “The Czech police used this occasion to suspend my entrance pass.”¹¹⁷ Emma added: “Due to his political activity [. . .] he was expelled.”¹¹⁸ The communist press claimed to cite the Czechoslovakian authorities’ reasoning: “We already have enough communists of our own.”¹¹⁹ *Vorwärts* declared the prevention of Heller’s return to the country as an “act of terror,” characteristic to the “terror method” employed by the government against many communist activists who were banished from the country.¹²⁰

Heller himself sarcastically criticized the decision by connecting it to a police interrogation opened against him five years earlier. In 1921, according to his own report, Heller was accused of assisting the robbery and murder of a social-democratic activist, allegedly in an attempt to blame the communists. He has been never charged, presumably due to lack of evidence, but the case was never formally closed. Against this backdrop, Heller never received a permanent residence permit. He pointed to the absurdity of banishing a suspected “robber-murderer,” whose actual “crime” was being a “communist, who got pneumonia in Russia.”¹²¹ Despite his expulsion, Heller eventually returned to Reichenberg and stayed there illegally for several