

Who is Alexander Grothendieck?

A biography in three parts

Anarchy Mathematics Spirituality

Part 1: Anarchy

by Winfried Scharlau

Translated from the German by Melissa Schneps

Who is Alexander Grothendieck?

Part 1: Anarchy

by Winfried Scharlau

Translated from the German by Melissa Schneps

About this book

Alexander Grothendieck is one of the most important mathematicians of the twentieth century; in particular, he revolutionized the subject of algebraic geometry. His life contains unique drama. Within the project of this biography in three parts, the first volume deals with his parents and describes his origins, youth, education and student years. His father, Alexander Shapiro (1890-1942) was a Russian-Jewish Anarchist who was already involved in revolts against the Tsarist regime by the age of fifteen, was involved in the Russian Revolution during the First World War, and took part in the Spanish Civil War, before losing his life in Auschwitz. He earned his living as a street photographer. Grothendieck's mother, Hanka Grothendieck (1900-1957) broke away from bourgeois life as a young woman and worked temporarily as an actress and as a journalist. Grothendieck himself spent his earliest years with his parents in Berlin, and then lived with a foster family in Hamburg. In France he was interned in various camps, but in 1941 he was able to start attending a high school, the Collège Cevenol in Le Chambon sur Lignon, where he passed his Baccalaureate. In 1945 he studied mathematics in Montpellier, and then continued in Paris and in Nancy, where he began his meteoric ascent.

The author is a mathematician, professor emeritus at the University of Münster. He has been working on Grothendieck's biography for some years. Besides several textbooks and numerous scientific articles he has also published two novels.

Foreword

Every mathematician who is at all knowledgeable about mathematics of the twentieth century is familiar with the name of Alexander Grothendieck. However, it is absolutely certain that most non-mathematicians, including educated people and intellectuals, have never heard this name.

Who, then, is Grothendieck? He is one of the most important and influential mathematicians of the second half of the twentieth century. His field was theoretical mathematics. In a central area of modern mathematics, Algebraic Geometry, he discovered entirely new fundamental principles. He thus created the possibility for unforeseen progress. A whole new generation of mathematicians, some of them better known to the public than Grothendieck himself, have built their work on this basis. Their work (for instance that of Andrew Wiles on the problem of Fermat's Last Theorem) would literally have been "inconceivable" without Grothendieck's preliminary achievements. In terms of scientific impact (not fame), Grothendieck's name can be mentioned along with those of the most distinguished scientists of the twentieth century, physicists such as Bohr or Heisenberg, biologists such as Watson or Lorenz, philosophers such as Wittgenstein or Popper.

It would certainly be subjective and rather meaningless to state that Grothendieck was the most significant mathematician of the twentieth century. But one can assert with certainty that he has influenced the mathematics of the second half of the twentieth century as few if any have done. The most important scientific award in mathematics is the Field's Medal, which is awarded to between two and four mathematicians every four years. Grothendieck received the medal in 1966, and many of the later prize-winners did research based directly on his work, or were strongly influenced by it. Hardly any other mathematician of this period developed a comparable activity.

But that is not all. Even if numbers and facts do not suffice to express and demonstrate it, the genius and personality of Grothendieck is both special and unique. One of his oldest friends, Paulo Ribenboim, relates how even as a student in Nancy something "mystical" and mysterious surrounded Grothendieck. And I can remember exactly how, as young students in Bonn, just beginning our studies, we were told with a kind of awe that Grothendieck was coming to a symposium. (People like Milnor, Atiyah or Smale were also mentioned, but they were, so to speak, just normal geniuses.)

The portion of a biographical account of Alexander Grothendieck presented in this book originated in a much more modest project. I had read the autobiographical novel *Eine Frau* by Grothendieck's mother Hanka, and I wanted to shed light on the biographical, historical and literary background of this book. This inevitably and rapidly led me to occupy myself with Grothendieck's life, especially his youth. I quickly realized that the newspaper articles, books and information scattered across the internet contained numerous uncertainties, contradictions, and even errors. My next step was to clear up these inconsistencies as much as possible. I therefore interviewed witnesses from that time, and attempted to find relevant written documents such as letters, photographs and personal records.

Even during a superficial investigation of Grothendieck's story, one encounters other human destinies that are so adventurous and so unique that only life itself could have invented them. Everything that I read and learned increasingly fascinated me, and without my having originally intended it, the many smaller projects I had begun grew into a biographical account of Grothendieck himself, and especially of the people who were close to him.

Any biography about Grothendieck would consist naturally of three parts, each dealing with about one-third of his life. The first part would deal with his childhood and youth, his parents and ancestors, his half-sister and half-brother, his foster parents, and all those who contributed to making it possible for him to become one of the most important mathematicians of all time. In this sense it would be concerned less with him than with his origins and the people who influenced him. The second part would depict the time when he was an active mathematician, a time when with unprecedented energy he fundamentally altered the general picture of large sections of theoretical mathematics. The third part would have to describe his withdrawal from the world of science and the scientific community, his meditation, and there would have to be an attempt to explain this unparalleled and mysterious behaviour. The present book is a contribution to the first part of such a biography.

I was aware from the start that a biography of Grothendieck is problematic, and raising questions which are difficult to answer. For over sixteen years Grothendieck has chosen to live in reclusion, keeping almost no contact with other people. He has completely broken off any relationship with his own family, with children, grandchildren, friends and acquaintances, former colleagues and students. Under these circumstances can it be permitted to collect, assemble and circulate biographical material? Certainly, one may write a little about the importance of a contemporary personality, such as a newspaper article or a short biography for a commemoration. But where does the boundary lie? How far and how deep may one dig?

And what of the biography of his parents? Both died many decades ago. Few people still remember them personally, and the little remaining amount of biographical material is difficult to locate. Grothendieck himself, it seems, deliberately destroyed the correspondence of his parents and many other similar documents, as if he wished to relegate their lives to utter oblivion. Does such a thing as a “spiritual” sleep of death exist? How, and in how much detail can and should one portray their lives?

