

This day-long conference, organized by the Buffalo Graduate Group for German and Austrian Studies, is being held in honor of the 100th anniversary of the founding of Karl Kraus's journal *Die Fackel* (The Torch) and will bring together such internationally acclaimed Kraus experts as Wilma Iggers and Harry Zohn, as well as specialists on Austrian thought such as Newton Garver and Mark Blum.

The range of topics discussed reflects the lasting influence and timelessness of Kraus's writings on literature, philosophy, linguistics, cultural studies, and politics; the talks will address issues such as "Kraus on Women," "Wittgenstein and Kraus," and "Kraus and Serbia."

The "vitriolic Viennese satirist," as Harry Zohn has called him, was born in 1874 as the youngest of nine siblings in the Bohemian town of Jicin, northwest of Prague. The father, a Jewish businessman and paper factory owner, moved the family to Vienna when Karl was three. Kraus remained in Vienna until his death in 1936. He enjoyed a harmonious upbringing and his father's wealth made him financially independent as an adult. After attending courses in philosophy and German literature at Vienna University, Kraus initially attempted acting but failed as Franz Moor in Schiller's *Die Räuber* in 1893. He switched to journalism and soon gained recognition through his satires, columns, and reviews. His work for various papers gave Kraus insights into the interdependence of journalism and business, laying the foundation for his lifelong polemics against corruption and the press, the "Phrasensumpf," as he called it.

Kraus founded his own journal, *Die Fackel*, in 1899 and would continue its publication (from 1911 to 1936 as sole contributor) until his death in 1936.

# The Last Days of The Human Race

The work of one of Austria's most controversial cultural icons of the 20th century, essayist, dramatist, journalist, and publisher Karl Kraus, will be the subject of a symposium at the University at Buffalo on October 16.

By Reinhold Steingröver-McRae and Barry Smith

Again and again his polemics, parodies, and satires were directed at exposing corruption, false morality, and hypocrisy with the proper use of language as his prime concern.

The horrors of World War I resulted in Kraus's apocalyptic stage play *The Last Days of the Human Race* (1917), which even the author considered "unstageable" with its 220 scenes and more than 500 characters. The text consists to a large extent of newspaper clippings, collages, and quotations, which give his work a unique documentary character. Kraus's accusation that the press was supporting militarism was expressed clearly and polemically during World War I, as well as during the early 30s and the rise of National Socialism.

Many of Kraus's plays, essays, and lectures on literature were first printed in *Die Fackel* before they appeared as books. He thus referred to his publication not as a journal, but as a "periodic pre-printing from books." For example, his famous essays in defense of Nestroy's pointed irony and against Heine's mild satires, "which targeted the world where it wanted to be tickled," appeared in the journal before they were included in essay collections.

In matters of literary criticism, Kraus was sharp in his rejection of Heine, Hofmannsthal, and Shaw and passionate in his appreciation of Nestroy and Wedekind.

Initially Kraus had included in *Die Fackel* contributions by artists and writers such as Richard Dehmel, Paul Heyse, Oskar Kokoschka, Else Lasker-Schüler, Adolf Loos, Heinrich Mann, Arnold Schoenberg, August Strindberg, Frank Wedekind, and Oscar Wilde. But from 1911, due to rising costs and because of differences with his contributors, he wrote the journal by himself.

The periodical initially appeared three times a month, later more irregularly. The total of 37 volumes contain 415 issues with 922 numbers. Thirty thousand copies were sold of the first issue. How much of a sensation and later an institution *Die Fackel* became for Vienna is illustrated by a historical description of the publication of the first issue, reported by Zohn: "Vienna has not seen such a day since. What murmuring, whispering, spine tingling! In the streets, on the streetcars, in the City Park, everyone was reading a red magazine."

