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The Red Countess Helene von Racowitza: From the Promise of Emancipation to Suicide in 1911

In the first page of her memoir, published two years before her death in 1911, Helene von Racowitza warned her readers that her memories are intended for an audience of “emancipated people.” She explains that those who are emancipated have “reached the pinnacle which stands above all conventions, [and] look forward to the time when each one will be free to form his own life according to his individuality, untrammelled by social or family prejudices.”¹ In a word, Racowitza expects personal emancipation from her readers. In this article I explore the life of Racowitza, whose peers called her “the Red Countess,” and the “Amazon of the Drawing Room.”² Her public persona may have been aristocratic, but the fact was that Helene von Racowitza’s mother was of Jewish descent, and, in a magnificent irony, she was the great-granddaughter of the maskilic writer Saul Ascher. For Ascher, emancipation meant Jewish equality, a struggle which looked stalled and embattled when he died in 1822. For his great-granddaughter Helene, emancipation meant freedom from her aristocratic family, emancipation meant becoming an actress or a physician or a writer, emancipation meant the right to enjoy love in and out of conventional marriage. In this article I recount the complex process by which Ascher’s great-granddaughter came to enjoy the privilege of rebelling against an aristocratic family.

The life narrative of Racowitza helps us to understand how, only three generations after Saul Ascher’s time, Jews could not just dress, speak and act like Christians, not just convert to officially become Christians, but also be welcomed into noble families and raise children not seen as Jewish by their contemporaries. Hers was certainly not a typical pathway, to be sure. Still, explaining the twists and turns of Helene von Racowitza’s heritage and her social position expands our

1 Racowitza; Princess Helene von: An Autobiography, New York 1911, p. 3. In German, see ead.: *Von Anderen und mir: Erinnerungen aller Art*, Berlin 1909. See also her memoir volume: *Meine Beziehung zu Ferdinand Lassalle*, Breslau 1879.

2 For a contemporary usage of the term to refer to her, see Bonsall, Stephen: *Death Ends the Strange Career of the “Red Countess”*, in: *New York Times* (October 8, 1911). The label “Red Countess” has also been used as a nickname for Helene’s contemporary Sophie von Hatzfeldt, as well as for women of subsequent eras, including Hermynia Zur Mühlen, Katinka Andrassy Károlyi, and Marion Dönhoff. The “Amazon” label is mentioned by Helene herself in her *Autobiography* at p. 227.

understanding of Jewish history in the century after the Edict of Emancipation in 1812.

Helene von Racowitza is at best a shadowy figure to students of nineteenth-century German history. If she is known at all, it is because of her role in the death of the socialist intellectual Ferdinand Lassalle. When he was 39 and she was 21, in 1864, Ferdinand and Helene fell in love and wished to marry. Ferdinand was furious that her parents refused to accept him as an acceptable husband for their daughter, and so he challenged Helene's father to a duel. Three days later he was dead of the wounds he suffered from the pistol of his opponent, a great loss to the socialist movement.³ Helene went on to marry three husbands, attained some success as an actress, translator and writer, as she wandered from Munich to Vienna to St. Petersburg to New York City. One of her acquaintances remarked that she had known "intimately" an entire "forest of celebrities".⁴ In 1911, she was back in Munich, feeling impoverished and mourning the very recent death of her third husband, Serge von Schewitsch, and she took her own life.

Helene von Racowitza's lovers, husbands, and friends recall the mixed society of the Berlin salons of the old regime, so popular among an eclectic mix of Jews and nobles. Hannah Arendt argued that mutual social exchanges between wealthy Jews and down-at-their-heels aristocrats help explain the brief flourishing of the salons, as well as the scandalous intermarriages of several salonières.⁵ Arendt argued that for a short period at the end of the eighteenth century, the nobility was the one class which truly accepted Jews into its ranks. Our exploration of Helene's society suggests that bonds between nobles and Jews lasted far into the nineteenth century, and in cities far beyond Berlin. Helene was an exemplary creature of the noble-Jewish alliance, with all of the predictable hypocrisy, self-hatred, and secret identities of those who gained entrance to these charmed circles. Her biography shows that as we move forward into the nineteenth century, the noble-Jewish affinity continued to appear, and beyond the salons the radical

³ The major biographies of Lassalle are: Bernstein, Eduard: *Ferdinand Lassalle as a Social Reformer*, London, 1893, rpnt. Greenwood/Connecticut 1969; Oncken, Hermann: *Lassalle*, New York 1971; Na'aman, Schlomo: *Ferdinand Lassalle. Deutscher und Jude*, Hannover 1968; Footman, David: *Ferdinand Lassalle. Romantic Revolutionary*, New Haven 1947; Brandes, Georg: *Ferdinand Lassalle*, Berlin 1881/London 1911, rpnt. New York 1968; and most recently, Bleuel, Hans Peter: *Ferdinand Lassalle*, Munich 1979. It is rare for historians to argue that his death was not a loss for the socialist movement; for a very different view of his legacy, see the 1980 play by Christoph Hein called *Lassalle fragt Herrn Herbert nach Sonja*.

⁴ See Huneker, James Gibbons: *Steeplejack*, Vol. 2, New York 1920, p. 28. Huneker was a music critic who knew Helene von Racowitza in her New York City period.

⁵ The current edition in English is: Arendt, Hannah: *Origins of Totalitarianism*, New York 2009.

movements were another space where Jews and nobles mixed.⁶ We shall see more examples of the noble-Jewish ambience as we follow Racowitza's life story.

The participation of Jews in left movements is a well-documented, much debated and still controversial theme, but the noble enthusiasm for radical politics has achieved far less historical attention. From the French Revolution all the way to the Bolshevik revolution of 1917, from Paris to Berlin to St. Petersburg, we find many nobles active and indeed leaders in left movements. Jenny von Westphalen Marx, Sophie von Hatzfeldt, Malvida von Meysenbug, Bettina von Arnim, Olympe de Gouge, Leo Tolstoy, Michail Bakunin, Peter Kropotkin, Alexander Herzen and Bertha von Suttner are among the most famous examples. The noble activists often donated their fortunes, their homes, and their lawyers and their friendship circles to the cause. And many noble activists often fell in love with their less well-born comrades, creating some odd couples. But let us now watch the personalities in action by returning to the life of Helene von Racowitza, tossed as she was between classes, religions, husbands, occupations, cities and political causes.

What is Emancipation?

Although we can well imagine that she knew nothing of his passions, Helene's great-grandfather Saul was a notable and altogether iconoclastic figure. His points of view were bold, at a time when the cause of Jewish emancipation and its terms were becoming ever more disputed. Just how controversial Saul Ascher was in his lifetime is illuminated by the fate of one of his books at the Wartburg Festival in October of 1817. The festival attracted over 500 students, who all met at the top of the Wartenberg mountain, near to the Wartburg castle where Martin Luther had resided while he translated the New Testament from Latin to German three centuries before. The date was a double anniversary, since it was also four years since the victorious German battle against the French at Leipzig in October of 1813.⁷ The location of the Wartburg festival invoked the double legacy of a Reformation landmark and recent military success.

