

The Life and Times of August Forel

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The Life and Times of August Forster

Sheila Ba n a ni

In 1848, the famous “year of revolution,” on September 1, August Henri Forel was born, the eldest of four children to Victor Forel (b. Switzerland) and Pauline Morin (b. France), in the country house called “La Gracieuse” belonging to his paternal grandparents near Morges, on the shore of Lake Geneva [see photo, next page].¹

As a young child he was sheltered by his overly protective mother who isolated him from outdoor play and friendships, leaving him bashful and timid, bored and lonely. He found fulfillment in his physical environment, in nature, initially in the lives of snails and later in wasps and ants. The “social” life of insects fascinated him in their encounters, both fighting and assisting one another, and intrigued him to learn what was inside their nests. But his parents and grandmother forbade him to keep living insects and he was allowed only to collect dead ones. This was the beginning of what would become Forel’s life-long passion and result, ultimately, in his famous book *The Ants of Switzerland* [1874] and later the donation of part of his extensive ant collection, one of the largest in the world, to the Geneva Museum in 1922.

Forel's Protestant mother gave him a religious education which taught the Bible, both Old and New Testament, was the revealed Word of God, "even the most incomprehensible passages," he wrote in his autobiography. As a result of his loving respect for his mother, by the age of fourteen his religious doubts and conflicts led him to regard himself as "a hardened, outcast sinner, who need not hope for God's mercy," though he still hoped that his "conversion" would come upon him like a Biblical "miracle" (Forel 25). His schooldays were passed in Morges and later at the College Cantonal in Lausanne. By the age of 16 [1864] he faced the dreaded "confirmation" discussions with the local Pastor. He stammered to the Pastor, "I can't believe." In his autobiography he later wrote: "In the quiet meadows round my home I had often cried in despair to the so-called personal God: 'If you really exist, destroy me here and now; then I shall know that you exist, but otherwise I cannot believe in your existence!' But all was silent; I was not destroyed" (Forel 47).

By 1866, while not particularly attracted to the prospect of entering education for the field of medicine, he did recognize the connection between medicine and his love of natural science. So, with his growing unbelief in God, despite his increasing sense of independence and self-confidence, he felt himself a pessimist. “On

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every side I saw only lies and disappointments in human intercourse. It seemed to me that life was hardly worth living. My only consolation was, and remained, natural science” (Forel 51).

This fateful year
[1866] Forel met
Edouard Bugnion, a
fellow entomologist,
who became his future
brother-in-law when he
married Forel’s eldest
sister in 1873. It is
through Bugnion that
Forel first learned about
Charles Darwin [1809-
1882] and his work.

Forel wrote in his
autobiography: “When I
read [Charles Darwin’s]
The Origin of Species
[written 1859] it was as
though scales fell from
my eyes.... I saw that the
study of medicine was
worthy of my highest
endeavour. It must have
been about this time that
the notion of monism
first dawned upon me,
for I placed the
following reflections on
record: ‘If Darwin is
right, if man is a
descendant of animal
species, and if therefore
his brain also is
descended from the brain of the animal, and if, moreover, we think
and feel with the brain, then what we call the soul in man is a
descendant (an evolutionary product) of the animal soul, of the same
fundamental structure as the latter, and, like it, entirely conditioned,
in its simpler or higher development, by the simpler or higher

development of the brain.... Consequently ... psychology cannot in the last resort be other than a sort of physiology of the brain” (Forel 53). In the University of Cambridge Darwin correspondence files [internet], I found evidence that eight years later Forel sent to Darwin [written in French on 23 September 1874, from Munich] a copy of *Lights of ‘Irfán Book Six 3*

his newly published book on Swiss ants [*Les Fourmis de la Suisse*, Geneva] and notes points and passages that Forel thinks will interest him. Darwin responded [28 September 1874] with thanks to Forel and recommends he read Thomas Belt’s *The Naturalist in Nicaragua* [1874] by Darwin’s fellow-countryman. In his autobiography Forel states: “He [Darwin] asked me the question: ‘Do you read English easily?’ I [Forel] had no knowledge of English, and felt greatly ashamed of the fact on receiving this book” (Forel 99-100). Forel then finds someone to help translate Thomas Belt’s book and writes, “by the time we finished it I could read English pretty fluently, and in time I even learned to speak it after a fashion. For this Darwin was responsible, and I have been grateful to him all my life. Darwin also sent me his own interesting observations of ants, which led to a brief exchange of letters” (Forel 100).

In Forel’s last year of medical school in Zurich [1870-1871] he became enormously interested in psychiatry. “I felt that here, where I perceived the contact of brain and soul, must lie the key to the monistic-psychological problem which was engrossing me” (Forel 63). This interest led him to Vienna [1871-1872] where he prepared his thesis under the guidance of Professor Theodore Hermann Meynert [1833-1892], finally passed his medical examinations in Lausanne and was graduated as a doctor (Forel 79-85). He then received his first medical appointment in Munich as assistant physician under Professor Bernard Aloys von Gudden, an asylum director and head of a laboratory, where he was able to work on the anatomy of the brain and make the “first thin microscopic section of the human brain,” which had never been done before (Forel 93). Upon completing and publishing his book on Swiss ants he was awarded in 1875 the Thore prize by the Paris Academy of Sciences. This greatly surprised him until he learned that the politics of granting their academic distinctions favored not giving it to a Frenchman (Forel 96).

