

A tangled web

Stuart Hood, Rosa Meyer-Leviné and Renée Goddard

In his novel *A Storm from Paradise*, published in 1985, Stuart Hood retells a love story that took place in Scotland at the beginning of the 20th century. John Scott, a teacher in a small Scottish hamlet, falls in love with an East European socialist refugee, Elizabeth de Pass, who has been caught up in this provincial place by somewhat obscure circumstances.

Elizabeth offers John a fascinating glimpse of an alternative culture and life, but he cannot overcome the restraints of his upbringing, turns down the chance of leaving with his lover and settles into a more conventional career and marriage.

Stuart Hood evokes in this book a Scotland he himself encountered as a child, but it is also, as are all of Hood's books, a novel of ideas. In many parts the male figure is modelled on his father, chiselled and shaped into a fictional character. Indeed, there are other experiences from Hood's own life which are woven into the story of this Scottish schoolteacher. When I met Hood in autumn 2001, he mentioned that the figure of the East European exile was, in part, inspired by Rosa Meyer-Leviné whom he knew in London in the nineteen-sixties. She was "a Polish-Russian intellectual, a kind of left-wing Jewish intellectual. She lived in London, and she used to phone me and asked if I wanted to talk. She told me stories, about the German political situation, about Trotsky and Bucharin in Vienna, extraordinary stories, some maybe true some maybe not. She hated Trotsky. He saw her in Vienna in a new skirt. I think she was at that time the girlfriend of a rich Austrian industrialist. Trotsky made a snipping remark about shopping in a compartment store, and she never forgave him."¹



Rosa Meyer-Leviné (1890–1979) was heavily involved in the history of German (and international) communism in the short 20th century. She was married to two eminent leaders of the communist movement, both of whom she survived to tell their, and her, story. Firstly, with Eugen Leviné, leader of the short-lived Munich Soviet Republic, who was executed by the state authorities in 1919, and secondly with Ernst Meyer, twice leader of the German communist party. In 1934 she arrived as a refugee in England and lived there till her death in 1979.

1 Stefan Howald: Interview with Stuart Hood in Brighton, 8/8/2001.

Towards the end of Hood's book, after John Scott has rejected to travel abroad with Elizabeth, the narrator sketches as an alternative Elizabeth's life in the twenties and thirties in Germany and her political activities there. Now he calls her by her "real" name: Elizavyeta Mueller-Potapova. This name has an echo of Rosa Meyer-Leviné, although it is still somewhat fictionalised. This is true for the following passage as well. Here the narrator quotes and comments on a report purported to be from the Foreign Office: "She was the wife of Otto Mueller (deceased) and she had a daughter, Sonya, aged 11. Her address was given as 148 Abbey Road, West Hampstead. She was not politically active. What the report did not state – presumably because she did not tell them – was that the deceased husband, Otto Mueller, had been a member of the USPD, the left-wing Communist Party; that he'd been arrested and imprisoned on the night of the Reichstag Fire; that he had been interned in Dachau and summarily shot there in 1936."²

Furthermore the narrator recounts, as another coda, Elizavyeta's later life during the fifties and sixties in London: "her interest in politics awoke once more so that in the fifties and sixties she drew to her flat young people on the left: a radical publisher, the editor of a Marxist journal, members of various Trotskyist group [...] There was always in her comments on the present a clear dialectic process at work, a sharpness and a practicality that deflated the arguments of revolutionary utopians and cut through the verbiage of fashionable theory."³ This seems to be a fairly apt description of Rosa Meyer-Leviné during her time in London. There were several eminent people of the left who were acquainted with her, English and Germans, mostly members of the undogmatic left, some of them leaning towards Trotskyism – in spite of Meyer-Leviné's alleged hatred of Trotsky the man. These acquaintances included, for instance, Eric Hobsbawm, Erich Fried and Rudi Dutschke.

