

Vera Lachmann (1904-1985)

The fateful year of 1939: Vera Lachmann, who as a Jew is persecuted by the Nazis has to leave Germany in order to save her life. In her luggage: the language. Let us rediscover a lyric poet, among whose favourite poems are the songs of Sappho.

Vera Lachmann is born on 23 June 1904 in Berlin and grows up in a prosperous Jewish family. Her mother Caroline comes from Prague. Her father is the respected architect Louis Lachmann; he dies, when she is five years old. In the 20ies the young woman studies German and ancient languages in Basel and Berlin. In 1931 she receives her doctor's degree about the islandic saga and in February 1933 she is able to pass the state exam for graduate teachership. But the Nazis' takeover foils the post-doctoral lecturing qualification and hereby a university career as well as the possibility to work as a school teacher. She is also unable to publish her literary texts and a drama written by her which was already planned to be performed is taken off. Suddenly she is a woman without a future.

In the following years she devotes herself to a small private school which Vera Lachmann founds in April 1933 in the district of Berlin-Grünwald, together with her former teacher and motherly friend Helene Herrmann, who once introduced her to the Greek world of thought and the German classics. Now they teach 65 Jewish students - boys and girls - together, who are more and more driven out of the public schools. 'She had a lot of charm and humour', Lachmann's niece Beate Planskoy, who also visited this school remembers. 'But when she wanted to achieve something she could head for her goal as inconsiderate as a locomotive, and with this energy she has often achieved the almost impossible.'

At the end of 1938 the school is closed down by the Nazis. Afterwards Vera Lachmann helps to take Jewish orphans to safe countries. The hunt for entry and exit visas, ship passages and other required papers becomes a race against time. The more dramatic the situation becomes for the refugees, the more restrictive most countries handle their

policy of giving asylum. It is only on 17 November 1939 that the 35-year-old leaves Germany herself, which not many others manage after the beginning of World War II.

When talking to Gabriele Kreis, author of the book *Women in Exile*, Vera Lachmann relates in 1980: "Luckily I had a friend, who managed to get a visa for me, when the quota had long been exhausted, and so I came to the USA via Sweden in 1939 with the 'Gripsholm' from Göteborg. Suddenly there I was on my own, and that even had its *good* sides. For me exile was a reincarnation. There was nothing of my former life which burdened me. The only thing which counted was what one knew... So I went through this until I finally ended up in my own subject again.'

What Vera Lachmann describes here in a succinct and laconic manner was a long and arduous path. After her arrival in the USA, being without any means and without any knowledge of the English language she works as a cleaning woman and secretary. Although she has been teaching German, Greek and Latin in various colleges and universities and teaches classical philology as a member of the faculty at Brooklyn College it is only in 1972 - at the age of 68 years - that she receives a professorship in her subject at the university of New York.

Apart from having to earn a living her literary work - her 'actual life' - comes to the fore. Her poems are published in various journals for German language, mainly in the New York immigrants paper *Aufbau*. The Amsterdam publishing house Castrum Peregrini finally publishes three volumes of poetry with American translation (*Golden tanzt das Licht im Glas*, 1969; *Namen werden Inseln*, 1975; *Halmdiamanten*, 1982). All of these Vera Lachmann has dedicated to her partner Tui St. George Tucker, a composer and recorder virtuoso, who set some of the poems to music. Born in California in 1924, she was named by her mother, who came from New Zealand, after a bird there.

The two women met in 1950 and lived together in Greenwich Village until the death of Vera Lachmann on 18 January 1985. For a long time Grete Sultan, a pianist who had emigrated from Germany was the third in the trio. When I wanted to call on Tui St. George Tucker in 1987 when staying in New York in order to collect more information

about their life together I looked for her nameplate in vain. Some months ago I heard from Moritz von Bredow, who is writing a biography on Grete Sultan, that Tui moved to Catawba/Blowing Rock after Vera's death - the very place where for many years Vera Lachmann held summer camps for boys between 5 and 12. She was supported by Grete Sultan and her partner, who looked after the musical education of the boys. On 21 April Tui St. George Tucker, whose greatest piece of work, a requiem, was only finished the year before, dies in Catawba in the mountains of North Carolina.

It was the poems on which the experience of exile had left its mark, which made me curious for this woman. Her landscape and nature verses are often a cause for self-reflexion (Selbstbetrachtung) and an attempt to heal the wounds which result from the persecution and loss of people she loved. Numerous poems which have been dedicated to people show the close friendships with women: in many poems Vera Lachmann has set a literary monument for women, for example for the German-American Erika Weigand, with whom she had a love-relationship. Erika Weigand was born in 1917 and had lived in Germany from 1933 until 1937; it was her, who organized the life-saving security (Bürgschaft) and a special teaching place, which helped the immigrant to get a visa for the USA. In 1946 she jumped to her death from a high-rise.

Erika's eyes

Today remembrance of your eyes, Erika,
makes my heart beat fast.

They sometimes shone, and were sometimes grey,
and often clairvoyant.

With childlike surprise they took notice of what was
and yet looked age-old,
their blueness encircling abyss-dark moons,
drunken with forms.

They were twin riddles large in reverence,

full in answer to love,
often deeply terrified, ice-green and distant,
finally forever sheltered in the lids.

(from: *Namen werden Inseln*)

The history of the culture and the ideas of the antiquity are a repeated motif in the poems of Vera Lachmann. The mythology of ancient Greece had the power to ease the trauma of the flight. Among her favourite poems were the songs of Sappho for her daughter. With the following poem Vera Lachmann shows her reference to the Greek poet.

Lesbos

Not the adamantine horn
of your very sublime mountain,
nor the opal twilight waters
of the bay you embrace,
not even the hundredfold roundness
on slopes buttressed by walls
of your silver-green olive wealth
makes you, island, so desired,
as does the hide-and-seek play
of your Undaunted One.
She quivers there awhile
in the tiny crown of a cyclamen
between broken rock,
yet before being picked
she flees into blast of mountain wind,
throws herself in sorrow
into after-glow of sea sand,

beats the ether
with slender crane wings
toward a pale-organe
large moon.

(from: *Golden tanzt das Licht im Glas*)

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Spencer Holst (Translation of the poems)

Proposal for quotation

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URL:<<http://www.lesbengeschichte.de>>