

The Reflected Glory of Objective Consciousness

The woman who was standing before me in the living room of the condo in Crans Montana, Switzerland, was slight of build, of average height, gray-haired, spry, and ninety years old.

Her name was Jeanne de Salzmänn, and you might have been forgiven for having trouble believing that her smallish, unassuming person embodied the whole tumultuous history of the Gurdjieff movement.

Madame de Salzmänn, as she was called, met Gurdjieff for the first time in Tbilisi, Georgia (then part of Russia) in 1919, when he had come storming out of the Caucasus with his band of students and she was a performer and teacher of eurhythmics, the art of interpreting musical composition by a rhythmical, free-style movement of the body. Jeanne de Salzmänn's husband, Alexander, was one of the great stage designers of his day, a visionary who rubbed shoulders with the likes of poet Rainer Maria Rilke and painter Wassily Kandinsky. It was through the de Salzmänn that the first public performance ever of Gurdjieff's Sacred Movements was staged, at the Tbilisi Opera House, in June of that year. Jeanne and Alexander soon became Gurdjieff's students, departing with him and his other students for Constantinople in May 1920. Their travels took them on to Berlin and then to France, where in 1922 Gurdjieff set up the Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man at the Prieuré des Basses Loges near Fontainebleau.

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(The institute had been given its name in Tbilisi.) Madame de Salzmann studied with Gurdjieff for thirty years and at his death in 1949 assumed the primary responsibility for the Work, starting the Gurdjieff Institute in Paris. She maintained the overall direction of many Gurdjieff groups throughout the world and had also overseen the publication of Gurdjieff's books and helped to preserve the form of his dance movements.

In standing before Jeanne de Salzmann, I wasn't only standing before a living page of history, still vibrant, still creating. I was also—or so the scutbutt in the Gurdjieff Work group had it—standing in the presence of someone who was established in objective consciousness. It was thought that Madame de Salzmann, by virtue of her three decades of association with the Master and her own work upon herself, had attained to the highest level of being, one in which her physical, emotional, and intellectual centers were in perfect equilibrium. People speculated that she was, in accordance with Gurdjieff's teaching, further connected to her higher emotional and higher intellectual centers, the sine qua non of objective consciousness.

I'm quite sure I didn't spend long enough with Madame Salzmann to know if she was established in objective consciousness or not. Moreover, I'd been told that, if I didn't stand pretty close to that highest state myself, I couldn't hope to perceive it in somebody else! Gurdjieff taught that a person at a lower level of being could never assess the level of being of a person at a higher level. When filmmaker Peter Brook was about to meet Madame de Salzmann, a friend of his told him: "You will see; she is like a fan, which gradually opens until more and more is revealed." In his autobiographical *Threads of Time*, Brook alludes to the elusive refinement of Jeanne de Salzmann, writing that she had "achieved this freedom through a life devoted to the service of that unknown source of finer energy that can only become manifest when the human organism is completely open—open in body, feeling, and thought. When this condition is reached, the individuality does not vanish; it is illuminated in every aspect and can play its true role, which is to bend and adapt to every changing need."¹

All I can report about my own meeting with Madame de Salzmann is that she chatted pleasantly enough with me for a couple of hours and

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taught me an exercise, one used by Gurdjieff, having to do with sensing the flow of energies through the body. I came away from her condo certainly liking her—which I hadn't expected to, because it was my understanding that it was Madame de Salzmänn who was responsible for the various restrictive practices around which the Gurdjieff groups are hedged (and which I've already mentioned), such as keeping the groups secret by not publishing their telephone numbers and never returning a first inquiry but waiting for a second call. Because I thought these practices emanated from Jeanne de Salzmänn, I'd expected to find her secretive and guarded, even unfriendly. But I had found her, on the contrary, open and willing to talk.

Ironically, it was these elitist and exclusionary Gurdjieff group policies, promulgated by whomever, that had made it very hard for me to meet Jeanne de Salzmänn in the first place. Neither my group leader in Florida nor her two lieutenants, all three of whom had been in Gurdjieff groups in New York before coming down to Florida, would give me an introduction to Jeanne de Salzmänn, even though I had to be in New York on business at the same time that I knew she was going to be there. They told me it was because I hadn't been in the group long enough (this was in 1979), that such an introduction was premature.

There was an element of outright secrecy about these Gurdjieff groups that had bothered me from the outset. I'd written to Ashish that "it seems to me that there is too much secrecy amongst the groups I am involved with. This smacks of elitism that puffs people up with an imaginary specialness. Isn't this the opposite of what the Work is about?"

Letter of July 18, 1980

The unknown part of the teaching is actually plastered up all over walls for everyone to see. But it remains "secret" because it cannot be truly understood until a man is ready to understand.