⁶ For a useful survey of salons in Berlin, which continued into the nineteenth century, see Wilhelmy-Dollinger, Petra: *Die Berliner Salons*, Berlin/New York 2000 and ead.: *Der Berliner Salon im 19. Jahrhundert*, Berlin/New York 1989, as well as the museum catalogue, *Jewish Women and their Salons: The Power of Conversation*, edited by Emily Bilski and Emily Braun, New Haven 2005.

⁷ See Hertz, Deborah: *Wie Juden Deutsche wurden. Die Welt jüdische Konvertiten vom 17. bis zum 19. Jahrhundert*, Frankfurt a. M. 2007, pp. 203–204.

At the festival, the young radicals, many of whom had been soldiers in the recently victorious War of Liberation, sang Protestant songs and listened to political speeches around a bonfire. Into the fire they threw a corporal's cane, a wig pigtail, a copy of the Napoleonic Code, and a copy of Saul Ascher's recently published book, called *Germanomania*.⁸ Indeed, Ascher's nemesis, "Turnvater" Friedrich Ludwig Jahn, the iconoclastic founder of the patriotic gymnastics movement, was the leading figure at the Festival.⁹ The fateful contrast between Ascher and Jahn has attracted contemporary attention and stimulated a publishing revival of Ascher in our times. In the early 1990s Peter Hacks reprinted his major works, and argued that Johann Fichte, Ernst Moritz Arndt and Friedrich Ludwig Jahn were actually not the heroic figures which had been celebrated in the historical teachings of the German Democratic Republic. Hacks lavished praise on Saul Ascher, noting that the fury his writings aroused in the nationalists of his era reveals the antisemitic stream of patriotism at this crucial juncture.¹⁰

At the time of the Festival, Ascher was already 50, and was the author of 16 books, including several novels, five translations, and scores of articles and leaflets, often published under pseudonyms. He had been born into a wealthy Berlin Jewish family, had married well, and for decades had worked as a publisher and bookseller. In his first years he concentrated on Jewish themes, but soon enough turned to analysis of contemporary politics. Unlike many other intellectuals who

8 *Germanomanie* is included in the collection by Saul Ascher, edited by Peter Hacks, *Vier Flugschriften*, Berlin 1991. For Ascher's own report on the Wartburg Festival, see id.: *Die Wartburgs-Feier, Leipzig 1818*. See also the new complete editions of his work, edited by Renate Best, Köln 2010 and by André Thiele, Mainz 2011. For commentary in English, see Hess, Jonathan: *Germans, Jews and the Claims of Modernity*, New Haven 2002, as well as the essay on Ascher in Grab, Walter: *Radikale Lebensläufe*, Berlin 1980.

9 For further research on Jahn, see Jahn, Günther: *Friedrich Ludwig Jahn. Volkserzieher und Vorkämpfer für Deutschlands Einigung*, Göttingen 1992; the bibliography collection edited by Peter Rohrlach et al., Berlin 1978, and the biography by Franz Wilhelm Beck, Frankfurt 1952. See also Puschner, Marco: *Antisemitismus im Kontext der politischen Romantik*, Tübingen 2008. For an interpretation of these developments from the perspective of gender, see Hagemann, Karen: *Military, War, and the Mainstreams. Gendering Modern German History: Rewriting Historiography*, New York/Oxford 2007, pp. 63–85 and her „Männlicher Muth und teutsche Ehre“. *Nation, Militär, und Geschlecht zur Zeit der Antinapoleonischen Kriege Preußens*, Paderborn 2002.

10 See the first volume in the three-volume collection edited by Peter Hacks, *Ascher gegen Jahn: Ein Freiheitskrieg*, 3 Vols., Berlin 1991. For background on the reputation of Peter Hacks today, see "In Berlin, A Peter Hacks Renaissance", *New Yorker*, November 9, 2009. Of great relevance is the contemporary campaign at the University of Greifswald to remove the name of Ernst Moritz Arndt from the university name, the movement which calls itself "Uni ohne Arndt". See „Immer mit dem Finger in die Wunde – Sebastian Jabbusch verlässt Greifswald“ on the website webMoritz.de (May 24, 2010).

turned against Napoleon and the French Revolution after Germanic lands were invaded in 1792, Ascher remained loyal to the Napoleonic program. He defended French values at a time when early German nationalists were struggling against Napoleon's armies and everything French. A touchy point was that the occupying French regime had legislated improvements in Jewish civic status without authentic support from local populations. To encourage support for their cause, intellectuals who had previously identified as atheists and supporters of the French Revolution integrated Christian values, representations, songs and symbols into nationalist rituals. The point here is that for myriad reasons still not well understood, hostility to Jewish emancipation entered the nationalist program in this setting. That the students at the Wartburg Festival would toss a book of Ascher's into the flames seems to validate the claim that the nationalism in this setting was "racist and anti-Semitic from the very beginning".¹¹

Ascher died as a neglected figure in his own time. Alas, few of the younger Jewish intellectuals who followed him in the next generation took up his causes. The ex-Jewish intellectual celebrities in the middle decades of the nineteenth century, including Heinrich Heine, Ludwig Börne, Eduard Gans and Karl Marx, definitely did not seek to integrate Jewish emancipation into the nationalist program. On the contrary, many successful former Jews tended to ignore the hostility to Jews which emerged among left-wing patriots in these decades. These brilliant and very public intellectual stars were known to be Jewish by their friends and their many enemies. For a complex mix of reasons, including family tensions, occupational barriers and the repression of reform Judaism, the best and the brightest intellects of the era often abandoned their Jewish families, Jewish practices, and indeed any formal association with Judaism. This was the path chosen by Ascher's descendants, to whose fates we now return.

The Obscurity of Saul Ascher

When Ascher died at 55 in 1822, Prussian Jewish policy was at a turning point. The Edict of Emancipation was only a decade old, but already its terms were being retracted in letter and in spirit. To begin with, critics at the time and later complained that unlike the emancipation of French Jewry legislated in 1791 and 1792, the premise of the Prussian Edict was that equality would have to be earned.

¹¹ This claim was penned by Greenfeld, *Liah: Nationalism. Five Roads to Modernity*, Cambridge/Mass. 1992, p. 369. For further background, see Mosse, *George: Nationalization of the Masses*, New York 1975.

The expectation was that the state would encourage and reward religious reform within Judaism as a preparation and indeed a condition for continued civic emancipation.¹² It was therefore all the most frustrating and certainly against the spirit of the new law when Prussian officials closed down the alternative reform services held in the home of Amalia and Jacob Herz Beer. The government intention to prohibit religious innovation was encouraged by local traditionalist rabbis who militantly opposed any change in ritual. The state officials certainly achieved their aim because after the repression of reform, at least in Berlin, more and more Jews chose baptism in the middle decades of the century.¹³ When state officials turned against religious reform, an evolution of Judaism which had been imagined as a preparation for further civic emancipation, the quid-pro-quo of the 1812 Edict became dubious. That conversion rather than reform would be the functional version of emancipation allowed in mid-nineteenth century Prussia was a very serious turn of events.