I am not even close to giving a complete and satisfying answer to these questions, but I have come to some partial conclusions.

As indicated before, all sorts of false or inaccurate information is in circulation concerning Grothendieck’s life, particularly his origins and his youth, but also the years of his withdrawal from mathematics. These range from trivial errors such as dates and places of residence, to serious mistakes. I consider one of my tasks that of clearing up and correcting all of these errors and contradictions.

I have also formed a clear opinion regarding Grothendieck’s parents. The life’s goal of his mother was to become a writer. She hoped at one time for her work to be published. Outside circumstances of her capricious and unhappy life prevented it. However, she left behind her a long autobiographical novel. Personally I consider large parts of it to be of

literary value and furthermore a highly interesting historical document. I consider one of my tasks therefore, at the least, to record that such a work exists, to give an idea of its contents and style, and to state that behind this work lay a life of drama and tragedy.

Grothendieck's father has almost completely disappeared into the obscure depths of history. But what we still know and can discover about him (and what we may perhaps add in imagination) is so unusual and adventurous that it is impossible not to write down and document everything that can still be found. His was a personal destiny as eventful and turbulent as the wildest author's fantasy could imagine. At the same time it mirrored a dramatic part of Europe's history: the revolts against the Tsarist regime in Russia, the Anarchist movement in Russia and Spain, the ousting of eastern European intellectuals, the fate of the Jews of Eastern Europe, intellectual life during the twenties in Berlin and Paris, the collapse of France in the Second World War, concentration and internment camps, and finally Auschwitz and the Holocaust.

Grothendieck's own life is only too similar. The mere fact that he survived the Second World War is anything but obvious. Considering his incomplete and irregular schooling and university education, his ascent over the shortest period of time to become one of the most eminent mathematicians of his generation, already as a mere beginner reaching farther than leading worldwide experts in their own fields, is simply impossible to explain. And his sudden withdrawal from the world of science into freely chosen isolation is without precedent in the entire history of science. His significance as a scientist makes him a figure of "public interest", but first and foremost he is a person who has approached the boundaries of human experience, intellectually and existentially, as well as spiritually and morally, as few have ever done.

The life and the destiny of Alexander Grothendieck belong not only to him but also to society as whole. (That is the destiny of all truly exceptional people.)

I am naturally aware that there are many people (family members, friends, former colleagues and students) who know Grothendieck, as a person and as a scientist, incomparably better than I do. Many of them could write his biography more easily and more aptly than I; in particular, they would be able to portray his personality more clearly from a personal perspective. But perhaps observation and description from a distance has its own advantages, and in any case, this first volume is essentially a depiction of the world in which Grothendieck grew up. Whatever the answer, it is clear that this account is aimed at those who knew Grothendieck only briefly, or only as a mathematician, or not at all. I must ask the others to be lenient with me.

I owe a great number of people thanks for information, help and support. I will add something to this in the afterword. The most important written sources on which this book is based and which are frequently quoted, are Hanka Grothendieck's unpublished autobiographical novel *Eine Frau* (quoted as EF) and Grothendieck's unpublished meditations *Récoltes et Semailles* (ReS), *La Clef des Songes* (CS) and *Notes pour la Clef des Songes* (NCS).

Winfried Scharlau

September 2007

Note on the reprint of 2008

Some printing errors were corrected, and more information about Hilde Wulff and her children's home was added. Fortunately two articles by Sasha-Piotr (= Sasha Tanaroff) were discovered in Anarchist journals from the nineteen-twenties.

December 2007

Note on the second edition 2008

Following a surprising piece of advice from Marianne Enckell, a chapter about the writer Theodor Plievier, a close acquaintance of Sasha Shapiro and Hanka Grothendieck, was added. Other small additions and corrections were also made.

September 2008

Prologue: The Bronze Bust

Paris 1949. *Rue des Fontaines du Temple* is a short, narrow street in the third district of the city, the *Marais*. Here are located the atelier and shop of Jacques and Laila R., makers of fur jackets and coats for women. They survived the horrors of the war in small villages in the countryside (although many of their relatives were deported to Birkenau and Auschwitz). For a few years now they have been living in Paris, the city that was spared destruction. They have opened up their business again. The wounds and scars are invisible.

One day a young man, not much older than twenty, appears in the shop, a stranger. He is poorly dressed, he looks like a peasant, he is a foreigner, and one feels immediately that he will be a foreigner everywhere and always. He could be of Jewish origin, as they are, but his hands and his shoes are those of a peasant from the South, a man from the countryside. In remarkably perfect French (although one notices that he was not born in France) he makes his request, an unusual request, and one cannot help feeling that all his requests will always be unusual ones.

He has heard that R. owns a bronze bust, which the sculptor Aron Brzezinski, probably a relative, made of his father more than twenty-five years ago, here in Paris. He would like to buy this bust.

Jacques R. remembers: Brzezinski was not a relative, but a friend of the family. In 1940, before the Jews of France were deported, he died – of tuberculosis, but more probably of poverty, and most of all, of despair. He lived in a miserable room and his atelier was an empty plumber's workshop. During the war, when he received no commissions and could no longer sell anything, it became impossible for him to pay even the modest rent for this dark, filthy dungeon. He had known better times as a student of Boucher, the renowned professor at the Art Academy. Because of the debt he incurred by not paying his rent for so long, the landlord would not release any of his possessions when upon his death R. appeared to secure his estate. With difficulty he was able to persuade the landlord to let him take two bronze busts, although he was obliged to pay even for them. He could still remember how many artworks and paintings were standing in the corners and against the walls in the plumbing workshop. Whatever became of them all?