Treatment of the patients in the asylum, some of whom were very violent, challenged Forel who tried various experiments of separating out the physically infirm for better care and, for the first time [in 1876], he began to understand the insidious role of alcohol as a problem for the patients. However, it was not until a few years later that he became convinced that only total abstinence from alcohol was healthy.

In 1877 Forel became qualified as a lecturer in the University of Munich and, as a member of an entomological society, met and

became close friends with Edouard Steinheil, the father of the child Emma [then twelve years old] who, years later [1883], becomes Forel's wife (Forel 105). Edouard Steinheil had previously made a trip to South America [Colombia] and now, with Forel, planned a six-

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month ant hunting expedition there, so Forel took a leave of absence from his work in 1878 and they set out together. On their voyage when they reached the Caribbean, at the first stop at the island of St. Thomas, Steinheil took ill while still on board ship and suddenly died of tropical heat-stroke. His body was taken ashore for burial on the island where Forel served as his only mourner (Forel 109-111). Forel returned immediately then to Munich to break the news to Steinheil's family and returned to his own family home in Morges, to his old room, since he was still on his six-month leave of absence from his work at the Munich asylum and as a lecturer at the University. During this period Forel received and accepted an appointment to become assistant physician at the Burgholzli Institute, an asylum in Zurich. He served at Burgholzli for the next nineteen years [1879-1898]. Upon his arrival at the asylum, he found himself having to act also as its temporary director as well as physician and to look after the women's division in an insane asylum with more than 300 patients. Within a few months he was formally appointed the Burgholzli Institute Director and given a full professorship in the University of Zurich (Forel 138).

Now that his career path seemed quite settled, Forel arranged for the widow of his fellow entomologist friend Edouard Steinheil and her children [including young Emma, now a teenager] to come from Munich to visit his parents while he too was on a vacation at home. In subsequent visits to the Steinheil home, Forel's affection for Emma began to grow slowly though his naturally pessimistic outlook led him to fear that she would reject him as too old [he was 35 at this time]. But on the contrary, he relates in his autobiography, "I was positively dizzy with joy when at last a young girl, and, indeed, the daughter of the family I loved so dearly, confessed that she loved me. A totally new world was opening before me, and I can truly say that at one stroke the pessimism that had hitherto oppressed me vanished and was replaced by a firm, optimistic confidence. I could not only love, deeply and tenderly, but — and this seemed a sort of miracle to me — I could also be loved" (Forel 145). The wedding took place in the nineteen-year-old bride's family home in Munich the end of August 1883 with both families present in a simple ceremony. When Forel took his bride Emma back to Zurich she quickly made friends with various inmates of the Burgholzli asylum, organizing a choir and various festivities for those patients able to participate. Their first child, Edouard, was born November 15, 1884 followed by five more children, altogether four girls and two boys, the last child born in

1896 when Forel was 48 years old (Forel 231).

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In these early years at Burgholzli he met a boot-maker, Jakob Bosshardt, who tried to convince him that alcoholism was not curable except by total abstinence which Bosshardt exemplified by rescuing and curing by abstinence many alcoholic former patients of the Burgholzli Institute.

Forel, although a believer in the temperance movement, did not accept total abstinence until he slowly began to realize the positive success rate and cures accomplished by abstinence.

Forel relates that he asked Bosshardt, "I want you to explain something: I am a psychiatrist, employed, as director of the asylum, to heal the sick, and you are a shoemaker; how is it, then, that I have never yet been 1883 marriage to Emma Steinheil. 'Everything about her was tender and thoughtful.'

able to cure a drunkard

permanently, while you are Source: Vader, between pages 4 and 5 so successful?' To this Bosshardt replied, with an understanding smile: 'It's very simple, Herr Direktor: I'm an abstainer, and you are not!'

On that very day both my wife and I signed a pledge to abstain from alcohol.... This incident was for me the beginning of a new period of my life" (Forel 152-160).

Forel's brain research led to his formulation of what later became known as the neuron theory. He wrote a paper on the subject, "Some Considerations and Results relating to the Anatomy of the Brain," and sent it to the Archiv fur Psychiatrie in Berlin but it did not appear in publication until January 1887. However, without Forel's knowledge, Professor Wilhelm His [1831-1904] of Leipzig had arrived at similar results and published them in a periodical which appeared two months earlier [October 1886] than Forel's. Both papers were generally ignored until 1889 when in Barcelona Professor Ramon y Cajal [1852-

1934] completely confirmed their results “mentioning His and [Forel], though only briefly” (Forel 163) and, in 1906, Santiago Ramon y Cajal was awarded the Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine for his

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work on the structure of the nervous system which was shared with the Italian anatomist Professor Camillo Golgi.²

Hypnotism also intrigued Forel because of what he saw as “the relation between brain and psyche, or between the physiology of the brain and psychology, and the true monism or unity between cerebral and psychic phenomena.” He read of research by a Professor Bernheim of Nancy so he traveled there where he received from Bernheim instruction in “hypnotism or suggestion, which are one and the same thing” (Forel 166-167). Forel later wrote a very popular book on this subject, *Hypnotismus und Psychotherapie* [1889] which reached its twelfth edition by 1923.

