By JOHN GROSS

"...few Hungarian Jews can have been ordained as both Anglican clerics and Buddhist monks. Few Presbyterian missionaries can have gone on to promote dubious oil companies in the Balkans and serve as advisers to Chinese warlords. It is unusual, to say the least, for a former British Member of Parliament to escape from jail in Brooklyn, face a possible charge of high treason in Austria and help organize a right-wing Putsch in Berlin. Yet these are only some of the parts played by a single man — originally called Ignace Trebitsch, though he was to use many other names as well — in the course of his improbable career. A notorious figure in his day, Trebitsch (who died in 1943) has been largely forgotten since; but now, thanks to the exemplary detective work of Bernard Wasserstein, we can follow his progress step by step, from the small town south of Budapest where he was born in 1879 to his final incarnation in China as the Abbot, where he was born in 1879 to his final

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Trebitsch Lincoln in 1901.

"...in the foreword to "The Secret Lives of Trebitsch Lincoln," Mr. Wasserstein, who teaches history at Brandeis University, describes the long quest that began with his casual browsing in an index of British Foreign Office papers and led him on to explore archives in a dozen countries. A diary in the Royal Copenhagen Library, a rare photograph of Trebitsch (tracked down in the Haifa Institute of Technology), the files of the Shanghai Municipal Police — he has drawn on a dizzying variety of sources. At the same time, he has largely set aside, with good reason, the autobiographic writings of Trebitsch himself. "Trebitsch's father was a prosperous Jewish merchant who lost his money in a stock-market crash. His own original ambition was to be an actor, but he left Hungary in a hurry at the age of 18 (he had taken to stealing watches) and made his way to England. After being converted to Christianity, he immigrated to Canada, where he labored as a missionary — first on behalf of the Presbyterians, then the Anglicans among the Jews of Montreal."

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It is a fascinating story, and Mr. Wasserstein makes the most of it, tracking down his quarry with wit and verve. But are there any larger conclusions to be drawn?

In many respects Trebitsch's adventures were remarkable for variety rather than quality. For all his mania, he comes across as a curiously uncharismatic character, and there are times when he simply sounds like a commonplace swindler. But taken as a whole, his career was plainly that of someone driven by demons. Trying to put him in historical perspective, Mr. Wasserstein draws a comparison with the 18th-century Jewish pseudomessiah Jacob Frank. Some of the parallels he cites are almost startlingly apt, and there seems little doubt that Trebitsch was his British phase simply brought to the surface "a messiah complex," as Mr. Wasserstein calls it, that had been brewing for a long time. Mr. Wasserstein's second suggestion is that Trebitsch's craziest ambitions were a kind of parody of the forerunner's in "a period of lost ideological, social and spiritual bearings" — the period that culminated in Hitler. But this seems to me too vague to be very helpful. It might have been better to pursue the messianic clue a little further, and in particular to ask what strange kink prompted Trebitsch to throw in his lot with the vicious anti-Semitism of the Kapp conspiracy and the White International. Mr. Wasserstein tends to fight shy of psychological explanations, but it is in the realms of psychopathology that the answers to the marker riddles of Trebitsch's career must surely lie.

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Illustrated. 327 pages. Yale University Press. $27.50.

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