Yes, it is true: there are two bronze busts upstairs in the apartment on the fourth floor, and one of them bears an odd inscription "Sasha-Piotr." It could portray the father of the young stranger; the similarity is striking. But how could the stranger have found out that he was the owner of the bust? At the end of Brzezinski's life only solitude was left to him; he was so poor that he could barely have bought stamps for a letter. He had no friends, no one that would remember him now, and the R.'s themselves had been hiding in the countryside. How could the stranger have succeeded in following the trail?

Jacques R. does not respond to the stranger's wishes, but he does admit that he owns two of the sculptor's works, which he would like to keep in memory of the artist. Nevertheless, he will discuss it with his wife. R. is a businessman, and at a glance he can see that the stranger probably doesn't have a franc in his pockets, but he also knows that such clients are often the most reliable. Monsieur R. goes to speak with Madame, who is working in the workshop behind the store, but as he comes back through the door he shakes his head. The stranger says good-bye and leaves, without any discussion of a price. Should he have said that he possesses nothing of his father except an oil painting, painted by a fellow prisoner in the Le Vernet camp, shortly before all Jews in the camp were deported?

Jacques and Laila R. both remember this event, although they never spoke of it again. For decades the bronze bust stood in a closet in their apartment, wrapped in a towel and ignored. Sometimes they ask themselves who the unknown stranger could have been.

1. Novozybkov 1890

The first chapter of this book deals with the biography of Grothendieck's father. One would wish to begin with a clear, straightforward and informative sentence such as: Alexander Shapiro was born on August 6, 1890 in the small Ukrainian town of Novozybkov, descendant of a Jewish family.

However, already at this very first sentence the author must hesitate. From the start, one is assailed by doubt and incertitude. His first name was Alexander, but for his whole life all his friends, acquaintances and relatives called him Sasha (therefore in this book he will always be referred to as Sasha). There is no documentary proof that his family name was Shapiro. That has been passed on by word of mouth, and there is no written evidence to prove it. The only certainty is that in 1921, Sasha lived with forged papers under the name of Tanaroff; a Russian name, not a Jewish one.

Perhaps it is not important to know his exact date of birth, unless one wishes to indulge in astrological speculations, as did his son, who sees a special significance in the fact that August 6th is the day the atomic bomb exploded over Hiroshima.¹ But is it even the August 6th that we know? In Russia at that time the Julian calendar was in use. No one will have made the effort to calculate the date using the Gregorian calendar. In the forged papers mentioned earlier and in other documents based on these, a different date is used. But even here an error has crept in: sometimes we read October 11, 1889, and other times November 10, 1889.² It is said that the name in Sasha's personal documents was altered "as well as could be done." That would imply that one of the last two dates is the correct one.

Novozybkov -- that part is true: Sasha's parents lived there, and he was born there. A Jewish family? Yes, Sasha himself said that he came from a religious, Hassidic family. One of his grandfathers was even a rabbi.³ But "family" -- one can only be puzzled. A family in the shtetl would boast of many children. There would be relatives, uncles, aunts, nieces and nephews. However, not once can one find any reference to siblings or other relatives of Sasha. He seems to have been an only child, and at fourteen he abandoned his parents' house forever. There was no further mention of "family".

What do we know of Sasha's parents? Practically nothing; it can be summarized in a few sentences. In 1930 Sasha had to submit a declaration of his origins to the authorities in Berlin.⁴ In reference to his father the declaration states: "died in 1923" and about his mother: "unidentified in Russia (Marie Tanaroff, born Dimitriewa in Novozybkov)". This may contain some truth. The name Tanaroff was false, but he would have been unable to give a different name for his parents. His father may really have died in 1923. His mother, in any case, lived at least until 1930, as demonstrated by a photograph taken in that year.⁵

It is hard to fathom the face in this photograph: a concentrated, sceptical and searching look, thin lips, perhaps the trace of a smile, an intelligent and disciplined expression. Such a face could not belong to a woman fulfilling her traditional role in the shtetl, and does not indicate a happy life -- one can only guess, but nothing is certain.

Sasha occasionally spoke of his parents:

¹ *NCS (Notes pour la Clef des Songes)*

² Various documents in private possession relating to registration with the police by Tanaroff in Berlin and to his deportation to Auschwitz.

³ Compare P. Cartier, *A mad day's work. From Grothendieck to Connes and Kontsevich*, Bull. Am. Math. Soc. 38. This essay contains useful biographical information, but it also contains some errors, that were later reproduced by others and thus circulated even more widely.

⁴ Compare footnote 2

⁵ In private ownership, as are all the photographs mentioned in this biography.

“My mother is a very clever woman,” Sasha recounted. “My father often called her the witch. He said so, because often something turned out just as she had predicted it, but that was no witchcraft; she just saw and judged clearly. He respected her enormously. But I think they did not live very happily with each other. To me my mother said sometimes: If I knew that you were going to cause as much sorrow to your wife as your father does to me, then I would rather bury you as a baby. My father was certainly faithful to her, as one says, but – she wasn’t happy.”⁶

On another occasion, he said that his parents belonged to the middle class. It would perhaps be a mistake to imagine them as typical eastern-European orthodox Jews, who generally lived in inconceivable poverty in the shtetls of the Polish, Belarusian, Ukrainian or Lithuanian towns. Perhaps their Jewish identity was already weakening. According to various accounts, religion did not have any great influence on Sasha.

Almost all questions about Sasha’s origins and family remain open, and probably will never be resolved. Which language was spoken in his parents’ home? Those people whose family history also unfolds in the world of Jewish influence in Eastern Europe have assured me that “obviously” Yiddish was spoken. That may be true, but there are reasons to doubt it. At a later date, in Western Europe, Sasha was always called “the Russian.” He spoke Russian with his anarchistic comrades-in-arms. In Berlin someone observed that Sasha was delighted to be able to speak with a visitor in his mother tongue, and on that occasion there is no doubt that the language was Russian. Mention is also made of his strong Russian accent. He wanted to be a writer, and the little that he actually set down on paper may have been written in Russian. On the whole, the author tends to the opinion that Sasha’s mother tongue must have been Russian. (On the back of a photograph sent to him of his mother, however, are a few handwritten lines in Hebrew script.)