"Schools" treat it as secret and do not "explain" it to people who are not ready, for the reason that, wrongly handled, it can cause a man to crystallize on the wrong level. If he adds the crystallization of that teaching to the hard core of his egotism, his further progress is completely blocked.

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This is why much stress is laid on steady, dedicated “work,” doing what one has to do because one has to do it and not for hope of gain. This helps to erode the ego integration.

This, too, is why many schools stress submission to the teacher. One cannot submit one’s egotism to the demands of the spirit if one is incapable of submitting to another person. And this is why love is the guide to the path.

I had managed to swallow that. But now this business of not being allowed to meet Jeanne de Salzmänn seemed to me to smack of hierarchical church politics; the palace guard keeping the great woman separated from the masses. I refused to take no for an answer. I decided I would do an end run around the hierarchy. And I developed a means of doing so.

In 1979 I’d met the French-Swiss author/seeker Lizelle Reymond. She lived in Geneva, not far from where I maintained a condo in one of the city’s suburbs. I had telephoned her and introduced myself after reading two of her books, *My Life with a Brahmin Family* and *To Live Within*. Lizelle and I became friends. She had spent five years at the ashram of Sri Anirvan in the Himalayan foothills, caring for the guru through several of his illnesses. Anirvan’s ashram was just twenty miles from Mirtola, and Lizelle had visited Krishna Prem and Madhava Ashish a number of times. Mostly we talked about these two. To my surprise, it turned out that Lizelle was also a Gurdjieffian, but she preferred to follow the code of secrecy I’ve described above, wishing not to discuss the Gurdjieff Work but to keep our relationship based on the Mirtola connection.

Lizelle had become involved with the Gurdjieff Work in the following way: Sri Anirvan had been reading Ouspensky’s *In Search of the Miraculous* just as she was preparing to leave the ashram and had asked her to write back to him with some sense of what the Gurdjieff movement was doing. When she returned to Europe, Lizelle had gone directly to Paris to talk to Jeanne de Salzmänn. Madame de Salzmänn had liked Lizelle’s background and had asked her to set up a Gurdjieff Work group when she returned home to Geneva. This Lizelle did, and now she was the director of the Gurdjieff movement in Switzerland that at that time comprised about one hundred members. My friendship with Lizelle led to my bringing her

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with me to Mirtola in the spring of 1981. She was in her eighties then, and, although a woman still formidably strong in spirit, not very anxious to travel alone.

I wrote to Ashish about meeting Lizelle Reymond.

Letter of December 22, 1979

Yes, I know her. One of the very few people I've seen who actually changed herself, almost unrecognizably. Acceptance of suffering! Work! In fact, one of the things that recommended Madame de Salzmänn to me was her recognition of Lizelle's worth.

I met her guru a long time ago, in 1952. He was, then, a shy little man. But Madame de Salzmänn met him later, 1970 or '72, whenever it was, even later than that maybe. She called it the highest point in her tour of Indian Mahatmas. Maybe. I haven't seen him since then. I haven't seen any of his writings since then. I feel whereas Lizelle has done something great with herself, she's never told me anything about Anirvan, her guru, that made me see anything there. But that may be my own blindness.

Lizelle had kept up her relationship with Jeanne de Salzmänn—who, I had learned, also had a condo in Switzerland, at the ski resort of Crans Montana. Because my Gurdjieff group leaders refused to give me an introduction to Madame de Salzmänn in New York, I telephoned Lizelle Reymond and asked her if she would give me an introduction to meet Madame de Salzmänn in Switzerland when I expected to be there that summer. She replied that of course she would. So it was that, the next time I arrived in Geneva, I drove with Lizelle Reymond and my friend Jane, who had accompanied me to Switzerland and who was also active in the Florida Gurdjieff group, around the northern shore of Lac Léman and up into the mountains to Crans Montana. Madame de Salzmänn was waiting for us when we telephoned her apartment from the lobby. She came downstairs, introductions were made, and Lizelle left, I think to do some shopping.

As I said, I found the leader of the Gurdjieff Foundations, Societies, and Institutes pleasant, relaxed, and helpful. As for her being established in objective consciousness, I had no idea. Certainly, I felt no

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blasts of “soul energy” surging from her—though that may have been my own problem.

But, just a week later, I was to run into Jeanne de Salzmann one more time, quite accidentally, and that encounter—though it would hardly be my only encounter—would be almost electrifying.

Remember, this was the summer of 1979. The great spiritual teacher Jiddu Krishnamurti was still alive. As part of his annual teaching routine, Krishnamurti would address the public every July from under the canopy of a huge circus tent, at Saanen, near Gstaad in Switzerland. Usually he would attract crowds of about two thousand people. The talks that summer were to go on for a week at the end of July.

It so happened that his annual talks were scheduled to take place the same week I would be visiting with Jeanne de Salzmann.