Forel traveled to North Africa [Tunis and Algeria] for a month in the Spring of 1889 because of his great interest in ants of that region. While there he observed the results of famine in some areas and “comparatively savage people — the Arabs, very difficult to civilize, because of the influence of Islam — governed by a cultured nation, the French” (Forel 186). Soon after his return to Burgholzli, he noticed the people of Zurich were taking a greater interest in the “drink problem” and, in 1890, an Abstinence Society was founded which was to become “The International Society for Combating Indulgence in Alcohol.” He also founded the Ellikon sanatorium for the medical treatment of alcoholism.

He began to see in his activities and interests the inseparable connection among alcoholism, social problems, psychiatry, penal law, and science as well as education. “What is the solution? The renunciation of alcohol in childhood; freedom of belief, and the teaching to children of the scientific truth, and their social duties.” Further problems occupied him: the “sexual problem” [prostitution], the “feminist problem” [he became a supporter of women’s right to vote, and women’s rights in general], the problem of an international auxiliary world-language to promote mutual understanding [he studied Esperanto], and, the problem of what he called “the human races” [“Which races can be of service in the further evolution of mankind, and which are useless? And if the lowest races are useless, how can they be gradually extinguished?”] (Forel 193). Please recall the full title of Charles Darwin’s book, *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life*, which dealt with evolution and selection, had persuasive influence on Forel. He worked out the draft of a Swiss Insanity Law which, in 1894, was accepted by the Psychiatrists’ Union. He also was commissioned to draft a bill to abolish brothels (Forel 201-206).

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Following a three-month expedition to Colombia, this time in the company of his brother-in-law Bugnion, he returned to Burgholzli feeling exhausted in mid-1896, just in time for the birth of his sixth and last child. By 1897 he was nearing a general breakdown. "I had already given up the anatomy of the brain, I had handed over the direction of the Ellikon asylum ..., and I had reduced my studies of the ants to a minimum" (Forel 237). He was not yet fifty.

"After my retirement I

can concentrate

wholly, if I wish, on Family Group, 1898

those social and Above: left to right, Inez, Edouard, Martha

scientific tasks which I Centre: Mme Forel and A. Forel

regard as most Beneath: Oscar, Cécile, Daisy

essential" (Forel 238). Source: Miall, page 225

By Spring 1898, Forel left the asylum in the hands of his successor and friend, Dr. Eugene Bleuler. Soon after [1902] Carl Jung worked as a psychiatrist under Dr. Bleuler at Burgholzli. Jung was to meet Sigmund Freud in Vienna in 1907.

Forel and his family left Burgholzli to begin his retirement near his childhood home in the little country village of Chigny in the canton of Vaud, Switzerland. He took up bicycling and archery. His brother-in-law Professor Bugnion persuaded him to give a few lectures on psychology at the University of Lausanne, but he soon discontinued them because too little interest was shown in the subject (Forel 251). Forel traveled to the United States, where he delivered a lecture at Clark University on the occasion of their jubilee festival [1899], and to Russia [1902] as a member of the International Criminological Union invited by the Russian Minister of Justice Muravieff (Forel 253-261). Forel observed "Moscow was at that time a curious mixture of barbarism and culture, with striking contrasts between wealth and

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poverty, education and ignorance, integrity and corruption, feasting and starvation. And everywhere society was fermenting under the surface” (Forel 263).

In Forel’s autobiography, he gives his “retrospect” of the 19th century at its close: “The beginning of the century stood under the sign of the French Revolution, whose consequences influenced the whole century; after which the technical and scientific discoveries that followed one another with headlong speed, and the names of Napoleon I, Lamarck, Darwin, and Bismarck, gave the century its peculiar stamp. If I had to make a choice I should call it the century of Lamarck and Darwin, in which the doctrine of evolution gave birth to the germ of the discovery of the identity of the human soul with the brain, and therewith dealt the deathstroke to the dualism of body and soul. Compared with this, what is the significance of conquerors, diplomatists, and technical discoveries?” (Forel 256).

In 1903, Forel and his family moved to the village of Yvorne in the midst of vineyards near the little town of Aigle at the foot of the mountains and overlooking the Rhone valley which opens westward on Lake Geneva. Their home, which his wife called “La Fourmiliere” [The Ants’ Nest], is where he lived productively his final twenty-eight years. In 1908, on the occasion of their 25th wedding anniversary, the Forels celebrated by journeying to Algeria, Tunis, Cairo, Carthage, and Italy (Forel 264-270). Upon their return to Yvorne, Forel set out again on lecture tours throughout Europe, the Balkans, Greece and

“The Ants’ Nest,” Forel’s last home, in Yvorne/Aigle, Switzerland
1903-1931

Source: Sheila Banani photo.

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Turkey, visiting organizations for the support of abstinence and helping form Leagues of Youth. Upon his return to Switzerland, he celebrated the marriage [1910] of his daughter Martha to Dr. Arthur Brauns. It is from this couple, ten years later, that Forel learns of the Bahá’í Faith.