What sort of education did he receive? We do not know. Probably in Novozybkov there was a high school. Was he educated there, and if so, what did he learn? We would also like to know what profession his father held. Was he a salesman or a businessman, as were so many Jews, or was he a bank employee or a clerk in an office? We do not know. Where did Sasha get the indomitable strength and courage, the will to fight, the passion, the decisiveness (maybe also intelligence) that determined the course of his whole life? Again, we do not know.

Perhaps we should cast another glance at the small town of Novozybkov, the place where Sasha spent his first fourteen years. If we possess hardly any facts about his life in these years, then at least we can try to shed some light on the scene of these unknown events.⁷

At the meeting point of three countries, Russia, Belarus and the Ukraine, Novozybkov lies between the Russian city Bryansk and the Belarusian Gomel. In 1890 the city apparently belonged to the Ukraine; today it is Russian. The majority of the population was likely to have been Russian. The city was founded in 1701, by members of the “Old Believers”, an orthodox sect that separated itself from the Russian Orthodox Church, and later suffered terrible persecution at the hands of the official church. Today Novozybkov is a stronghold of the Old Believers. Between the two World Wars almost the entire population (except for the Jewish minority) professed this religion. In 1806 the town was given city rights. A census in 1861 mentions 7493 residents, of which only 161 were Jews. In the following decades, a massive wave of Jewish immigration apparently took place. In 1914, more than a fourth of the 22,345

⁶ EF, Chapter 5 “Sasha”. In the following there will be frequent quotations from EF, without its being indicated every time.

⁷ All the compiled information about Novozybkov comes from different internet sources.

residents were Jewish, namely 6881. The major part of the population could be described as belonging to the lower middle class (petty bourgeoisie), with peasants, traders, nobility and the military representing small minorities.

It is impossible to ascertain whether the Jews of Novozybkov lived in a typical shtetl, which would imply inconceivable conditions of poverty, with limited means of earning a living. There was a large marketplace, typical for a shtetl, in which gathered great numbers of traders with their wagons and coaches. There was of course a synagogue and certainly a bath house, a Jewish cemetery and a Talmud school. Photographs that still exist today also show buildings typical of a small Russian city: a bank, various office buildings, the homes of wealthy citizens, hotels, and some factories.

As in so many other Russian cities, terrible anti-Semitic pogroms took place during the Russian Revolution of 1905 and the revolts against the tsarist regime. The “Black Hundreds”, groups of monarchist extremists who were mostly responsible for these attacks, acted with the support of the government and the Russian Orthodox Church, and specialized in massacres of Jews, Armenians and other minorities. The Englishman Carl Stettauer, who visited Russia in 1905, returned with photographs and reports of these pogroms in an effort to organize aid for the Jewish population.⁸

After the city was occupied by German troops in 1941, virtually all Jewish inhabitants were murdered; only a very few managed to escape. One must assume that, in the event that they were not able to flee to other countries, the members of Sasha’s family lost their lives in these years. After the Second World War, a small Jewish community gradually re-established itself. Today it numbers a few hundred members.

In the more recent past, Novozybkov became one of the places most severely affected by the Chernobyl nuclear reactor disaster, after a strong wind carried the radioactive cloud directly above the city. The public has never really been informed about the accident, and they still suffer the consequences. In principle, the area is so contaminated that it should be declared uninhabitable, and many residents have moved elsewhere. Paradoxically, this has led to a growth of the city: apartment and real estate prices have fallen so drastically that people from all over Russia have come to settle there.

* * *

The first part of this book describes the life of an anarchist, and perhaps it would not be completely superfluous to make a short statement about what Anarchism is:

Anarchism is a world view whose basis lies in the conviction that the domination of people over each other, and every form of hierarchy, leads to the suppression of individual and collective freedom; that it is unjustified, repressive, and results in violence. Anarchism propagates the dissolving of hierarchical state structures. It places individual freedom, equality and collective self-determination at the center of its effort to create a social organization entirely free of coercion.

Only twice in the twentieth century could an anarchist social order be realized on a large scale: during the Makhno movement in the Ukraine between 1918 and 1920, and before the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in various Spanish provinces, particularly in Aragon and Catalonia. We will speak more of both of these cases later on. Apart from them, Anarchism has remained a political utopia.

⁸ His works, with numerous accounts of his travels, including to Novozybkov, can be found in the University Library in Southampton.

2. The “Other” Shapiro

Before we can properly begin with the biography of Sasha Shapiro, a misconception which has been widely circulated and was later elucidated must be definitively swept out of the way. Namely, there was a very well-known anarchist by the name of Sasha Shapiro, whose biography, although amazingly similar to that of Grothendieck’s father, was, nevertheless, another person. Considering that their names are identical, it is quite understandable that some confusion arose, and certain references in the literature about Grothendieck’s father actually refer to his double.⁹ In fact, the author has spent much time and effort in clearly establishing the identity of Grothendieck’s father. Even Alexander Grothendieck himself did not realize that there was a second Alexander Shapiro¹⁰, so that he may have unknowingly and unwillingly contributed to this confusion. It took a long time before it could be determined that starting in 1921, Grothendieck’s father went by the name of Tanaroff (cf. Chapter 7).