In old age, Rosa Meyer-Leviné published two books about her political involvement in Germany, one each about her two husbands. The men are the focus of these books, but in her individual writing and style her own personality shines through. Rosa Broido was born on the 18th of May 1890 as the twelfth child of a Jewish rabbi in former Russian Poland. After the early death of her father she travelled as a young adult to Vienna and from there to the provincial town of Heidelberg in Germany, working as a governess and as a private tutor. In 1910 she got to know Eugen Leviné and they married in 1915 in Berlin.

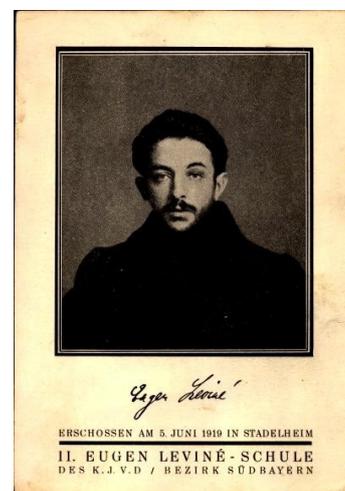
Eugen Leviné (1883–1919), was a founding member of the revolutionary "Spartakusbund" and, subsequently, the German communist party (Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands, KPD). In March

2 Stuart Hood: *A Storm from Paradise*, Manchester 1985, p. 182.

3 Hood: *A Storm from Paradise*, p. Xxx.

1919 he was sent by the party to Munich, and in April 1919 he took over the reins of the second Bavarian Soviet Republic there. After the Republic was crushed by military forces he was captured, sentenced to death and executed on the 4th of June 1919.

Rosa Meyer-Leviné's book about him was published in German in 1972 and in English in 1973, with an introduction by Eric Hobsbawm. It is written in awe of her late husband, in revolutionary fervour and as a protest against his execution in an act of "state terror". Nevertheless she characterises the ambivalence of the communist movement. In April 1919, Eugen Leviné and the KPD thought it too early to proclaim a Soviet Republic in Munich. But once the worker's council had been established, Leviné lent his support to it – as Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht had done in January 1919 to the Berlin Soviet Republic, which had resulted in both being murdered by right-wing militia. Once an initial counter-revolutionary movement against the first Soviet Republic in Munich had been defeated, Leviné and the KPD with its more rigid discipline took over the command in the Second Soviet Republic. However, former leading proponents with a more anarchist leaning like Gustav Landauer and Erich Mühsam were sidelined. Modern historiography characterises this mostly as a communist takeover, but Rosa Meyer-Leviné describes it as a sort of sacrifice by Leviné. He knew from the beginning, she suggests, that the Soviet Republic in Munich was doomed. However, once it had started, someone had to take the burden of defending it until the bitter end.



This position has been shared by Eric Hobsbawm in his introduction:

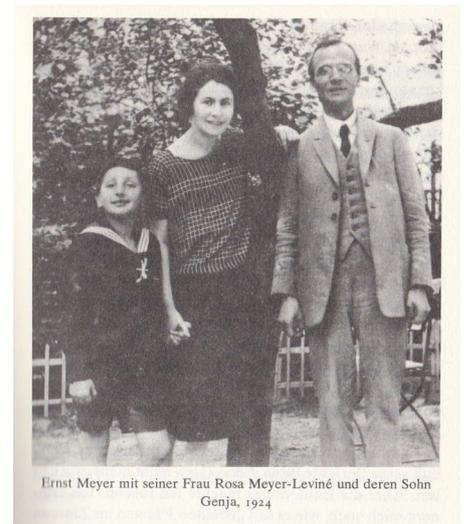
"Leviné, a lucid, sceptical, efficient professional of revolution among noble amateurs living out the dream of liberation and confused militants, knew that it was lost, but also that it had to fight. Though not lacking in at least passive support among the Munich workers, the Soviet Republic horrified the conservative and Catholic peasantry and the notably reactionary middle class of Bavaria to the point where they welcomed the joint invasion of government troops and Free Corps from all over Germany (including a Bavarian Free Corps)."⁴