The end of July 1910 Forel endured the sudden and tragic death by embolism of the pulmonary artery of his first son, Edouard, who had just passed his examination in medicine and was engaged to be married (Forel 280-281). Disheartened at his loss, he nevertheless continued on lecture tours throughout Europe speaking on behalf of the International Order for Ethics and Culture on such subjects as eugenics, heredity, instinct and intelligence, morality in men and animals, heredity and progress in married and sexual life, social and hygienic requirements of the twentieth century. He expressed the hope to “gradually build up and firmly establish the new agnostic ethic, the religion of social welfare” (Forel 283).

Forel had also been studying the new ideas of psychoanalysis advanced by Sigmund Freud [1856-1939] who had written a review of Forel's *Der Hypnotismus* book when it was first published [1889], but he absolutely rejected Freud's "exaggerations in respect of infantile sexuality, dream-interpretation, and the like." (Forel 284) Longing to see the tropics in another part of the world [Africa, Madagascar, the Indian Ocean] and possibly travel back by way of Japan and Singapore, studying ants wherever he would go, Forel made preparations to be gone about one year [from August 1912-1913]. He had even written his Will [which is included in his autobiography by the publisher in the German and English editions, but not the French which was the language in which he wrote his Will]. But on May 17, 1912, as he began to dictate something to his secretary, he was conscious of a tingling and numbness in his right arm and he could not find the right words to express himself. He thought he might have had a slight stroke but a doctor friend examined him and said it was just due to excessive fatigue. However the symptoms continued, his speech became indistinct and he fumbled for phrases. Within days he was paralyzed on his right side. Now he was certain that it had been a stroke and that he would have to give up his journey to the tropics. He gradually trained his left hand to do many things. In the autumn of 1912 he began to write his memoirs, using his wife's journal since she had kept an almost daily diary, and continued working on these memoirs until 1916 when he put them aside for awhile. With his son-in-law Arthur Brauns he went to Zurich in September for the session of the International Union for Medical Psychology and Psychotherapy where he was obliged to accept the Presidency in spite of his compromised health (Forel 290-295).

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He eventually regained sufficient dexterity to be able to prune his peach trees and do other gardening at home as rumors of war became more threatening in Europe. In May 1914 he had written an article at the request of the *Hamburg Allgemeiner Beobachter* concerning the idea of a "United States of Europe" saying he was not in favor of confining the League of Nations to Europe since he believed it should include the whole world (Forel 299). As war approached, his eldest daughter Inez married and moved to Canada, his remaining son Oskar went with his Alpine regiment to the Swiss-Italian frontier, and his son-in-law Arthur Brauns left in August for Germany where he was appointed as an army surgeon in an auxiliary hospital. In Yverne the men had to join the frontier garrison. Forel and his remaining family organized a crèche for infants and young children so the mothers could replace their husbands in work on the land. He also began writing pacifist articles which appeared in various periodicals, in both French and German, and some were issued in pamphlet form in 1915 on the subject *Les Etats-Unis de la Terre* ["The United States of the

World”] (Forel 303). He expressed this view in his memoirs: “The truth is that in the interest of the German people, whom I love and esteem, I cannot too strongly condemn German feudalism and the militarism and megalomania of the Pan-Germans. On the other hand, in France, and even in my own country [Switzerland], I was often regarded as a friend of Germany, and, indeed, suspected of secret Pan-Germanism.... In 1914, and again until 1918, I kept my pacifist correspondence in special drawers in my library.... Far more significant for me were the considered writings of really eminent minds, conceived in the neutral sense of an international reconciliation and a lasting inter-State peace. These I arranged in a drawer of their own in my library. My own ideas in respect of the whole problem were recorded in [Forel’s pamphlet] ‘The United States of the World’” (Forel 305).

The biologist Professor Ernst Haeckel [1834-1919], in his 70’s by 1906, had formed the German Monist League along with a board which included Forel. The Monist League argued for “biosocial reform” and was an expression of Haeckel’s “social Darwinism” views. Its philosophy claimed that, on scientific grounds, man was merely a part of nature with no special transcendent qualities. At the same time, German social Darwinists claimed Germans were members of a “biologically superior community,” advancing some of the ideas that were to become part of the core assumptions of national socialism.³ It is interesting to note that in 1933, when Hitler became chancellor of Germany, the Monist League was disbanded.

Views on “racial purity” spread worldwide. The eugenics movement affected even California when, in 1909, it became the third state to legalize the sterilization of the feeble-minded and insane. Eugenics sterilization was in the mainstream of science and politics and upheld Lights of ‘Irfán Book Six 11

by the U.S. Supreme Court. Eventually, more than 30 states with such laws sterilized about 60,000 — a third of them in California, which finally repealed its law in 1979.⁴

But Forel disagreed with some of Haeckel’s views. He wrote an “open letter” in 1914 to Haeckel in Jena, the French version of which was published in the *Journal de Geneve*, criticizing Haeckel’s essay on “World War and Natural History” which he had sent to Forel in which Haeckel had accused foreign countries of misrepresenting the German Army as a “horde of barbarians and incendiaries.” Forel reminded Haeckel that he had written in the *Monistische Jahrhundert* for November 13, 1914 that it would be “highly desirable for the future of Germany, and a federated Continental Europe, to besiege London, to divide Belgium between Germany and Holland, and to give Germany the Congo Free State, a great part of the British Colonies, the north-eastern departments of France, and the Baltic provinces of Russia. To this you [Haeckel] add

that Poland should be amalgamated with Austro-Hungary.... and your colleagues demand that the Emperor of Germany shall be the President of the future United States of Europe, and that the military security of this federation of States shall be entrusted to Germany.... If these assertions have any reality, then all foreign countries, and even our little Switzerland, will be compelled to defend themselves against your schemes of hegemony to the last drop of their blood” (Forel 303-304).