Here are the most important details from the life of the “other Shapiro”:

Alexander (known as Sania) Shapiro was born in 1882 in Russia. His father, who was also an anarchist, was a friend of Kropotkin. Until the First World War he belonged, alongside Kropotkin, Malatesta and Rudolf Rocker, to the anarcho-syndicalist labor movement in England. During the war he was interned because of his resistance against conscription. In 1917 he returned to Russia, in order to join the revolution. At first he was pro-Soviet, and participated in Lenin’s government. Victor Serge describes him as a “critical and moderate mind”. In 1921, disappointed by the repressive course that Communism took under Lenin and by the rigorous persecution of Anarchists, he left Russia and, together with Alexander Berkman and Emma Goldman, went to Berlin. At the end of 1922, there was a meeting of representatives of the syndicalist movement from many countries in Berlin. The IWMA (International Workingmen’s Association) was founded there. Rocker, Shapiro and Augustin Souchy were elected as secretaries. Shapiro was also active as publisher and collaborator of numerous relevant journals, memorandums, accounts of conferences, calls to action etc. Notably, he co-founded several aid organizations for anarchists imprisoned in Russia, or destitute anarchists from other places.

He left Berlin at the beginning of the Nazi period, as did so many others, and settled in Paris, as a publisher (i.e. of “*La Voix du Travail*”) and organizer. There also, efforts to help persecuted or imprisoned anarchists were central to his activity. In 1941 he fled Paris as a refugee and reached New York, where he died in 1946. Letters from him can be found in the papers of prominent anarchists; it can be verified that he was the author of various newspaper articles and other similar material. Sania Shapiro is mentioned in numerous publications and autobiographical books. On the internet, one can find much information in reference to him. (In a very few cases it is possible that they could be referring to Grothendieck’s father. In any case, it is clear that Sasha Shapiro was far less prominent and less of a central figure in the anarchist movement.) As Sania Shapiro’s life demonstrates, he was a true internationalist; besides Russian and Yiddish he spoke English, German, French, Spanish, Bulgarian, and Turkish. He is altogether a historical personality, whose portrait can be reconstructed with incredible clarity in comparison to that of Grothendieck’s father.

With their lives taking such parallel courses, one may assume that they met each other (especially in 1921 in Berlin), in all probability more than once, and that they actually were acquainted. However, no documentary evidence of this can be found. (And this is one of those

⁹ Cp. foot note 3

¹⁰ Letter to the author

points where biography ends and author's or reader's fantasy begins. It is fascinating to try to imagine how two such similar lives could have been woven together. But – this book is a biography and not a novel.)

3.The Revolution of 1905

In the year 1905 the gigantic Russian empire was shaken by a revolution that lasted for almost two years. The catalyst was a foreign policy event, namely the war started by Russia against Japan, which ended in a humiliating defeat and the loss of the entire fleet, then in turn to the loss of Manchuria and the spread of Japanese influence in the Far East. Even more decisive, though, were the multiple causes related to domestic policy. In many respects, the Revolution of 1905 anticipated the October Revolution of 1917, with the essential difference that for the last time, the autocratic and anti-reformist regime of the Tsar retained the upper hand.

The main cause of revolution was doubtless the indescribably miserable living conditions of the peasants. Although serfdom had been abolished during the course of different reforms, the economic situation of the peasants had barely improved. For this reason many of them migrated to the cities, where modern heavy industries gradually developed. Because of the excess supply of labor, the industry workers were exploited and miserably paid, so that a revolutionary-minded industrial proletariat arose (although not nearly in such proportions as Communist propaganda and historical writings claim). Furthermore, in the relatively small (in comparison to other European nations) section of society represented by the middle class, revolution had been smouldering for decades. Intellectuals, students and even the minor aristocracy found the extremely backward regime of the Tsar unbearable, and demanded reforms. On top of this, the country experienced a terrible economic recession and lost much of their agricultural export market as a result of their defeat at war.

The Tsar, an unprincipled weakling who had been ruling since 1894, reacted to the demands of his people with increased repression, terror and police supervision. He was completely dominated by the Tsarina Alexandra, who was herself under the influence of the faith healer Rasputin.

The revolts in the country began in the following manner: in order to continue the war against Japan, the government needed the agreement of the people, and so in November 1904 they permitted a sort of people's congress to be held in St. Petersburg. Demands for reform were made on this occasion, to which the Tsar and the government gave no ear. Thereupon the labor leaders called for a huge demonstration, which took place on January 9/22, 1905¹¹ in St. Petersburg. This day has gone down in Russian history as "Bloody Sunday". One hundred and fifty thousand unarmed and peaceful workers gathered and marched to the Tsar's Winter Palace, in order to state their demands. Suddenly and with no provocation, the Imperial Guard opened fire on the demonstrators. More than one thousand people died, and many were wounded.

After these events, uprisings took place all over the country. The industrial workers went on strike, hundreds of estates across the countryside were dispossessed and burned, and many of the proprietors were murdered. Some military units also mutinied, particularly parts of the Black Sea Fleet. Of particular interest is the mutiny that took place on June 14/27 on the battleship Potemkin. In 1925 Sergei Eisenstein created an incomparable memorial to this uprising with the creation of his famous silent film of the same name.¹² Lenin returned to Russia from exile in Germany and called for merciless battle against the Tsar under the leadership of the Bolsheviks. The high point of the resistance was the railroad strike in October 1905 that brought practically the whole economy to a halt. It is certain that the revolutionary masses believed for some months that they could bring about a turn for the better. Trotsky wrote:

¹¹The first date refers to the Julian calendar, the second to the Gregorian calendar.

¹²It is a remarkable fact that a film which in principle was shot as a propaganda film of Stalin's epoch became one of the most grandiose films of all time.

The spirit of the revolution hovers over the Russian land. Some powerful and mysterious process has taken place in myriads of hearts: individuality, which had only just become aware of itself, merged with the masses, and the masses merged in the great élan.

On October 17/30, 1905, the Tsar agreed to the demands of the Revolution in his “October Manifesto”, and promised civil liberties such as freedom of religion, freedom of opinion, freedom of assembly, freedom of association, and the creation of a parliament with two chambers (the Duma), that would have legislative powers. However, since revolutionary activities gradually slackened and the Tsarist military held the upper hand, Tsar Nicholas II soon retracted most of the reforms of the October Manifesto. The authority of the Duma remained very limited. With the final failure of the Revolution, Lenin returned to exile.