We return to Helene's biography to see these trends illuminated in her own life choices. Her great-grandfather Saul Ascher and his wife Rachel Reichel Spanier had one child, called Wilhelmine, born in 1795. In 1815, when she was 20, Minna, as she was called by her friends and family, married very well indeed, to Joseph Wolff, son of a wealthy family of wool manufacturers.¹⁴ Helene's grandmother Minna would be involved in many decisions about Helene's fate as the years passed. Wilhelmine and Joseph had six children, and their only daughter was Franziska, Helene's mother, born in 1819. Wilhelmine lost her father Saul three years after Franziska was born. Thus he never knew that his granddaughter converted in 1841, when she married the historian Wilhelm von Dönniges. Franziska's husband Wilhelm had just been appointed a professor of political theory at the University of Berlin. He had been born into a once-prominent Junker family down on their luck, and was trained by the preeminent historian Leopold von Ranke in medieval Habsburg history.¹⁵

Six years after their marriage, in 1847, when Helene was still an infant, Wilhelm took his family to Munich to take up a post as the tutor to Crown Prince Maximilian of Bavaria. When Maximilian succeeded King Ludwig a year later, in

¹² See Strauss, Herbert: "Pre-Emancipation Prussian Policies towards Jews 1815–1847". *Leo Baeck Institute Year Book*, Vol. 11 (1966), pp. 107–136, and for a more recent perspective, Liberles, Robert: "Was there a Jewish Movement for Emancipation in Germany?". *Leo Baeck Institute Year Book*, Vol. 31 (1986), pp. 35–49.

¹³ See Hertz, *Wie Juden Deutsche wurden*, pp. 249–260.

¹⁴ Joseph Wolff was born in 1792, and he should not be confused with the contemporary author Sabattia Joseph Wolff, 1756–1832.

¹⁵ On Wilhelm von Dönniges, see the article on him in the *Allgemeine Deutsche Bibliographie*, Vol. 5, Leipzig 1877, pp. 339–341.

1848, Wilhelm became a high official in the king's close circle, and soon became the Bavarian ambassador in Switzerland. When Helene was 12, in 1862, her family left Munich for Geneva, although she often travelled to Berlin to live with her Grandmother Minna. In her memoir, composed half a century later, Helene called her grandmother a well-educated aesthete, which may well have meant a *salonnière*.¹⁶ In the same passage, Helene openly confessed to her Jewish heritage, when she noted that "my mother belonged to one of the old and highly cultured Jewish families in Berlin". She added that "my family was as proud as any noble one of its pure Semitic blood".¹⁷ This confession rests uneasily with the actual history of the family, as each generation departed further and further from Jewish practice and identity. We still do not know whether her Jewish heritage was an open secret to her friends and acquaintances, well known but not discussed.¹⁸ Perhaps she felt free to confess her Jewish origins when she composed her memoir because of her age at the time she was writing the document.

In her memoir Helene remembered her parents as having been very much in love and happy in their Munich and their Geneva years. Franziska entertained a cultured circle of friends and was known for her social charisma. From afar it may look as if Franziska and Wilhelm led quite the charmed life. But up close, the edifice of their aristocratic position was actually somewhat shaky. As a Protestant ambassador representing a Catholic land, married to a wife of Jewish descent, Wilhelm's position was always less than secure. Certainly great-grandfather Ascher would have been shocked at the permissive sexual norms of the court society in which Helene came of age in Munich and Geneva. When she was 12, her parents arranged her engagement to an older Italian man, but Helene was vehemently opposed to the marriage. Indeed she later claimed that the forced engagement was simply a ploy so that her mother could enjoy a flirtation with her intended groom.¹⁹ In the eyes of one observer, in this marriage scheme Helene's

¹⁶ Further research into Minna Wolff's social life would clarify how mixed her friendship circle was, important for understanding Helene's milieu when she was with her grandmother in Berlin. Among Minna Wolff's close friends were the Baron Emanuel Karl Heinrich von Korff, a son-in-law of Giacomo Meyerbeer. It is important to note that her grandmother's friends introduced Helene to Ferdinand Lassalle, yet her family considered him an unacceptable marriage partner. This suggests that there was some difference between the social world of Grandmother Minna in Berlin and the marriage eligibility requirements of Franziska and Wilhelm von Dönniges.

¹⁷ Racowitza, *Autobiography*, p. 7.

¹⁸ See my article, *Masquerades and Open Secrets, Or New Ways to Understand Jewish Assimilation*, in: Lund, Hannah Lotte/Ludewig, Anna-Dorothea/Ferruta, Paola (Hrsg.): *Versteckter Glaube oder doppelte Identität? Das Bild des Marranentums im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*, Hildesheim [u. a.] 2011 (Haskala, Bd. 47), pp. 57–78.

¹⁹ See Racowitza, *Autobiography*, p. 20.

parents were actually “selling” her to the older Italian.²⁰ Helene’s grandmother back in Berlin argued that the engagement should be cancelled, which it was.

It was in 1862, during one of her visits to Grandmother Minna in Berlin, that Helene met Ferdinand Lassalle. Ferdinand Lassalle was quite the unusual and very notorious socialist intellect in the German states. Two years after that first acquaintance, Helene and Ferdinand fell in love, after Helene contrived a meeting with him in Geneva. By then he was 39 years old, a self-taught lawyer and published scholar of Greek philosophy. Lassalle had become the dynamic leader of the Allgemeiner Deutsche Arbeiterverein, called the ADAV, the first workers’ political party in Europe.²¹ His appearances at rallies across Germany had been wildly successful. Indeed historians today judge him to have been “a charismatic mass orator, probably the first in Prussian history”.²² At the juncture when they met in Geneva, Lassalle was at the height of his considerable powers. Indeed, during the year before his death his political stance caught the attention of the new Prussian Chancellor, Otto von Bismarck. Lassalle and Bismarck met for several productive meetings in the spring of 1863.²³

Ferdinand Lassalle fit precisely the qualities of a “Trotzjude”. A “Trotzjude” was someone who remained Jewish because they rejected the hypocrisy of conversion, not because they were dedicated to Jewish practices, identities or causes.²⁴ As a teen, in the dynamic Jewish community of Breslau, Ferdinand had indeed identified as an emancipated Jew and entertained fantasies of a role as leader of the Jews. But after he left Breslau as a young adult, Ferdinand Lassalle was never active in any Jewish institutions as an adult. Like his on-again-off-again friend Karl Marx, in his letters and in his diary, he could be quite vicious about other Jews.²⁵ Unlike Karl Marx, Lassalle’s parents never baptized him as a child,

²⁰ This is the judgment of Schlomo Na’aman: Ferdinand Lassalle. *Deutscher und Jude*, Hannover 1968, p. 80

²¹ See Morgan, Robert: *The German Social Democrats and the First International 1864–1872*, Cambridge/England 1965; Lehnart, Detlef: *Sozialdemokratie zwischen Protestbewegung und Regierungspartei 1848–1983*, Frankfurt a. M. 1983.

²² Steinberg, Jonathan: *Bismarck. A Life*, New York 2011, p. 203.

²³ A good summary of the Lassalle meetings with Bismarck can be found in Steinberg, Bismarck, pp. 199–207. See also Dawson, William H.: *German Socialism and Ferdinand Lassalle. A Biographical History of German Socialist Movements During This Century*, London 1899.