Haeckel did not reply to Forel.

Shortly after Forel became a

Bahá’í [1920], the U.S. Bahá’í

educator Stanwood Cobb and his

wife, Nayam, visited the Forel home Arthur and Martha Brauns-Forel,

in Yvorne which he records in an Forel’s daughter and son-in-law, from

article on Forel published in The whom he first learned of the Bahá’í

Bahá’í Magazine of September 1924: Faith in 1920. Arthur died in 1925 in a

“After a most interesting tour of his canoe accident. Martha became one

of the pillars of the German Bahá’í

library, ... we noted the pictures of community under the Nazi regime,

Goethe, Haeckel, and Darwin, when the Bahá’í Faith was outlawed.

favorites of Forel (though he told me

he found Haeckel much too Source: Vader, between pages 22-23

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dogmatic, contrasting unfavorably with the modesty of Darwin)...”⁵

When I visited Switzerland and Forel’s home in Yvorne in 1990

and again in 1991, Auguste Forel’s picture was imprinted on the one-

thousand Franc banknote of Switzerland and it had been in circulation

for a few years. His portrait had also been on a Swiss postage stamp

issued in 1971. However, in 1997 a Swiss Citizens Commission on

Human Rights (CCHR Switzerland) claimed credit that it had

“exposed how the face of the 1,000 Swiss Franc bill was adorned by

one of the founders of the ideology that spawned Nazism — Swiss

psychiatrist August Forel” and that eight months later Forel’s face was

removed from the currency.⁶

Swiss National Bank

1000-franc note,

obverse and reverse

Source: Iraj Ayman

photocopy of
original bank note

During World War I Forel continually supported anti-war efforts and movements, even attending international peace organizations formed in The Hague. On May 1, 1916 he wrote an appeal stating, "I believe only an international Socialist revolution can help us.... The human race must kill the three dragons that are strangling it: Capitalism, Militarism, and Alcoholism, or it will perish, the victim of all three.... But by overcoming these, by the eugenic mating of the best, the sterilization of the worst, and the help of social education Lights of 'Irfán Book Six 13

and the training of a well-disciplined, industrious Peace Army of all men and women ... we may gradually begin a steady ascent to social welfare on the basis of a supra-national peace.... Yet in vain I seek to light the lantern of Diogenes, and with it enlighten the rulers of Europe and America; so far I can find no man among them. Perhaps one will come even yet." And in July 1916 he resolved to become an active Socialist (Forel 313-315).

Switzerland suffered during the war years and the Forel family, with rationing, was unable to adequately feed and warm themselves. Forel's memoir recites that his wife even boiled earthworms for a meal and that the price of coal forced them to give up central heating and to content themselves with their fireplace during the winter of 1918-1919 (Forel 317). At this time the Russian Legation in Bern informed him that he had been appointed a member of the new Academy of the Russian Soviet, but he had already heard of the "misdeeds of the so-called dictatorship of the proletariat" so he sent a letter to the Russian Legation declining the appointment "unless the deeds of violence of which I spoke ceased immediately." He never received a reply and later heard the Russian Legation was expelled by the Swiss government (Forel 322-323).

Forel's memoir, *Out of My Life and Work*, closes in 1920, eleven years before his death July 27, 1931 and cremation in Lausanne on July 29, 1931. His son, Oskar, wrote in August 1934 in an Epilogue to his father's autobiography, "August Forel left the publication of his memoirs to Herr Ernst Reinhardt, publisher, of Munich, since he wished to make sure that his own family would not be involved in their publication.... [T]he editor, with the permission of August Forel's widow, has greatly abridged it...." Forel himself wrote, "I have made so many friends and enemies that I have felt afraid that my obituary would be tendentious in one sense or another. For this reason I preferred to write my own memoirs.... Many readers will take offence at my opinions, and this I sincerely regret. But to tell the truth when it must be told, and yet hurt no one's feelings, is an art which is beyond my capacities, and I cannot get out of my own skin, nor do I wish to ..." (Forel Preface).