In the confusion of the Revolution, the situation of the Jewish population was especially precarious. On the one hand, they formed part of the intellectual elite of the country; on the other, anti-Semitism was widely disseminated among considerable sections of the proletariat by the Tsar and many of his officials, and by the church. Konstantin Pobedonostsev, a patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church, expressed a widely held view in the land when he declared that the “Jewish problem” could only be solved if one-third converted to Christianity, one-third emigrated, and one-third “disappeared”. A phenomenon which accompanied the Revolution (as mentioned in the first chapter) was that of anti-Jewish pogroms, which witnessed the sacrifice of many thousands of lives. Although the Russian Orthodox State Church did not actually initiate these pogroms, they were certainly responsible for encouraging them.

This was the Russia in which Sasha Shapiro grew up -- in a remote town. Did relatives discuss the revolutionary events in his home? Did his schoolmates discuss them? We do not know, but we must assume that he heard of them, that the ideology of the Anarchist movement became known to him, and that when he was still just a child it made a lasting impression on him so strong that it determined the whole course of his life. It is difficult to imagine, and yet it happened: as a fourteen or fifteen-year-old boy, he left his home, joined an anarchist group, and fought with gun in hand against the Tsarist soldiers.

Many years later his son, Alexander Grothendieck, wrote about these events in his unpublished meditation *La Clef des Songes*:

My father came from a pious Jewish family in Novozybkov, a small Jewish town in the Ukraine. One of his grandfathers was even a rabbi. In spite of this, religion does not seem to have had much influence on him, even during his childhood. Very early on he felt solidarity with the peasants and ordinary people, more so than with his own family which belonged to the middle class. At the age of fourteen he ran away in order to join a group of Anarchists who travelled the countryside preaching revolution, the sharing of land and private property, and freedom for all people – enough to make a generous and brave heart beat faster! That was in Tsarist Russia, in 1904. And right up until the end of his life – in spite of everything and everyone – he saw himself as “Sasha-Piotr” (that was his name in the “movement”), as an Anarchist and revolutionary, whose mission was to prepare the World Revolution for the emancipation of all peoples.

For two years he shared the turbulent life of the group that he had joined. Then, surrounded by armed forces after a ferocious battle, he was taken prisoner together with all his comrades. They were all sentenced to death, and all but he were executed. For three weeks, day by day, he waited for the firing squad. Finally, because of his youth, he was pardoned, and his sentence was commuted to life in prison. He spent eleven years in prison, from the age of sixteen to twenty-seven, a period marked by dramatic escape attempts, revolts and hunger strikes...¹³

¹³We will continue this quote from CS in later chapters. It is the only known place in which Grothendieck gives a coherent and relatively detailed account of his parents.

What transpires in the soul of a sixteen or seventeen year old, who, condemned to death, waits every day for weeks for the sentence to be executed, and then is pardoned? One cannot properly imagine it; perhaps one does not wish to imagine it. (The death penalty had already been abolished in Russia, but as part of the repressive measures taken during these years, it was reinstated for a short time.)

Perhaps the time has come to say something about the documents upon which we base our observations regarding the biography of Sasha Shapiro. Everything that we know about Sasha, his life, and his personality, comes from three interdependent sources. First and foremost, he plays an important role in Hanka Grothendieck's unpublished novel *Eine Frau*: the last existing chapter, named "Sasha," is dedicated to him. For an in-depth treatment of this book, we refer to Chapter 24. Hanka Grothendieck was Sasha's partner from about 1925 to 1940; we will speak about her and her life in detail later on. Although Hanka's book is a novel and not an autobiography in the strict sense of the word, she made an effort to stick to the facts as much as possible in relating Sasha's life. An example of this can be seen in the handwritten notes and dates of his life that she added in the margins of the typescript.

Furthermore, Alexander Grothendieck, the son of Sasha Shapiro and Hanka Grothendieck, says that he spent many months occupying himself with the biography of his parents and their correspondence. The relevant notes that he made in his meditation (or confessions) *Récoltes et Semailles* ("Reaping and Sowing") and especially in *La Clef des Songes* ("Dreambook", literally "The Key of Dreams") are the second important source which can be consulted. Alexander Grothendieck could not have learned much from his father directly. As we shall see, after the age of five they only lived together for at the most a few months when he was about eleven. He knew his father at first only from his mother's descriptions, and later from the correspondence his parents left behind, and a few other written documents. The third source consists in the existence of a few scattered original documents concerning Sasha's life, which we shall mention in the appropriate places.

In many cases it is very difficult, indeed almost impossible, to relate genuinely definite facts about Sasha's life, and one must frequently rely upon plausible assumptions. One of these assumptions is that already as a youth he once and for all forsook his Jewish origins and the religion of his forefathers. During his whole life we do not find the slightest indication that religion held any meaning for him or that he was interested in his Jewish roots.

His son writes in the already quoted text:

My parents were atheists. For them, religions were archaic remnants, and churches and other religious institutions were instruments of exploitation and domination over mankind. Religion and churches were destined to be swept away forever by the World Revolution, which would put an end to social inequality and all forms of cruelty and injustice, and would ensure that all mankind could flourish in freedom. My parents, however, both came from religious families; this gave them a certain tolerance towards other people in matters of faith and religious practice, and also towards religious figures. To them, these were people like any others ...

In a footnote to the excerpt quoted above, Grothendieck adds:

Evidently my father's belief in the "World Revolution", of which he considered himself to be a chosen apostle, replaced belief in God. In the following note to the principal text I say a few words about the blossoming of this belief in a closed milieu, in which nothing could have predisposed him to receive it. I haven't the slightest doubt that this mysterious and irresistible vocation, that took possession of him already as a child ... was a vocation in the full sense of the word, that is to say a manifestation of the designs of God in regard to him.