²⁴ For an example of the use of the term in a recent scholarly work, see Schneider, Karlheinz: *Judentum und Modernisierung. Ein deutsch-amerikanischer Vergleich 1870–1920*, Frankfurt a. M. 2005, p. 40.

²⁵ For discussion on this theme, see the chapter on Lassalle in Wistrich, Robert: *Revolutionary Jews from Marx to Trotsky*, London 1976; Brandes, Georg: *Lassalle*, Berlin 1881. For fascinating interpretations of the parallel issue in the Jewish identity of Karl Marx, see Manuel, Frank: *A Requiem for Karl Marx*, Cambridge/Massachusetts 1995.

nor did he ever convert as a teen or an adult. It was significant that he could succeed as he did without converting. Baptism in the Lutheran church was seen by an increasing number of families as a reasonable price to pay to help their sons become professors, lawyers or civil officials. Young men more often also accepted baptism as the price of functional civic equality. When asked about the matter Lassalle claimed that socialists opposed hypocrisy and that was why he would not convert. His grand gesture of remaining Jewish was made easier by his family's comfortable financial situation.²⁶

Space constraints will not allow for a leisurely jaunt through Lassalle's eventful life. One episode from the year 1853 involving his father and his sister, then living in Prague, illuminates the tensions in his family around Jewish identity. Ferdinand's sister Riekchen married an ambitious cousin, Ferdinand Friedländer, who subsequently was ennobled and became Ritter Ferdinand von Friedland. Friedland was a successful entrepreneur, a pioneer in founding gas supply for street lamps in Prague and Breslau. Eventually Friedland brought his father-in-law Heyman Lassal as well as Ferdinand himself into his gas supply firm. In Prague, the von Friedland couple made lavish donations to high culture and seem to have tried to pass themselves as Christians to their new friends.²⁷ One night in 1853, Ferdinand's father Heyman Lassal was visiting from Breslau. As a guest at a dinner party at the Friedlands' home, in front of all the guests, Heyman declared that Riekchen and Ferdinand Friedland were Jewish. His words that evening were: "I will not purchase by deceit the honor of dining with you."²⁸ In other words, he "outed" his own daughter in her own home.

Before he met Helene in 1862, Ferdinand had certainly enjoyed a lively romantic life. He usually chose women with a noble heritage, who seem to have welcomed him into their beds. Beginning in 1846, when he was 21, his deepest personal relationship was with Sophie von Hatzfeldt. Their relationship revealed his tendency to acquire noble status and simultaneously conduct public campaigns against noble abuses of privilege and power. Since they lived in the same home [in Düsseldorf] for several years, gossips at the time presumed they were lovers. To this day, the precise details of their physical relationship remain in dis-

²⁶ See Na'aman, Shlomo: *Juden und jüdische Aspekte in der deutschen Arbeiterbewegung 1848–1918*, Tel Aviv 1977.

²⁷ For the relevant letters, see Bernstein, Eduard: *Intime Briefe Ferdinand Lassalles an Eltern und Schwester*, Berlin 1905; rpt. Bremen 2012.

²⁸ This quote is cited in Zangwill, Israel: *Dreamers of the Ghetto*, New York/London 1898, p. 374.



Abb. 7: Ferdinand Lassalle, Fotografie.



Abb. 8: Helene von Dönniges, verh. Racowitza, Stahlstich, um 1870.

pute.²⁹ The status, financial, personal and political exchanges between Sophie and Ferdinand were immensely complicated. The project that initially brought them together was his legal assistance in her eight year struggle to win a divorce from her husband, who refused to grant Sophie a formal divorce.³⁰

Sophie's favors to Ferdinand included her personal and intimate attention to him and to his intellectual and political career as well as her introductions to her many well-born friends. The case of her divorce saga gave him a cause, which he pursued through speeches and publications. She also provided much of the funding for his lavish lifestyle. In the settlement, achieved in 1854 after eight years, Sophie promised to pay Ferdinand a lavish yearly allotment of 4,000 talers. Ferdinand and his family also helped Sophie. His father and his brother-in-law Friedland loaned her money before the 1854 settlement of the divorce. Ferdinand himself provided intellectual training for Sophie's talents and helped her become an activist in her own right. Over the years the intensity of their bond faded in some complex ways. But up until his death in the duel in August of 1864, Sophie remained involved as an advisor and maternal figure for Ferdinand.

From the beginning, Helene's parents in Geneva ruled Lassalle out as a possible husband. His various defects included his public Jewish identity and his notorious relationship with the Countess von Hatzfeldt. Understandably, Wilhelm and Franziska von Dönniges were not at all pleased with Ferdinand's spectacular success as a socialist organizer. The fate of her siblings would be influenced by such a misalliance. Helene's sister Margarethe had just become engaged to Count Eugen von Keyserling, and a marriage with Lassalle might have caused him to break off that engagement. Her brothers worried that if she married Lassalle they could never become officers. We need to grasp the very real consequences of a noble family accepting a Jewish son-in-law, perhaps especially because Franziska von Dönniges was of Jewish heritage. As she reconstructed the month before the duel that summer of 1864, looking back from a half-century later, as she was composing her memoir, Helene noted that Grandmother Minna back in Berlin actually did approve the match. Apparently her desires did not count for much for Helene's parents in this matter.

If Lassalle had not been so proud, he and Helene could have eloped immediately, before she even presented him to her parents as a suitor. But he found

²⁹ For a sharp critique of how contemporaries and other biographers assumed physical details without good evidence, see Bleuel, Lassalle, pp. 113, 131, 174f. and 188.

³⁰ For recent research on Sophie von Hatzfeldt, see Hirsch, Helmut: Sophie von Hatzfeldt, Düsseldorf 1981 and Kling-Mathey, Christiane: Gräfin Hatzfeldt, Bonn 1989. For an older assessment, see Mayer, Gustav: Gräfin Sophie von Hatzfeldt, Bismarck und das Duell Lassalle – Racowitza, in: Historische Zeitschrift 134 (1926), pp. 47–56.

elopement humiliating, worried about the consequences for his political career, and was confident that soon enough he could charm her father. During the month of August, letters were written, hidden, and burned as Helene, her parents, Ferdinand and a large cast of characters debated over her fate.