In spite of – or because of – her harrowing experience of being obliged to watch the death of her husband by firing squad, she kept her left-wing convictions and her membership in the KPD. In 1922 she married Ernst Meyer (1887–1930) and so became a member of "the inner circle" (the title of her second book) of the KPD on a national level. Meyer was leader of the party in 1922 and again in 1927/28, as a proponent of a moderate, middle faction in the party, trying to steer an

⁴ Eric Hobsbawm: Introduction. In Rosa Meyer-Leviné: Levine. The Life of a Revolutionary, London 1973.

independent course between “left-wing radicals” and “reformists”. Intertwined were these struggles between factions with the global communist movement. The KPD was the most potent and important communist party outside the Soviet Union – in 1928 it had 130’000 members and won 3.2 million votes in the parliamentary elections, rising in November 1932 to 330’00 members and 6 million votes, i.e. 16,9 percent of all votes nationwide. As a consequence the party was deeply involved in the political machinations of the Komintern, which was the organisation of international communism with its headquarters in Moscow. Meyer and Meyer-Leviné travelled several times to the Soviet Union; Meyer-Leviné spoke Russian and acted as an interpreter – and, after the early death of her second husband from tuberculosis, she lived for a while in Moscow, working as a publicist for the government. However, at the beginning of 1933 she found the stifling atmosphere in the Soviet Union unbearable and travelled back to Germany, only to flee again after Hitler took power. She escaped via Prague and France to London where she arrived in October 1934 and stayed there until her death.

Reading her second book which was published in English in 1977 and in German in 1979 is a somewhat harrowing experience. There is a thread through it: The KPD was in its “inner circle” mostly occupied with factional struggles. Left-wing, moderate and reformist factions fought one another tooth and nail. There was rarely a leading member who hadn’t, at one time or another, been ostracized or even expunged. Supposedly this happened on the basis of different political strategies, especially between an “offensive, revolutionary tactics” and the policy of a “united front of all workers” (Einheitsfront). Was Germany after the First World War in a revolutionary situation and ripe for a violent uprising to establish the dictatorship of the proletariat, or was it necessary to work together with the majority of Social Democrats in trade unions and in the worker’s movement in general? Was parliamentary politics a necessary and promising way for a revolutionary struggle or just a diversion and distraction? Should the communists tolerate coalition governments of Social Democrats with centrist parties in some of the German federal states? Rosa Meyer-Leviné tries to substantiate that these diverging positions mattered to the “ordinary” party members and that they were discussed on all levels of the communist party. However, it was primarily the party hierarchy and leaders who were involved in these often arcane debates, and the decisions were not always the result of political reasoning. Frequently changing positions in KPD and



Komintern, as well as changing coalitions in the party itself, served mostly to secure their own influence, position and power.

On the whole Rosa Meyer-Leviné criticises the communist party, of which she had been an unremitting member for two decades, in her book unrelentingly. For some periods, she writes, lies and treachery were the most common means. All the main policies between 1921 and 1933 were failures and disasters, from the uprising in March 1921 in the Ruhr to the candidacy of Ernst Thälmann for the German presidency in 1928 to the absurd and catastrophic thesis of “Sozialfaschismus” - neither the Nazis nor the right-leaning bourgeoisie were declared the main enemies of the working class, but instead the Social Democratic Party was regarded as such because its nature was considered to be fascistic. Too often, she writes, some actions were merely the consequence of reckless provocations without any consideration for the livelihoods, indeed the lives of the common party members.

She also sketches unsparing portraits of some of the leading members of the KPD like Ruth Fischer, Gerhart Eisler, Ernst Thälmann, Heinz Neumann, and even of the near-mythical “red press baron” Willi Münzenberg. True, Rosa Meyer-Leviné is somewhat biased because she thinks that her late husband Ernst Meyer was the only communist politician with integrity and a clear political understanding of the actual situation. At the same time, she criticises some of his views as well as her own calling them naive or blind.