Presumably, these words reveal more about Grothendieck himself than about his father. In 1987 when he wrote down this meditation, he had approached a form of Christian mysticism, which also contained esoteric elements. In the following years, symptoms of "religious

mania” became ever stronger. He looked for signs of God’s works (the “good God”) in people and in the world around him. It seems understandable that in the altogether extraordinary life of his father, he thought he could recognize the hand of God. It is, after all, perhaps true that Sasha Shapiro’s belief in the World Revolution and in his own role as forerunner took on a quasi-religious character.

(In this place a remark must be made: We have just mentioned Grothendieck’s “religious mania”. This remark may seem open to attack, subjective, and not distanced enough. The fact is, though, that in the eighties Grothendieck identified himself with a stigmatized nun, he believed that he was receiving messages from angels, he prophesied the date of the Day of Judgement to be October 14, 1996 and believed that God had chosen him to announce this, and he held his foster father to be an incarnation of Jesus.¹⁴ It seems to me that with such symptoms (the list could easily be made longer) one is permitted to and even should speak of religious mania. In the third part of this biography this aspect of Grothendieck will be dealt with in detail.)

¹⁴ In the first edition of this book the date was accidentally given as October 16, 1996.

4. In Prison

After Sasha was condemned to death, presumably in 1906 or 1907, then pardoned and his sentence commuted to life imprisonment, he spent the next ten or eleven years in Russian penitentiaries. It was the period, from his seventeenth to his twenty-seventh year, in which a young person normally completes his education, learns a profession, starts a family, and finds his place in life. Presumably during these years Sasha also found his “place in life”: his profession was that of revolutionary, and his life’s goal freedom for all.

In the comments by his son cited earlier, it becomes clear that the time he spent in prison was highly eventful: “a period marked by dramatic escape attempts, revolts and hunger strikes”. What really happened during these years can no longer be reconstructed, but some things are known, again from the records of his son, and also from scattered remarks in *Eine Frau*.

First of all one would like to establish the exact time-period that Sasha spent in prison. He was set free during the course of the Revolution, probably already in February 1917 (as was for instance Makhno), and at the latest after the October Revolution in November 1917. Other details fit together with this. It has been stated that he was in prison for ten or eleven years, and was sentenced already as a sixteen year old. If one considers that the uprising of 1905 had already collapsed by the following year, one can assume that he was sentenced in 1906 or 1907 (he could still have been sixteen years old) and subsequently spent ten or eleven years in prison.

The next question is, where was Sasha held prisoner? In *Eine Frau* the Central Prison of “Yaroslav” is mentioned, so it could have been in the town Yaroslavl, two hundred and fifty kilometres north of Moscow.

Sasha undertook the “dramatic escape attempt” mentioned by his son at the age of nineteen, in 1909 or 1910. He speaks of a “first” attempt; apparently there were others. During one of these escapes he was shot in the left arm, which then had to be amputated in the prison hospital. Sasha didn’t want to fall into the hands of his pursuers, and tried to commit suicide. He had also been wounded in his right arm, however, and unable to hold the revolver properly, he aimed too low and failed to shoot himself in the heart.

A casual remark in *Eine Frau* could be interpreted to mean that after Sasha was pardoned he had only been sentenced to a few years in prison, and that it was only after this attempted escape that he was condemned for life. In relation to this escape there is one additional seriously unclear point. Sasha speaks of “several months” spent in freedom. It has been impossible to determine when that could have been.

Since that time, Sasha used to shave his head, which particularly impressed everyone who met him. Over and over again one hears of his “imposing head”, and his “Caesar-like countenance.” As is well-known, his son, surely as a sign of respect towards his father, adopted this habit, and achieved a similar effect on the people around him. Sasha told his partner Hanka how it came about:

That became, if you want to so say it, a fashion with our people. In prison they shaved our heads, and when we got out of prison, some of us continued so to do. That which they did to us to shame us, have we made with it a sign of honor. [...] And after they have cut off my arm, all my hair fell out in thick bunches [...] so that I should look, as a nineteen-year-old rascal, already like a professor –or a monk. But even now I think it doesn’t go with me, neither this one nor that one. The Caucasians have the custom to shave their heads, and that is a good race of men. Better to look like them.

It is also interesting to learn that Sasha was able to get some education in prison, especially in the field of literature.

I could not have arrived at my present standpoint of literary understanding and ability, if we had not had so good and varied libraries in the Russian prisons. Yes, many people from the Russian intelligentsia donated books for the prison libraries, and there are not a few people even, who really got their whole education from there.

Shortly after the above mentioned escape attempt Sasha turned twenty. To give a summary of his young life at this point in time: having abandoned the parental home at fourteen in order to fight gun-in-hand with an Anarchist group against the Tsarist regime, he was condemned to death presumably at sixteen, then imprisoned with no hope of release, and at age nineteen went through an escape attempt, a suicide attempt, and a lost arm.

One can easily believe what his Anarchist friends said of him fifteen years later in Berlin: since that time he was a man “with no age”. “A strange fellow. Between thirty-five and fifty-five, one cannot say more. [...] A man who has all that behind him simply doesn’t have an age.”

Grothendieck relates further that his father had to spend a year in solitary confinement in 1914, maybe as a punishment for a new escape attempt:

It was surely the hardest year of his life [...]: Total solitude, without anything to read or write, or any occupation, in an isolated cell in the middle of a deserted floor, cut off even from the sounds of the living, with only the unchanging and obsessive daily scenario: three times a day the brief appearance of the guard bringing the rations, and in the evening a visit by the director, who came in person to inspect the “hardhead” of the prison.