To understand the causes of Lassalle's humiliation that summer, we must contrast how Lassalle saw himself as a potential husband for Helene and how her family saw him. From afar Lassalle looks like an acceptable match for the von Dönniges clan. In Berlin he was a popular host with many well-born friends. Indeed as Friedrich Engels observed, Lassalle "had a mania for forcing his way into distinguished circles".³¹

For the eight years before 1864, he had been enjoying an enviable standard of living in his Bellevuestraße home in Berlin. Just how his public Jewish identity played out in the detailed discussions among the personalities in the drama has not been well recorded. The extant biographies and memoirs are more than elusive about the touchy issue of who knew what when about Helene's Jewish lineage. It is just about impossible for the contemporary observer to imagine that Ferdinand did not know that Helene was Jewish by descent. Grandmother Minna was a well-known wealthy Jewish personality in Berlin. Just why she did not elaborate on the complexities of this vexing issue in her memoir is telling, and also unfortunate.³²

Explaining just why Lassalle went through with the duel is difficult. His choice of this particular ritual, over the hand of Helene, presents us with a complex stew of motives and meanings. Some biographers suggest that he courted death that summer, because of pressing financial and health setbacks of the years just before August 1864.³³ The facts are that after weeks of wrangling, Lassalle, frustrated that Wilhelm von Dönniges did not accept him as a son-in-law, challenged him to a duel. That von Dönniges took the challenge seriously must have pleased Ferdinand in and of itself. Years before, Ferdinand had challenged Sophie's husband Count von Hatzfeldt to a duel, only to be mocked when he told his friends there

31 This quote is cited by Schwartzchild, Leopold: *Karl Marx the Red Prussian*, New York 1947, p. 232. Of the 24 total number of social visitors to Lassalle's home, seven were noble and two were Jewish. See Kohut, Adolph: *Ferdinand Lassalle*. Berlin 1902, p. 58.

32 We can find an imagined, fictional conversation on this theme in Stefan Heym's novel: *Lassalle. Ein biographischer Roman*, München 1969. Heym composed a conversation between Ferdinand's sister Riekchen, Helene, and Helene's Grandmother Minna. The topic was the Jewish identity of the various parties to the dispute. Riekchen says to Helene "you are only half a shiksa". (p. 57). See Helene's very brief mention of the question of her parents' hostility to his public Jewish identity at the time, in her *Autobiography*, pp. 29–30.

33 We can learn the details of his financial crisis in a letter to Sophie von Hatzfeldt from March of 1862, as quoted in Footman, *Lassalle*, p. 162–163.

was no need to respond to “this silly Jewish boy”.³⁴ Perhaps Lassalle was testing to see if a noble would accept his very demand for a duel, to measure if his status in that arcane hierarchy had increased. As for his ideals, he had previously announced that duelling, like conversion, was against his socialist principles.³⁵

Although in principle Wilhelm accepted Ferdinand’s challenge, he felt himself too burdened with public and private responsibilities to meet his challenger on the field of honor. The family requested the young Hungarian student to whom Helene was actually engaged, Count Jacko von Racowitza, represent the von Dönniges family. Although he was an experienced marksman and Racowitza had no experience, Lassalle fell in the duel and died three days later. Sophie von Hatzfeldt wanted to tour his corpse around Germany to celebrate Lassalle’s importance and build support for the movement. But his mother was upset, considering that Jewish laws mandated rapid burial. She intervened with the police to return her deceased son’s body to his family. Before too many days had passed he was buried in the Breslau Jewish cemetery.³⁶ That two of the most important female figures in his life would have such different attitudes to his corpse is emblematic of Ferdinand’s complex identity during his lifetime.

Because fighting in a duel seemed so inconsistent with socialist politics, just after his death that August, behind closed doors his friends wrote rather nasty comments in their letters about the duel. Just days after learning of Lassalle’s death, Friedrich Engels shared his reaction with Karl Marx. “That could only happen to Lassalle, with his unique character, part Jew, part cavalier, part clown, part sentimentalist”, Engels wrote. Engels ruminated further, asking Marx “how can a politician of his caliber let himself be shot dead by a Rumanian adventurer?”³⁷ The riddle of why Lassalle risked his life in a duel continued to preoccupy Engels. Several months later his tone was absolutely hilarious. He wrote to Marx that “Lassalle’s fatal error was obviously that he did not throw the hussy [Helene von Dönniges] on the bed in the boarding house and deal with her appropriately.” Engels continued “it was not his fine mind but his Jew’s pizzle (penis) that she was interested in.”³⁸

³⁴ See Steinberg, *Bismarck*, p. 200.

³⁵ This is noted by Footman, *Lassalle*, p. 96.

³⁶ See the discussion in Kling-Mathey, *Gräfin Hatzfeldt*, p. 147.

³⁷ The letter is from September 4, 1864, quoted in note 39 of Wistrich, *Robert: Revolutionary Jews from Marx to Trotsky*, New York 1976, p. 56.

³⁸ Letter from Engels to Karl Marx, November 7, 1864, in: *Marx Engels Collected Works*, Vol. 42, New York 1975, p. 19. The word pizzle may sound Yiddish, but it is actually Old English.

After the Fateful Duel

After Ferdinand died, Helene married Janko von Racowitza, according to the wishes of her parents. They were moderately happy, although he had pulled the trigger on the gun which killed Lassalle, whom she still felt to be her lost love. Janko died of a lung infection a mere 15 months after their marriage. As a young widow, Helene often complained that she felt poor, and blamed her father for failing to help protect her assets when she married von Racowitza. After a few years of painful and fitful contact with her family, her alienation from them became complete.³⁹

After some wandering between the various European cities, Helene settled in Berlin and became a quite successful actress. Precisely this career had been problematic for her parents, so for her this work was an emancipation from them, enacted with more success than her intention to marry Ferdinand. She wrote in her memoir that “by going on the stage I stepped out of the society in which my birth and my first marriage had placed me, I broke off all connections that bound me to it.”⁴⁰ By 1868, only three years after Jacko von Racowitza’s death, Helene had fallen in love with the Jewish actor and theatrical producer Siegwart Friedmann.⁴¹ She and Siegwart performed together and during their years in Vienna, they belonged to a prominent social circle of painters, actors, composer and writers. One of their favorites was the newly-prominent Richard Wagner, whose texts Helene often read aloud at social gatherings. For years to come, even when they were no longer a romantic couple, he remained an intimate confidante and theatrical mentor.⁴² In this marriage, as in her passion for Lassalle, she had again chosen a man of Jewish descent whose values and profession were well outside of conventional Jewish society.

Helene’s sense of the style of life to which she felt entitled is revealed in the financial claims she mentions in her memoir. When remembering these years,

³⁹ A recent biography allows us to track the significant milestones in Helene’s life. See Hirner, Andrea: *Die Todesparzschönheit: Helene Prinzessin Racowitza. Ein Münchner Kind in der Fremde*, München 2011.

⁴⁰ Racowitza, *Autobiography*, pp. 231–232. For useful background, see Davis, Tracy: *Actresses as Working Women. Their Social Identity in Victorian Culture*, London 1991.

⁴¹ See Kohut, Adolph: Siegwart Friedmann, in: *Bühne und Welt* 14/II (1912), pp. 45–55. For his memoir, see Friedmann, Siegwart: *Vertrauliche Theaterbriefe*, Berlin 1909.

⁴² The civil marriage to Friedmann was never actually valid, so she did not need to divorce him when they separated. When they married, she was technically a Romanian, holding Ottoman citizenship through her marriage with Jacko von Racowitza. Friedmann was a Hungarian with Austrian citizenship. A civil marriage was their only option, since she was technically a Protestant and he was Jewish.

she noted that her yearly income from theatrical payments and royalties was 12,000 guildens, which she estimates to be 1,200 British pounds.⁴³ While she was still in Europe, Helene felt so strapped for funds that in order to earn the amount she felt she needed, she toured constantly, because touring performances earned more income than repertory theatre. As for her marital status, as usual the details were contradictory and confusing. After she and Friedmann had gone their separate ways, they attempted to divorce, only to discover that technically they had never actually been married, because they belonged to different nation states and were officially in different religions. Friedmann was a Hungarian with Austrian citizenship, and Jewish, and she was a German who was Protestant by religious affiliation.