He wrote his personal “Testament” in the year 1912 which he states in his memoir will be read by his son [Oskar] “as my own funeral oration, during the cremation of my body” (Forel 332). [note: Bahá’í law stipulates burial, not cremation, although Forel may have been unaware of this law]. When Forel became a Bahá’í he added a Codicil in August 1921 to his Will which was also read at his funeral before hundreds of colleagues and admirers and it was included by the editor in his memoir. It is this important document which states his Bahá’í belief, “Our children should not be discouraged; they should, on the

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contrary, take advantage of the present world-chaos, by helping in the difficult building of an ennobled and supranational human fabric on the basis of a universal League of Peoples. In the year 1920, at Karlsruhe, I first made acquaintance with the supraconfessional world-religion of the Bahá’í, founded in the East seventy [sic] years ago by the Persian Bahá’u’lláh. It is the true religion of the welfare of human society, it has neither priests nor dogmas, and it binds together all the human beings who inhabit this little globe. I have become a Bahá’í. May this religion continue and be crowned with success; this is my most ardent wish.... I am dying — I have died — in peace, desiring for my ashes nothing better than the eternal rest, the ‘Nirvana,’ which awaits them.... My ashes are sleeping the sleep of death. Remember this, and think of me only with a quiet and cheerful mind, as you think of my ants, my books, or the old walnut-trees in the garden.... We dead can do no more to alter the past; you living can give the future a different form. Courage, then, and to work!” (Forel 341-343)

Dr. John Paul Vader wrote a valuable monograph (drawn from his dissertation) published as *For the Good of Mankind: August Forel and the Bahá’í Faith* [1984] which covers specifically those years following the writing of Forel’s memoir [1920-1931] after he became a Bahá’í. A summary of Vader’s work would make this essay too long but, for a more complete view of Forel’s life, Vader’s book is recommended. As Vader states, “It is theoretically possible for Forel to have heard about the Bahá’í Faith before the winter of 1920-21.... Forel himself, however, clearly dates his first meeting with these teachings to the winter months of 1920-21 which he spent at the home of his daughter and son-in-law, Martha and Arthur Brauns-Forel.” Dr. Arthur Brauns had opened his psychiatric clinic in Karlsruhe and, in 1920, both he and his wife joined the Bahá’í Faith.⁷ Before continuing with August Forel’s last years of life, when he was a Bahá’í, let me conclude the story of the Brauns family since it is through them the Faith is carried on today by the Forel family.

On September 1, 1925, Forel’s 77th birthday, tragically Arthur Brauns was drowned in a canoe accident on the Rhone river, leaving Martha a young widow with five children. Martha Brauns-Forel became the center of the Bahá’í group in Karlsruhe and later served as

an elected member of the Bahá'í National Spiritual Assembly of Germany. During World War II she suffered greatly, both personally [her youngest son died on the Eastern Front and her eldest son was seriously injured] and as part of the German Bahá'í community during the eight-year suspension of Bahá'í activity in Germany [1937-1945]. She died at the age of 60 in August 1948.⁸ In May 2000, the Karlsruhe Bahá'í community celebrated their 80th anniversary which included an internet website review of their Bahá'í history from its beginnings with the activities of Dr. Arthur and Martha Brauns-Lights of 'Irfán Book Six 15

Forel.⁹ The review states: "Marta Brauns experienced significant difficulties during the Nazi regime. Shortly after the Nazis came to power, it became apparent that Bahá'ís would be targets of hostilities due to their global world views as well as their contacts with people from all over the world. In 1937 Germany, Himmler outlawed the Bahá'í religion. Marta Brauns-Forel was accused of participating in the Bahá'í cause and being in contact with Jews and foreigners. She was treated badly and insulted by the Gestapo. She wrote the following to one of her sons: 'My dear, dear child! It has happened more than once in my life that I thought this must have been the most difficult thing that could ever happen to me: August 1, 1914 [the beginning of World War I], September 1, 1925 [Arthur Brauns' death] ... but once again, fate has brought me days filled with horror and dismay, causing me to fear for my own sanity.... I have been to the Secret State-Police four days in a row now, and I thank God that you have no idea what that really means.... The Gestapo has taken everything. All letters and addresses ... no books, not a single page, no prayer book, not a single one of those framed Golden Words."¹⁰ Soon after Arthur and Martha Brauns had become Bahá'ís in Karlsruhe, Forel sent 'Abdu'l-Bahá a letter dated 28 December 1920, in which he explained, "For my part, I am a monist, in the following sense: I am convinced that the functionings of the brain and of the human mind (or soul) are simply an inseparable whole. It follows that I cannot believe that the individual soul survives after the brain has died.... In metaphysical matters, on the other hand, I declare myself a complete agnostic, like the philosopher Socrates or the great naturalist Darwin, which means that 'God' for me is nothing but the Essence of the Universe, presumably absolute, but for man absolutely unknowable.... Despite all my admiration for your human principles, I must confess that I do not understand your 'Divine' principles. This, then, is my question: May I, yes or no, belong to the Bahá'í Faith, with the agnosticism I have mentioned above, without deceiving myself and others?" (Vader 14-15)

Forel's fascinating letter, quite fully describing his beliefs, activities, and Bahá'í literature he had read apparently was received in Haifa but not responded to by 'Abdu'l-Bahá until 21 September 1921

[among the last Tablets composed before ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s death 28 November 1921]. His Tablet to August Forel,¹¹ known now to Bahá’ís as ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s proof of God’s existence, was not received by Forel in Switzerland until March 1922, more than one year after Forel had written to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and one year after Forel had already decided to consider himself a Bahá’í.¹²

Some explanation is helpful to understand why there were delays in the response to correspondence between Forel and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá.