I wanted to hear the celebrated seer speak, and Lizelle wanted to hear him too, though she’d heard him speak in Switzerland before. Krishnamurti was an exponent of the Advaita philosophy of esoteric Hinduism espoused by Lizelle’s guru, Sri Anirvan—one that, in brief, posits oneness or wholeness, with everything in the universe being seen as part of one whole and the advaitic practitioner regarding himself or herself as that whole.

Krishnamurti was not, however, so easy to categorize. In a letter dated August 9, 1981, Ashish would write, in reply to a question I’d asked about Krishnamurti, that his “teachings are characterized by an attempt to cut through these word identifications. I am not sure how successful he has been.” In his talks, Krishnamurti was always urging people to live outside of time and space. To a hard-driving businessman like myself, such a concept was well-nigh ungraspable. My reasons for not being particularly interested in Krishnamurti can be summed up by reference to the title of his most famous talk (given in Holland in 1928), “Truth is a Pathless Land.” As an American businessman, I couldn’t stand the idea of “pathlessness”; as a spiritual seeker, I didn’t do much better.

Jiddu Krishnamurti is also, of course, the Brahman boy who, in 1910 at the age of fourteen, was plucked from complete obscurity by the Theosophical Society and groomed to be the great teacher who would one

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day lead humanity in its evolution to the new root-race as described in Theosophical teachings. But, in 1929, speaking before Society leader Annie Besant and about three thousand members, he had renounced Theosophy; dissolved the new society, the Star in the East, which had been created especially for him; rejected all organized religion and even to a degree the notion that anyone can ever learn anything from anyone else; and set out on a life of teaching that would end up affecting the lives of tens of thousands of people.

Some years later, Ashish would comment to me in a letter:

Letter of June 20 1990

I had come across J. Krishnamurti's talks long before coming to Mirtola and had never been able to make any sense of them: they said nothing to me. Against this background it was easy for me to adopt the view of J. K. I learned from Gopalda and Moti, for whom J. K.'s disbanding of the Star in the East was seen as a failure of J. K. to go through with his dedication to the Master's coming. This was exacerbated by the effect on Mrs. Besant, who was devastated. Then by what right did J. K. start teaching? It had never been suggested that he, J. K., would be the Teacher, but rather that the Teacher would take over the physical vehicle prepared by J. K. It was only after I read Mary Lutyens's *The Years of Awakening* and found confirmation of events that I had both heard of and assumed must have happened that I realized I had accepted a false view of the situation. This meant that I had to take responsibility for admitting that Moti, Gopalda, and even Ma [Sri Yashoda Mai] had been biased in their view of events. If I had not by then been standing on my own feet, I might not have been able to do it. It would not have been a conscious concealment. An emotional inability to criticize my teachers would have blocked my perceptions. However, my faulty position would have shown up in obvious bigotry.

At any rate, the three of us—Jane, Lizelle, and I—piled into my car on a sunny July morning and took off on the three-hour drive to Saanen, high up in the mountains of German Switzerland. We arrived and made our way into the crowded circus tent. Krishnamurti had already begun to speak.

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The great man was sitting up tall and erect in a chair at the front of the tent. At eighty-five, Krishnamurti was still dazzlingly handsome. His snow-white hair shone in the light that worked its way down from the top of the tent. Sitting in the front row, almost at his feet, was none other than Jeanne de Salzmänn. She was listening to Krishnamurti raptly, like a schoolgirl.

My first reaction upon seeing this was that Jeanne de Salzmänn didn't practice what she preached. Krishnamurti came from a very different tradition than hers. Gurdjieffians were not supposed to imbibe the words of other teachers. My group leaders did not like my ongoing relationship with Ashish at all, nor did they approve of my going around and meeting spiritual luminaries whether inside or outside the Gurdjieff Work. But here sat Jeanne de Salzmänn, chief among the Gurdjieffians, listening in rapt attention to this world-famous proponent of Advaita.

Could such a person, who broke the rules of which she was the custodian, really be firmly established in objective consciousness?

Such was my first impression. I listened to Krishnamurti, finding him every bit as confusing in person as I had found him in his writings, especially as his voice seemed to waver in and out eerily. Soon, though, my first impression was followed by a second. It struck me that I was present at a kind of confrontation of spiritual titans—a confrontation that had little likelihood of happening again, because Krishnamurti was eighty-five at the time (he would die in 1986 at almost ninety-one) and Jeanne de Salzmänn was ninety (she would die in 1990 at age 101). It occurred to me that there might be no more rules in the domain of objective consciousness—or in the realm of the annihilated ego in which Krishnamurti was said to dwell, with many believing of this latter that when he spoke his own personality abdicated, and Lord Krishna himself (or the Lord Maitreya, as some Theosophists would have it) spoke through him. This was a silent confrontation, with Jeanne de Salzmänn, as if ceremonially voiding herself of her ego in his presence, sitting at Krishnamurti's feet, and Krishnamurti, though I'm quite sure he knew Jeanne de Salzmänn, gazing beyond her as he spoke with that tremulous voice that was almost that of a channeled entity. It was, I would later think, a confrontation between their greater Selves, not them at all—or rather that, at such a high level

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of being, it was a merging of understanding into oneness, because there is only one greater Self, manifesting as it does through relatively separate individuals.