During an 1873 visit to the Bavarian health resort of Bad Kissingen, Helene was introduced to Serge von Schewitsch. Serge was five years younger than Helene, from a Russian entitled family, employed with a prestigious position in the civil service. Like many of his class, Serge sympathized with the radicals then agitating for social change in Russia. Here again Helene was drawn to the nexus of privilege and protest. At the Kissingen spa that summer, no sparks flew between Helene and Serge. But two months later they met by chance at the railway station in Salzburg, and conversed passionately about topics of mutual obsession. Again, they lost contact. But two years later, in 1875, she needed a respite from her rigors of her acting regime, and she set off alone for St. Petersburg.

Helene's connections in St. Petersburg were impeccable, with both the powerful and with the protest movements. One of her first projects after arriving in town was a plea to a high official in the state service for the release of an imprisoned radical physician. After several weeks of searching, Serge discovered her whereabouts in St. Petersburg. She later remembered that "the consummation of my Fate came tapping at my door one day when I was sitting in my drawing-room alone, and a little bored."⁴⁴ For the next three years Serge and Helene travelled around together, sometimes in St. Petersburg, sometimes in Berlin, and ultimately in Paris, uncertain about the strength of their commitment. As an aristocrat dedicated to social change, Serge represented a trend. The parents, relatives, and friends of the well-born activists in Imperial Russia often helped the movements

⁴³ As cited in her *Autobiography*, p. 230. A rough estimate is that 1,200 British pounds would be worth 89,000 pounds in 2011, using the calculations provided by the online website *Measuring Worth*. It is difficult to believe that she felt that a yearly income of this size was inadequate and if she did, it sheds light on the standard of living she maintained from her acting career and other sources of financial support not captured in the historical record.

⁴⁴ *Racowitza, Autobiography*, p. 274.

with their large homes, ample bank accounts, and legal services.⁴⁵ Shortly after their romance had begun, Serge took a leading role during a protest at the funeral of a radical at a St. Petersburg church in December 1876.⁴⁶ He feared arrest and a prison sentence, and decided to depart Russia at once, without taking an official leave from his position or acquiring an up-to-date passport.

By the winter of 1877, Helene and Serge were newly married, living in Paris, neither sure of where to live and how to use their talents and support themselves.⁴⁷ When Helene asked Serge: “What next?”, he replied: “We will go to America.” Helene recorded in her memoir that “I was perhaps for the first time in my life absolutely and entirely happy.” On March 1, 1877, they stepped off the Cunard steamer in New York City, feeling that they were indeed “two free and happy people!” Three decades later, when she wrote her memoir, she remembered their shared joy. “Behind us lay all conventions, all European social bonds. Before us lay life and all its possibilities!”⁴⁸ We observe from the sidelines that Helene’s freedom was enhanced by her still-lavish financial resources. For when she stepped off the boat in 1877 she had with her 14 trunks of dresses and her own maid.⁴⁹

During their thirteen years in New York City and in Hoboken, New Jersey, Helene and Serge thrived. Serge became a successful speaker on the socialist circuit, and published often in the radical press. Helene toured as an actress in the German-American theatre for several years, but then abruptly quit the stage. She hated the long separations from Serge and felt snobbish about her Midwestern and Western audiences. She later remembered that she “was tired of playing in the West to a public consisting of shoemakers, brewers and bakers”. She continued that “we made a little joke that all these people were more at home in a *saloon* than in a *salon*.”⁵⁰

After Helene ended her acting career, she and Serge both enrolled in medical school. Ever modest, she recalled in her memoir that she possessed the gift of “rapid and sure diagnosis”.⁵¹ Both midwifery and medicine were important vocational pathways for women at the time, and indeed the division between physi-

45 Two of the best-known aristocratic Russian radicals were Alexander Herzen and Peter Kropotkin. For background, see Fischer, George: *Russian Liberalism from Gentry to Intelligentsia*, Cambridge/Massachusetts 1958.

46 On the funerals for activists, which became political events, see Trice, Tom: *Rites of Protest. Populist Funerals in Imperial St. Petersburg 1876–1878*, in: *Slavic Review* 60 (2001), pp. 50–74.

47 Racowitza, *Autobiography*, p. 339.

48 Racowitza, *Autobiography*, p. 295.

49 Racowitza, *Autobiography*, p. 295.

50 Racowitza, *Autobiography*, p. 335.

51 Racowitza, *Autobiography*, p. 340.

cian and midwife was disputed.⁵² Serge soon returned to his political writing and publishing, but she continued for four years until severe illness caused her to halt her studies. Next Helene too turned to writing and publishing theatrical reviews, novels, and memoirs.⁵³

Serge's success as an intellectual in the radical movements of New York City in the 1880s was enhanced by his command of English, French, Russian and German, as well as his good connections with activists back in Russia. In her memoir Helene described her husband as a "burning, enthusiastic, inspired and inspiring orator", a "born aristocrat" who was "heart and soul a social democrat".⁵⁴ When he first arrived, Serge published mainly in three English-language papers, *The World*, *The Sun*, and *The Herald*. In 1880, he was appointed the editor of the leftist newspaper, the *New Yorker Volkszeitung*.⁵⁵ We must remember that in those years many of the radicals in New York City and beyond were readers of German.⁵⁶

While in New York, Helene and Serge enjoyed a wide social circle of friends, most of them radicals, who earned a living as doctors, writers and publishers. Again we find her among intermarried couples. Two of her closest friends were Auguste Lilienthal and the physician Mary Putnam Jacobi, both Christian women married to Jewish men.⁵⁷ Although Serge was very much the political organizer, Helene was not nearly so involved in radical causes. She was, however, a great enthusiast for what she saw as the freedoms enjoyed by many American women of different regions and classes. Ever alert to the problematic of arranged marriages, Helene saw that American young women were less constrained by their

52 She referred to her school as the New York Women's University, which could have been either the New York Medical College for Women, which opened its doors in 1870 and closed in 1918, or it could have been the Women's Medical College of New York Infirmary. For background, see Shorter, Edward: *A History of Women's Bodies*; New York 1982 and Brooke, Elisabeth: *Medicine Women. A Pictorial History of Women Healers*, Wheaton/Illinois 1997.

53 See her memoir focused on the relationship with Lassalle: *Meine Beziehungen zu Ferdinand Lassalle*, Breslau 1879, and two novels: *Gräfin Vera*, München 1882, and *The Evil That Women Do*, New York 1890.

54 Racowitza, *Autobiography*, p. 363.

55 Serge's life is poorly documented. One of the rare mentions of him in the contemporary German press is the article "Amerika, Du hast es besser", in: *Neueste Mittheilungen*. Jg. II, Nummer 72 (Berlin, July 9, 1883).

56 For historical background, see Hoerder, Dirk: *Immigrant Labor Press in North America*, New York 1987, as well as Hoerder, Dirk/Nagler, Jörg (eds.): *Transit: German Migrations in Comparative Perspective 1820–1930*, Cambridge/England 1995.