Nevertheless, having become deeply anti-Stalinist, she maintained her fundamental left-wing convictions in London. As an eyewitness to the struggles of the period in-between the two World Wars she must have been a fascinating presence, as some testimonials show. Eric Hobsbawm wrote, as mentioned, in 1973 an introduction to her book about Eugen Leviné. German historian Hermann Weber who became one of the leading scholars on German communism and the GDR, got to know her in the sixties as well. He helped her prepare her memoirs about the KPD, arranged the German translation which was published in 1979 some months before her death, and used her private archive for studies about her second husband Ernst Meyer. She also met regularly with people like Jewish socialist Akiva Orr.⁵

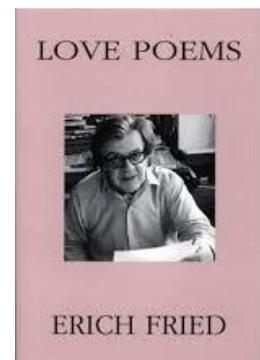
She was also in very close contact with Austrian writer Erich Fried (1921–1988), who’s house was an important hub of German-speaking exiles and English left-wing intellectuals. There she got to know the former leader of the German student’s movement Rudi Dutschke who planned to write a

5 See Moshé Machover: In memoriam Akiva “Aki” Orr. *International Socialist Review*, Issue 88, 2013.

biography of her.⁶ Later, Fried helped establishing contacts with officials in the Federal Republic of Germany to try to rehabilitate her first husband Eugen Leviné.

In his novel, Stuart Hood was interested in two aspects of her personality, both as a foil to his male hero John Scott. Firstly there was, obviously, her political involvement – he referred to it indirectly in frequent talks between Elizabeth and John, and more directly in the coda in which he sketches Elizabeth’s later life. Secondly he presents in her figure a more liberated sexual behaviour which Rosa Meyer-Leviné hints at in the earlier parts of her first book concerning her life in Vienna and Heidelberg.

Hood himself was directly involved in this historical context. He got to know Erich Fried shortly after the second World War when both men worked at the BBC and even lived for some time in Fried’s house.⁷ He knew and seems to have had a relationship with Catherine Boswell (1936–2015) who in 1965 became Fried’s third wife.⁸ In the early sixties Boswell worked as a picture researcher⁹ whereas Hood started working as a freelance film director. Aspects of this relationship might be the basis for the relationship between the two main characters in *The Book of Judith*, namely TV-director Fergus McAlpine and researcher Judith Gordon. In the circle around Fried, Hood got to know Renée Goddard-Wiechelt-Scholem (born 1923), who was to become his third wife, just as he was her third husband. Goddard was the daughter of Emmy and Werner Scholem, but grew up with her grandmother in Hannover under the name of Renate Wiechelt. Werner Scholem (1895–1940) himself was for some time one of the leading figures of the KPD and a member of the national parliament in Berlin. He was mostly a radical left winger, in contrast to Ernst Meyer, the late husband of Rosa Meyer-Leviné. In 1926 he was purged from the party, tried unsuccessfully to organise a new radical group, and subsequently worked as a barrister. In 1933, after the Reichstag Fire, he was arrested as a supposed “spy”, acquitted in 1935, arrested again on trumped up charges and eventually murdered in 1940 in the German concentration camp at Buchenwald. His daughter Renate Wiechelt-Scholem, in the meantime, had left Germany in August 1934 as an 11-year-old bound for London, where she was reconciled with her mother Emmy, who had fled Germany a year earlier.



6 See Richard Stourac: Memories, thoughts and reflections. Episode 16 [<https://stourac.wordpress.com/>, pdf, p. 12].

7 See Robert Lumley: A dreamer in broad daylight: Stuart Hood. In: David Hutchison / David Johnson (ed.): Stuart Hood, Twentieth-century Partisan. Cambridge 2020, p. 159f. Hood reaffirmed and strengthened his relationship with Erich Fried in the late eighties, when he started to translate Fried’s poems into English.