Writing to Ashish in 1981, shortly after Lizelle and I had visited him in Mirtola, I told him that Lizelle had “told me that she knows there are ‘higher’ beings in India than in the West. She specifically mentioned Sri Anirvan and you as examples. But, as a Westerner, she says that she has to get what she can in the West, hence her Gurdjieff group activities. Is she right?”

Letter of August 9, 1981

Lizelle is right in her attitude toward east-west incompatibilities only insofar as she is concerned with the sort of teachings she has received from Anirvan. From his writings it appears that Anirvan thinks entirely within the framework of Hindu terminology, seldom distinguishing between the terms and what they represent. It should be clear that if terms represent reality, the reality is independent of the terms. Since terminology usually goes along with a way of thinking, people who first get a glimpse of the reality through a particular thought system and terminology often get into this confusion. They think that a different system with a different terminology is representing a different reality. One of the reasons for reading widely is that it helps to distinguish between the terms and what the terms refer to. Whereas words at first convey illumination, they may later become obstructions.

I do not believe that Ashish approved at all of my gallivanting around among the greats and near-greats of the Gurdjieff movement. I for my part was pleased with myself and thought I was breaking out of the hidebound hierarchies of the Gurdjieff groups—and perhaps demonstrating that I was at a higher level of being than they thought, dammit!

But, though I doubt I was aware enough at the time to really pick up on what he was saying, Ashish was certain, I now believe, that what I was really trying to do was shine, so to speak, by the reflected light of objective

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consciousness. He was sure that all of this would advance me not one whit down the path to the unitive vision. For him, I was just another American businessman, running around and cornering as much of a share of the spiritual market as I could. He told me as much—though I was somehow able to persuade myself that he was not really talking about me at all. He first made these points in a letter written shortly after I told him about meeting Lizelle Reymond; he would reiterate them in later letters.

Letter of December 22, 1979

Now look, Sy! Going around meeting people, getting experience of the sorts of people there are, what they say, what they do, what their views are, that's one thing. But hunting for a teacher, hunting for some sort of external confirmation in the outside world, that is not desirable. The path is inward, inward into the heart of your own being, the center of your own being. Not something that you can see with the ordinary mind. Technically, it's still mind, all right, mind with a capital "M." But it's not the ordinary, thinking, rational mind. That is something, a screen, you have to get beyond. The questions that seem to be bugging you are whether there is a material basis for the inner work, and how you can square your interest in it with your integration as a successful businessman. Unfortunately, the businessman seems reluctant to let go of his success, so he distorts the facts to make his interest compatible with the success ethos—expansion of interests, intelligence, achievement, survival of the personality, and further success leading to identification with "our unibeing" [a Gurdjieffian synonym for the "Absolute"]. This replaces ego-annihilation, self-transcendence, Nirvana. Instead of aiming at bodhisattva-hood, he becomes a candidate for becoming a hasnamuss.

The problem of the material of the inner worlds reflects the question, "Is it all REAL?" The feeling, not the truth, is that if it is not material, it is imaginary. But what the devil does materiality count for without the consciousness to which it is objective? This very material dissolves before the inner vision. Consciousness holds it in being. Withdraw the consciousness, and it is literally nothing. Nothing now.

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Well. Gradually, his words would work their way into my soul. But, even then, I believed that it was a real privilege to meet some of the people I was meeting through the Gurdjieff Work. In England, in 1983, I was put in touch with Pamela Travers, author of the *Mary Poppins* books. Ms. Travers, elderly by then, had been involved in Gurdjieff Work groups for decades and had even studied briefly in Paris with Gurdjieff. I met the author in her townhouse in the Chelsea district of London and participated in several evening sessions with her and the Gurdjieff group she led that met in her top-floor sitting room. I wasn't only name-dropping when I wrote Ashish that I thought such meetings were useful for me, that they showed me how the rest of the Gurdjieffian world worked, and that it was especially interesting to witness techniques in action that a single group had been using for many years.

Letter of July 24, 1983

A connection with Pamela Travers is to me a recommendation. There has been so much talk of her visiting that I will write her, but there seem to be real physical difficulties.

But, soon enough, I would no longer have the time to go gallivanting around reflecting the light of the Gurdjieffian objective consciousness, as the reader will discover in the next chapter.