57 On Lilienthal, see Buhle, Mari Jo: *Women and American Socialism, 1870–1920*, Urbana/Illinois 1981, and Lilienthal's daughter's memoir, Lilienthal, Meta: *Dear Remembered World*, New York 1947.

parents in choosing whom to wed. To be sure, in the eyes of a committed radical activist her privileges could rankle. When Emma Goldman met Helene and Serge, she was impressed with Serge, but declared that “the haughty rigidity of his wife I found disgusting, [because] she remained very aristocratic.”⁵⁸ It is altogether notable that Emma Goldman met Serge when they both belonged to a small political circle called “Znamya”, which also included prominent Jewish radicals such as Abraham Cahan, Hillel Solotaroff and David Edelstadt.⁵⁹

Among Helene’s closest women friends in New York City and Hoboken were Helena Petrowna Blavatsky and Otilie Assing. Blavatsky was then in her forties. Born to privilege in Russia, she had travelled almost continuously as an adult and designated her role in life to be a “missionary” for ancient knowledge. She had many followers for her theosophical movement in New York, where she lived briefly for six years during the 1870s.⁶⁰ Helene and Serge became quite involved in the theosophy movement, which incorporated Indian mysticism, feminism, and spiritualism. Indeed Blavatsky proclaimed “female virtue an agent of God’s will on earth”.⁶¹ Helene admired Blavatsky’s “contempt for and rebellion against all social conventions”, as well as her “warm heart and open hand for someone in poverty or rags, hungry and needing comfort”.⁶² By 1897 Blavatsky and her friend, the prominent lawyer Henry Steel Olcott, departed New York City for India, where they both became Buddhists. Wherever they wandered, for the rest of their lives Helene and Serge remained committed to theosophy.

Another woman whom Helene embraced was Otilie Assing, who was then 68, and had been living in the United States for a quarter of a century. Their

58 This encounter must have taken place in 1889 or 1890, since those would be the only years that all three of them lived in New York City. This translation is mine, as cited in Hirner, *Die Todesparzschönheit*, p. 241, note 36. Hirner was citing the biographical sketch by Hippolyte Havel, which forms the Introduction to Goldman, *Emma: Anarchism and Other Essays*, New York 1969.

59 This group seems to be rather obscure in the contemporary scholarship. It is noted in Havel’s Introduction to Goldman, *Anarchism*. For background, see Michels, *Tony: A Fire in Their Hearts. Yiddish Socialists in New York*, Cambridge/Massachusetts 2005; Avrich, *Paul: Anarchist Portraits*, Princeton 1988, Chapter Thirteen on “Jewish Anarchism in the United States” and Goyens, *Tom: Beer and Revolution. The German Anarchist Movement in New York City 1880–1914*, Urbana/Illinois 2007.

60 A volume published by press of the theosophist movement provides more detail: see Gomes, Michael: *The Dawning of the Theosophical Movement*, Wheaton/Illinois 1987.

61 See Buhle, *Women and American Socialism*, p. 78, and Meade, Marion: *Madame Blavatsky. The Woman Behind the Myth*, New York 1980. Helene’s memoir about her involvement in the movement, published under the name Helene von Schewitsch, was entitled *Wie ich mein Selbst fand. Äußere und innere Erlebnisse einer Okkultistin*, Leipzig 1911.

62 Racowitza, *Autobiography*, p. 349.

mutual affinity made perfect sense. Both were German-speaking intellectual women, both had spent earlier years immersed in the Jewish-noble ambience of the Berlin salon circles, both sympathized with radical causes, and both were alienated from their families. Otilie and her sister Ludmilla were born to a mixed Jewish-Catholic couple, David Assur, a converted Jewish physician, and his wife Rosa, an author, the sister of the diplomat and writer Karl August Varnhagen von Ense. Karl's wife Rahel Levin, a convert as well, was the most prominent salonière of the late eighteen and early nineteenth century decades in Berlin, and had died back in 1833. In 1842, after David and Rosa Assur both died, when Otilie was already 23, she and Ludmilla moved to live with their uncle Varnhagen in Berlin. After painful quarrels with her sister, Otilie moved to New York City in 1852. Ludmilla remained in Berlin, eventually became Varnhagen's literary executor and went on to publish editions of her uncle's diaries and letters, which led to considerable scandal in their circles.⁶³

Shortly after she arrived in New York, Otilie had become enchanted with Frederick Douglass, the most eminent Afro-American intellect and political leader of his era. Just how intimate their relationship was, and precisely when, has attracted attention from scholars but is still not entirely known. When Helene and Otilie first met, Otilie was living in Hoboken New Jersey, home to a lively community of radical intellectuals. Over the years she had courageously supported herself on a shoestring, working from time to time as a seamstress, a journalist for German and American newspapers, as a tutor and translator.⁶⁴ By the time that Otilie and Helene met in 1879, Otilie's life had become quite difficult. Her sister Ludmilla had moved to Florence after Varnhagen's death, and she and Otilie continued to disagree about money matters and about their famous uncle's literary legacy. Varnhagen was a collector of friends, letters, memoirs, and all manner of memorabilia, and his friends were the best and the brightest of the era from the French Revolution to the years just after the 1848 revolution.⁶⁵ By 1884, Otilie

⁶³ Just why the published exchange of letters between Alexander von Humboldt and Karl August Varnhagen von Ense created such a sensation when she edited a volume of the letters which appeared two years after Varnhagen's death remains unclear. See Assing, Ludmilla (Hrsg.): *Briefe von Alexander von Humboldt an Karl August Varnhagen von Ense*, Berlin 1860. An English translation appeared in London in 1860 as well. For background on Ludmilla and Otilie's mother, see Gatter, Nikolaus: „Was doch der Assing und der August für vortreffliche Frauen haben!“ Heines Freundin Rosa Maria, in: Hundt, Irina (Hrsg.): *Vom Salon zur Barrikade. Frauen der Heinezeit*, Stuttgart/Weimar 2002, pp. 91–110.

⁶⁴ See Diedrich, Maria: *Love Across Color Lines. Otilie Assing and Frederick Douglass*, New York 1999, pp. 351–354, and in Helene's memoirs, Racowitza, *Autobiography*, pp. 368–371.

⁶⁵ See Hertz, Deborah: *The Varnhagen Collection* is in Krakow, in: *American Archivist* 44 (1981), pp. 223–228.

returned to Europe to finalize matters with Ludmilla. While abroad, she read in a newspaper that Douglass, whose wife had recently died, married another woman. For a quarter of a century, since she had first fallen in love with him, she had imagined that they would marry if he would be widowed. She became aware that she was suffering from breast cancer. In August of 1884, Otilie took her life by poison, while sitting on a park bench in Paris.⁶⁶

Serge and Helene were highly motivated to earn a suitable income in these years, because Serge's access to his family fortune was temporarily blocked during their American years. In 1881, radicals in St. Petersburg succeeded in assassinating Czar Alexander II. It was at this dramatic juncture that Serge received the "hard blow" that Czar Alexander, before his death, had impounded his "possessions and fortune" because Serge had left Russia in 1877 running from a feared arrest. Serge and his family were informed that "he could not expect another rouble from home". In the coming years Serge's eldest brother, who was Governor of the Baltic province of Livland, was named the guardian of his family trust.⁶⁷ And his brother then restored Serge's access to his fortune, so that by 1890, Helene and Serge were again able to finance their taste for lovely clothes and maids and hotels in fashionable spots, and they bid goodbye to their friends in New York.