The goal of *Die Fackel* was to remedy what Kraus saw as the terrible effect

of journalism on thought and culture in the Vienna of his time. In Kraus's eyes journalists had conspired with each other to substitute mere phrases, predigested clichés, for what Kraus himself conceived as the proper uses of language. His idea was that one should drain the swamp of phrases. And if one succeeded in this, he held, then all sorts of positive effects would follow. He saw newspapers as having been responsible for bringing about a decline of culture by feeding their readers with ready-processed opinions.

Kraus tells the story of the man who, when asked what he thought about the bombing of Basra, replied: "Oh, I don't know, I haven't read the newspapers yet." Newspapers, in Kraus's eyes, denature the intellectual and emotional lives of their readers, and they remove or destroy the reader's capacity for moral and esthetic judgment. His remedy turned on his belief that there had once existed a German language that was not in this sense denatured and corrupted, a German language as it had existed before the perverting influence of the "black magic" of printer's ink. In this German language, Kraus held, certain things were simply not sayable. And when once, through the process of habituation effected via journalism, certain things became sayable, then certain things also became doable. If, as Kraus saw it, his contemporaries once fully grasped the meanings of their utterances, if they once truly experienced the reality contained within their words, then their lives and their world would change, and an otherwise all-pervading hypocrisy would become impossible.

This "critique of language" manifests itself in Kraus's treatment of the First World War, which, almost alone in Vienna, Kraus vehemently opposed. He

thought that if only people spoke differently, that is to say, if only people spoke carefully about what was taking place in the war, giving full significance to their words, then they would realize with horror what was being done to its innocent victims, and they would find it impossible to allow those things to be done any longer in their name.

Kraus liked to compare journalists to prostitutes. But what the prostitute does with her body is, he held, harmless: it is a purely private matter that has no far-reaching result. What the journalist does when he sells his mind, in contrast, cheapens the spirit and devalues the currency of meaning. It was for this reason that Kraus much preferred the anti-Semitic press to the liberal newspapers of his day. For the anti-Semitic press is less intelligent and therefore also less dangerous, because its lack of intelligence is more apparent. The lack of intelligence of the liberal press is more difficult to see; it is thus more insidious in its corrupting influence.

Now you might think that Kraus's single-minded devotion to the task of draining the swamp of journalistic phrasemaking was somewhat exaggerated. Surely journalism cannot be so bad or so important that one should devote 40 years of one's life to attacking it. Kraus was not, however, interested in individual acts of misusing language on the part of individual journalists. Rather, Kraus took examples of the misuse of language as illustrative phenomena, as exemplars. He was concerned to root out a certain metaphysical duplicity, a lack of fit between language and thought, whereby Kraus himself would serve as judge, trying Viennese journalism under the law that is the grammar of the German language itself.

Kraus was initially confident that

guilt in the crime of misuse of language would make itself manifest of its own accord and that any honest person would be able to recognize it immediately, when once exposed to the words in question, that there was something wrong. Then Adolf Hitler came. Hitler managed to misuse the German language - the road having been paved by the black magic of printer's ink - in such a way that even honest people were swayed by his words. And in face of this, Kraus was rendered speechless.

Hitler caused Kraus to go linguistically mad. The issue of *Die Fackel* that appeared after Adolf Hitler came to power in Germany is unintelligible. It consists of a 300-page essay on "Why *Die Fackel* does not appear." Against such an evil as National Socialism, Kraus's polemics and satires had lost all their power. "Mir fällt zu Hitler nichts ein" (I can't think of anything to write about Hitler).

Kraus's stinging satires, his sharp-witted attacks on daily journalism and cultural institutions, and his brilliant writing earned him many foes during his lifetime, but also the admiration of other intellectuals and artists such as the philosopher Wittgenstein, the writer Brecht, and the critics Adorno and Benjamin. The Buffalo symposium will honor the legacy of this combative spirit. It is free and open to the public, and, in keeping with the millennial spirit of the moment, will conclude with dramatic readings from *The Last Days of the Human Race*.

For more information please contact Heidi Lechner at 716/832-5966, lechner@acsu.buffalo.edu or see the calendar section of this issue.

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