8 See Stourac: Episode 13 [<https://stourac.wordpress.com/>, pdf, p. 3f.].

9 See Jonathan Romney: Obituary Catherine Fried, Guardian, 3/3/2015.

Renée Goddard, as she called herself after her first marriage, is a fascinating person in her own right. In London she lived most of the time with a British-Jewish family. In 1940/41 she was interned as an “enemy alien” at Holloway Womens’ Prison and, subsequently, on the Isle of Man for eighteen months. Later on, she worked as a nippy at a Lyons Corner House in London and began acting in theatre groups associated with the Free German movement.



“She was a very attractive, very active girl. Wherever she was, something happened”¹⁰, German theatre director Peter Zadek wrote in his autobiography, because he had fallen in love with her as a twenty-year old in London and lived with her for almost two years. “We were a passionate pair of lovers, all the time friends of Renée, who seemed to know the whole world, showed up. English friends and exiles. Our flat was filled with people from morning to evening. I was confused and couldn’t work, but I got along with it. It was exciting, a sort of permanent hysteria.”¹¹ Renée Goddard had a fairly successful career as an actress, touring with Laurence

Oliver and Vivien Leigh in the USA and working in several

repertoire theatres in London and throughout England. Somewhat disenchanted with life on the road, she drifted into stage management and began reading scripts for Oscar Lewenstein (1917–1997), firstly at the Royal Court theatre and then with his film companies. In this capacity she introduced *Waiting for Godot* onto an English stage and visited Bertolt Brecht in 1955 in East Berlin to bring Brecht’s Berliner Ensemble to London.

In 1964 she joined Associated Television (ATV), the London and Midlands franchise of the ITV-network, and advanced to head of the script department.¹² At this time, she became involved with Stuart Hood and married him in 1965. The marriage lasted about ten years. Never one to mince her words, she called him once “a stupid person”¹³, obviously not doubting his intellectual capacity but stressing that he got himself in situations which demanded too much of him or of people around him – a constellation not unfamiliar in Hood’s books, for instance in *The Book of Judith*. In an aside she detected in the relationship between Fried and Hood a homoerotic component.

But coming back to the start of this wide-ranging and complicated web of relationships: Rosa Meyer-Leviné and Renée Goddard’s mother, Emmy Scholem, acted in Germany politically on

10 Peter Zadek: *My Way. Eine Autobiographie 1926–1969*. Köln 1998, p. 146.

11 Zadek, p. 167.

12 See Kate Harris: Interview with Renée Goddard and Hanno Fry, 26/10/2005. British Library: Theatre Archive Project. See also Mirjam Zadoff: *Der rote Hiob. Das Leben des Werner Scholem*. München 2014, p. 295–298.

13 Stefan Howald: Interview with Renée Goddard in Nutley, 8/7/2009.

different sides of the communist schism. In London, however, the two widows became friends again.¹⁴ Indeed, if one looks at the short semi-fictional history, which Hood bestows upon Elizabetyva in *A Storm from Paradise*, in her “husband” Otto Mueller he amalgamates the political career of Ernst Meyer with the violent death of Werner Scholem.

Meanwhile. Rosa Meyer-Leviné’s books are accepted as somewhat iconoclastic sources for this period of revolutionary upheavals, although her own contribution to it has not been recognised. Indeed her archive in Konstanz has yet to be evaluated. But there is at least Hood’s *A Storm from Paradise* which provides a sort of special remembrance.

Stefan Howald

This is a shortened version of a longer article in German.

¹⁴ See Mirjam Zadoff: *Der rote Hiob. Das Leben des Werner Scholem*. München 2014, p. 237, 299; Ralf Hoffrogge: *Werner Scholem. Eine politische Biographie (1895 – 1940)*. Konstanz/München 2014, p. 383.