Later, when she wrote her memoir, she recorded her mixed feelings when they left. For her own part, she was delighted, because she admitted that "I had never felt myself at home in America". Serge, alas, would "have to quit the field of his successful political activity to return to a country where he could find everything – except, indeed, political freedom. But as we already had suffered too much under the nightmare of pecuniary difficulties", she was prepared to leave. In her words, the American era had been good to her, for "I went over there as a woman, hungering for life, restlessly seeking, never knowing equipoise of soul, always hoping to find in the next day, or even in the next experience, that which everybody can find within himself alone. It was only in America that I went through the great school of practical life."⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Frederick Douglass married Jane Pitts on January 24, 1884. In addition to the Maria Diedrich 1999 book, see also Lohmann, Christopher: *Radical Passion. Otilie Assing's Reports from America and Letters to Frederick Douglas*, New York 2000, and the M. A. Thesis by Behmer, Britta: *Von deutscher Kulturkritik zum Abolitionismus*, München 1996.

⁶⁷ Livland was a territory on the eastern shore of the Baltic Sea possessed by Russia from 1795 to 1918. At that time Livland was divided between the new states of Estonia and Latvia. On Serge's brother, see mention of his appointment to the post of Governor in the *Baltische Monatschrift* 30 (1883), p. 94.

⁶⁸ Racowitza, *Autobiography*, p. 388.

Upon their return to Europe, Helene and Serge seemed to live a charmed life of ease, travel, and sociability. They kept a pied-à-terre apartment in Munich, went south for the winters, and spent their summers in Switzerland. Serge published articles, novels, and wrote plays, often using a pseudonym. Although her health was in decline after a serious illness when she first arrived in Europe, Helene too continued to publish and in her memoir she recounts a sense of spiritual peace and social joys. We learn from the recollections of one of her acquaintances during her New York City years that their situation toward the end was troubled by various problems. A friend from there who kept up on news of the couple claimed that both of them actually committed suicide, because of “poverty, self-disgust, and boredom”. According to him, a few days before Serge took his own life, Helene begged their friends not to loan him any money, “because he spends it all on the girls”.⁶⁹ Just how it was that they had departed New York City in 1890 flush with money and 21 years later had nothing cannot be explored here. Several days after Serge died, on the 4th of October 1911, Helene took her own life. We have now told her life from beginning to end, and have explored how it was that this lucky woman, born to privilege, a talented actress and writer, beloved by notable intellectuals, apparently surrounded by fascinating friends, and passionate about social movements, died of her own hand at the age 66.

In Conclusion

Because of our fascination with the prominent, and because of the records they left behind, historians can use the lives of prominent families to explore patterns of assimilation across time. We must always be mindful of how atypical some of these prominent families were. Helene von Racowitza’s origins and her life journey spanned a significant century, beginning with her great-grandfather Saul Ascher and ending with her suicide in 1911. In the three generations of Ascher’s and his descendants, the meaning of emancipation shifted dramatically. For Ascher and his descendants emancipation referred to a vision for a new Jewish future. But on the eve of World War One, when Helene took her life, the term emancipation summed up the strands of an eclectic personal journey filled with rebellion, indulgence, wealth, wandering, and left politics.

⁶⁹ See Huneker, James Gibbons: *Steeplejack*, Vol. 2, New York 1920, p. 30. Huneker was a music critic, and met Helene and Serge in a boarding house in New York City. He knew of Helene from his previous reading of a fictionalized account of Helene and Ferdinand Lassalle’s duel episode in the novel by Meredith, George: *The Tragic Comedians*, London 1880. The novel was reprinted many times and remains in print in English today.

The progression of the three generations of Minna Wolff, Franziska von Dönniges and Helene von Racowitza fit well into the dominant pattern of conversion in the previous century, at least in Berlin. In the 1820s there was a distinct decline in the proportion of converts who were women, and a parallel decline in the proportion who were born to wealth. As time went on a poorer male in his twenties became the more typical convert in Berlin.⁷⁰ Grandmother Minna's daughter and her grand-daughter both fit the older pattern. In their family history, over three generations, each generation of women moved further from Judaism. We still know too little about whether this was a deliberate family strategy or more a random sequence of individual decisions. More research examining ritual practices, family bonds, and socializing among intermarried couples across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries would be fascinating. Helene von Racowitza's family story suggests that the affinity between nobles and Jews continued long past the era of the old regime salons, and took new forms as we move forward in time.

The grandmother Minna, Saul's daughter, remained Jewish, married and remained married to a Jewish husband. Her social circle in Berlin seems to have resembled the salon circles of the Rahel Levin Varnhagen generation. Minna's friends were either Jewish by descent or Christians, often noble Christians, who had married Jewish converts. It is notable that Ferdinand Lassalle belonged to Grandmother Minna's circle and in this way Helene's grandmother enabled their doomed 1864 love affair. For Minna's daughter Franziska, the necessity to become a Protestant in order to marry von Dönniges was totally obvious. Wilhelm's position in Munich's court society was the perfect platform for her salon style of entertaining.

When we paused Helene's history at the crucial landmark moment of the summer of 1864, the intricate inner workings of the process of radical assimilation became more visible. As a husband for Helene, Ferdinand was unacceptable, although he had changed the spelling of his last name, wore elegant expensive clothing, flourished in elegant and well-heeled circles, drank fine wine and hosted with panache. But! Because he remained openly Jewish and was very well-known, in such a marriage Helene's Jewish descent would predictably become more visible. Lassalle did not realize or did not accept that the von Dönniges family found a marriage with him would utterly mark them with the stain they were laboring to remove. Franziska and Wilhelm's rejection of Lassalle reveals the fragility of their aristocratic status. On the other hand, Helene's attraction to Ferdinand shows that she was willing to marry a socialist who was publicly Jewish. Amidst all of the other subterranean currents fueling her passion for Fer-

⁷⁰ See Hertz, *Wie Juden*, p. 294, Schaubild 3.

dinand, her choice of this man was clearly a rebellion against her status-obsessed parents.⁷¹

I conclude with a contrast between Saul Ascher's project of a religiously emancipated society, and his great-granddaughter's project of individual emancipation from social and sexual norms. Ascher's emancipation required a vast re-arrangement of an entire society, and was only realized very gradually and partially between his death in 1822 and Helene's death in 1911. We can well doubt that great-grandfather Saul would have looked kindly on her indifference to Jewish emancipation. Just why it was that her great grandfather's values found no place in either her grandmother's, her mother's, or her own life is a burning question facing historians of nineteenth-century German Jewry.

⁷¹ I am grateful to my colleague Professor Amelia Glaser of the University of California at San Diego for suggesting this point when her seminar "Socialisms in Context" read an earlier version of this essay in February 2013.