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Forel’s letter¹³ needed to be translated in Haifa to receive ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s considered answer and this was during the last few months of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s busy life. Then, after ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s Tablet was written, it was decided in Haifa to have it translated into English and French for wider distribution to Bahá’ís worldwide which is explained in the cover letter written by Shoghi Effendi, dated 27 February 1922 Haifa, Palestine and sent with ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s Tablet to Forel. In Shoghi Effendi’s letter he tells Forel that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s sudden passing, “has plunged us all in profound grief and added heavily to our preoccupations and responsibilities. Happily, however, the full answer to your [Forel’s] epistle had been written, and signed by him [‘Abdu’l-Bahá] many days before his passing ...” (Vader 18-19)

This essay will not include an analysis of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s famous Tablet to Forel but, for the purpose of this work, it is important to say what Forel responded to Shoghi Effendi when he wrote back on Sunday, 19 March 1922: “... Of course I empower you to publish the long and interesting answer which ‘Abdu’l-Bahá took the trouble to give me. Out of love for truth I must tell you, however, that I stray from ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s opinion on one point although at heart I am a follower of the twelve Bahá’í principles ... the soul dies with the brain, and I cannot believe that it lives on after the individual has died....

The short and simple question which I ask you please to answer concisely, in place of your late lamented Grandfather, is this: ‘May I, yes or no, consider myself a Bahá’í, without being a hypocrite after the confession of faith I have just made? ... I would like to be a Bahá’í without misunderstanding and without hypocrisy, a ‘leftist’ Bahá’í if you like, but with the same rights as are enjoyed by the rightists. I wanted to ask ‘Abdu’l-Bahá himself [Forel seems to have forgotten that he did ask ‘Abdu’l-Bahá this very same question in his 28 December 1920 letter], but it is too late. This is why I ask you to answer in his place ...” (Vader 19-21) Vader reports in his book that there is no evidence in Forel’s papers of a direct response by Shoghi Effendi to this letter, though Forel said he corresponded often with Shoghi Effendi, since tragically much of Forel’s correspondence and possessions were disposed of after his death. Nevertheless, Forel undoubtedly considered himself a Bahá’í and continued to identify himself as one in his letters and publications from 1921 until his death

in 1931.

After his declaration of Faith he had contact with several prominent Bahá'ís including visits from Hippolyte Dreyfus, Stanwood Cobb and his wife, Consul and Mrs. Schwarz, Mr. and Mrs. Mountfort Mills and Miss Martha Root (Vader 28-29). Forel founded the “Bahá'í group” in Lausanne in May 1922.

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He immediately set himself to teaching and defending the Faith, particularly on behalf of the persecuted Iranian Bahá'ís in the mid-1920's, to influence European public opinion. He audaciously wrote of these persecutions to the French Foreign Minister Edouard Herriot [10 April 1925]; to the Neue Freie Presse of Vienna [26 April 1925] and other newspapers; and to the Secretary-General of the League of Nations Sir Eric Drummond [12 May 1926] from whom he received a disappointing, but expected, response stating the League of Nations was powerless to help since Persia had not accepted an international agreement for the protection of minorities. When all members of the Local Bahá'í Assembly of Constantinople were on trial on charges of subversion, Forel wrote to Mustapha Kamal Pasha [Ataturk] in Ankara on 18 November 1927. In this letter he advised Ataturk, “... if you were to declare the Bahá'í Faith as an official religion of Turkey, in addition to Islam, you would make a great step towards progress and would give an example to all of Europe and even to all the nations of the world!” The trial of the Bahá'ís did have a favorable outcome (Vader 53-59).

Among the most well known of his articles written for and published in Bahá'í sources is “World Vision of a Savant,” first published in Star of the West in February 1928 and included in The Bahá'í World, Volume III, 1928-1930. In this article, Forel shares his “scientific” views on human behavior which reflect the racist understandings and attitudes of that time: “... one makes a pretext that there are differences in races; but if one excepts those races, altogether inferior, with a lighter cerebrum (according to Wedda about eight hundred or eight hundred and fifty grams instead of one thousand) it is a fundamental error.... There are several conditions of utmost importance which Bahá'ís ought to meet if they wish to remain scientific.... They should refrain from metaphysics, from seeking to know the Unknowable; and should occupy themselves wholly with the social good of humanity here on earth.... Our duty as Bahá'ís is not only to speak and think of God, but to be active for the social good.”¹⁴ Vader cogently reviews those areas of Forel's beliefs which diverge from Bahá'í belief as understood today. These include Forel's concept of God, in which he considered himself agnostic, monist, pantheist and unable to believe in a “personal” God, and his rejection of the immortality of the soul after death. Forel also was outspoken in his political views, defining himself as a “leftist” and with anti-capitalistic

views, which he incorporated in a listing of 12 principles entitled “Principles of the Bahá’ís” and published in *Sonne der Wahrheit*, the German contemporary official Bahá’í magazine. The final area of divergence from Bahá’í beliefs was in his racist attitudes, no doubt influenced by anthropological views of his day (Vader 33-38). Forel also was among many well known individuals who signed the Anti-18 Life and Times of August Forel

Conscription Manifesto of 1926 which included Albert Einstein, M.K. Gandhi, Martin Buber, Bertrand Russell, Rabindranath Tagore, and H.G. Wells. The 1930 petition Against Conscription and the Military Training of Youth was signed by Forel, along with some of the others mentioned before, and also Jane Addams, Paul Birukoff and Valentin Bulgakoff (secretaries of Leo Tolstoy), John Dewey, Sigmund Freud, Thomas Mann, and Upton Sinclair among others.¹⁵ When Forel passed away, his Bahá’í daughter Martha Brauns-Forel informed Shoghi Effendi¹⁶ to which Shoghi Effendi’s secretary, H. Rabbani, replied on Shoghi Effendi’s behalf dated 10 September 1931: “... However great the contradictions in Dr. Forel’s testament in regard to his attitude towards the Cause we cannot fail to recognize him as a Bahá’í who had but a partial glimpse of the Bahá’í Revelation. No one can claim that his knowledge of this Revelation is adequate, especially in the embryonic stage of its development. Dr. Forel was sincere in his convictions but like every human being his comprehension was limited and this was not in his power to change...” (Vader 40)

The year of Forel’s death, four months later, Shoghi Effendi penned his magnificent letter to the Bahá’ís of the world [“The Goal of a New World Order,” November 28, 1931] in which he ponders the decade since ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s passing [1921-1931], the same last decade of Forel’s life as a Bahá’í. Shoghi Effendi laid before us a description of a war-weary world, the signs of impending chaos, the impotence of statemanship, the guiding principles of world order, and the principle of oneness, the “pivot” round which all the teachings of Bahá’u’lláh revolve. The call for a federation of mankind, a deep wish of ‘My beloved Emma, my faithful, kind August Forel, would, Shoghi and devoted comrade, the unfailing of

Effendi wrote, require “the fire sunshine in my life ... bestowed upon of ordeal.” Both a call, and a me ... the most precious things in life: warning, which the world ignores love and optimism.’ at its peril. Source: Vader, between pages 60-1
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Appendix : Significant dates of events and correspondence of August Forel and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá

Birth & Death of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá: May 23, 1844 — November 28, 1921

Birth & Death of August Forel: September 1, 1848 — July 27, 1931

December 28, 1920: Forel wrote an inquiry letter to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá asking if he could be considered a Bahá’í after explaining his “agnostic views.”

September 21, 1921: Two months before His passing, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá wrote His famous Tablet to Forel on the existence of God. The original Persian text was then published in Cairo in 1922. Forel did not receive ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s answer (Tablet) sent from Haifa until the end of February 1922.

February 27, 1922: Date of the cover letter to Forel from the Guardian Shoghi Effendi written from Haifa, as the “grandson of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá,” explaining the delay in sending ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s answer

(Tablet) to Forel (various translations were being made). Following ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s passing, Shoghi Effendi had arrived in Haifa on December 29, 1921 from England. The Guardian then left Haifa on April 5, 1922 for rest and recuperation in Europe and was gone for 8 months, returning December 15, 1922. He had left his Great Aunt Bahiyyih Khanum, the Greatest Holy Leaf, and an “assembly” of 9 persons in charge during his absence.

March 19, 1922: Forel acknowledges receipt of Shoghi Effendi’s letter and the various translations (into English and French) of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s Tablet to Forel, 15 months after Forel’s original inquiry to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá asking whether he [Forel], could consider himself a Bahá’í “without being a hypocrite.” No specific answer to Forel’s acknowledgment of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s Tablet was sent from Shoghi Effendi, but he had left Haifa (see above) on April 5, 1922 to be gone 8 months. Very little of the correspondence remains in Forel’s papers between Shoghi Effendi and Forel because of disposal by Forel’s heirs. Forel states, in a Codicil added in August 1921 to his original Will and Testament, which he had written between 1912, following a stroke, until 1924, that he learned of the Bahá’í Faith in Karlsruhe in 1920. The Codicil was read, at Forel’s instruction, by his son Oscar at the ceremony on July 29, 1931 following Forel’s cremation. This is the one reference of his Bahá’í beliefs left in his writings which survives today:

At Karlsruhe, in 1920, I first came to know of the supraconfessional world religion of the Bahá’ís, founded in

the East more than 75 years ago [this was written in 1921] by the Persian Bahá'u'lláh. This is the true religion of human social good, without dogmas or priests, uniting all men on this small terrestrial globe of ours. I have become a Bahá'í.

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May this religion live and prosper for the good of mankind; this is my most ardent wish.

NOTES

August Forel, *Out of My Life and Work*, translated by Bernard Miall (New York: W.W. Norton, 1937) 20. Hereafter referred to in text as (F o r e l with page number reference).

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<http://www.bahai.de/karlsruhe/80jahre.html>: translated from the German by Houshang Banani, August 2003.

ibid.

First English translation by Dr. Zia Baghdadi published in *SW* 13:8 (November 1922): 195-202; another English translation was published in *BW XV* (1968-1973): 37-43.

Forel had added the Codicil to his Will in August 1921 declaring himself a Bahá'í.

Forel's letter was dated 28 December 1920 although mistakenly referred to in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Tablet as dated 28 July 1920.

August Forel, "The World Vision of a Savant," *BW III* (1928-1930): 286-287.

<http://www.peace.ca>

Her letter was dated 22 August 1931.