Grothendieck goes on to speak of his father’s hunger strikes. In all probability he wanted to secure recognition as a political prisoner, which he may have succeeded in doing in the last years of his imprisonment, as it seems that the following statement from *Eine Frau* refers to Sasha’s first imprisonment:

And before, this crazy love of the one sentenced to life in prison in the Yaroslav Central Prison, for Vera Dostoyevskaia, an oversensitive, slightly misshapen creature of spiritual ugliness and a sharp, somewhat malicious intelligence, a leftist social-revolutionary. Together with a group of comrades she was, one day, committed to Yaroslav. Together with them, he succeeded – Sasha with a hunger strike – in having the regime for political prisoners applied to them: their cells were left open during the day. The other social-revolutionaries didn’t seem to appreciate the fact that Sasha stole into the women’s wing every day, and into Vera’s cell. “You sully the banner of our martyrdom,” one of the older social-revolutionaries once reproached him. – “I didn’t bargain for martyrdom,” replied Sasha. “The only banner by which I stand, is freedom. And if, in chains for the rest of my life, I can snatch a little life and freedom from this dungeon, then it is well done.”

On the basis of these lines we would very much like to know who Vera Dostoyevskaia was. It has not been possible to find out; Google does not seem to know this woman. – Still, even in a Russian prison, certainly not the most pleasant place in the world, Sasha fought and won a small piece of freedom for himself.

5. The Makhnovist Movement

We begin with the few lines with which Grothendieck summarizes the life of his father during the years 1917 to 1921:

He was freed by the Revolution in 1917, and then participated very actively in the Revolution, mainly in the Ukraine, where he fought at the head of an autonomous group of well-armed Anarchist combatants, in contact with Makhno, the chief of the Ukrainian peasant army. Condemned to death by the Bolsheviks after their takeover of the country, he left the country clandestinely in 1921 and ended up in Paris (just like Makhno). During the four years spent in intense militant activity and combat, he had a rather tumultuous love-life, from which resulted a child, my half-brother Dodek.

Behind this laconic statement one can discern a life of such adventure as has been granted to few.

In order to classify the events of these years, one must perhaps first describe the history of the Makhnovist Movement. There is much detailed, easily accessible and very worthwhile literature available, on which we base ourselves in the following. The movement is portrayed in detail in the books *History of the Makhnovist Movement* by Arshinoff and *The Unknown Revolution* by Volin (pseudonym for Vsevolod Mikhailovich Eichenbaum).¹⁵ Both were close collaborators and comrades-in-arms of Makhno. An eyewitness account of the revolutions through which Sasha Shapiro lived, from Tsarist Russia to the Spanish Civil War, can be found in Victor Serge's book *Memoirs of a Revolutionary*¹⁶. In this and other books, it becomes clear that during these decades there were whole ranks of fighters who dedicated their lives to the Revolution and to Freedom.

Firstly one should give an overall description of the years 1917 to 1921. In the years of the first World War and the ensuing Russian Revolution, so many different parties were involved in intense battles with fluctuating battlefronts, that one can hardly tell them apart: the wartime enemies of Russia, namely Germany and Austria (with Rumanian reinforcements), the Red Army of the Bolsheviks led by Trotsky, the White Army of the Monarchists under Denikin and Wrangel, the Ukrainian troops of Pavlo Skoropadsky, who after the peace treaty of Brest-Litovsk became leader of the Ukraine, the competing nationalist-Ukrainian troops under Symon Petliura (who were responsible for horrific anti-Jewish pogroms), the Anarchist combatants led by Makhno, who from time to time operated with great success, Polish formations (Poland saw that the moment had arrived to attack a much weakened Russia). In addition, there were marauding groups of Don Cossacks and Ukrainian nationalists. The center of these frequently shifting battlefronts was the Ukraine; some cities harbored as many as sixteen different occupying forces in three years. At times the Red Army allied itself with the Anarchists against the troops of Monarchist generals Denikin and Wrangel, who would perhaps be known today as "warlords". However, when the Anarchists had won a resounding victory for the Revolution, they themselves fell victim to the superior Red Army. At the beginning of 1921, these battles ended definitively with the victory of the Red Army led by Trotsky. The Bolshevik secret police, known as the Cheka, liquidated countless Anarchists and other members of the opposition.

It is in any case characteristic of the political situation of the time that all of the military leaders mentioned so far died in exile: Makhno and Petliura in Paris, Denikin in Ann Arbor, Wrangel in Brussels, Trotsky in Mexico, and Skoropadsky in Germany.

¹⁵ P. Arshinoff, *History of the Makhnovist Movement 1918-1921*, several editions and internet link www.ditext.com/arshinov/makhno.html

Volin, *The Unknown Revolution*, several editions and internet link www.ditext.com/voline/unknown.html

¹⁶ Victor Serge, *Memoirs of a Revolutionary, 1901-1941*, several editions i.e. Iowa University Press 2002

The leading mind of the Anarchist movement was Nestor Ivanovich Makhno, whose biography corresponds in some ways to that of Sasha Shapiro. He did not, however, come from the middle class, but from the poorest peasant conditions. He was born in 1889 in Huliaipole in the Ukraine, and at seven years old he already worked as a shepherd in order to contribute to his family's income. At the local village school he could only acquire a minimal education. In 1906 he joined the Anarchist movement. Throughout his life he was neither a theoretician nor an ideologist, but a fighter and a man of action. He was condemned to death for the killing of a gendarme in 1908 (at approximately nineteen years of age), and, as in Sasha's case, he was pardoned and his sentence was commuted to lifelong forced labor. In the Butyrka Prison in Moscow (where numerous members of the opposition continued to be held later on), he continued his education and studied the works of Anarchist theorists Bakunin and Kropotkin. One of his fellow prisoners (and later comrade-in-arms) was Arshinoff, who wrote the *History of the Makhnovist movement*. In prison Makhno caught tuberculosis, and part of one of his lungs had to be removed; yet another parallel to Shapiro's life, whose health was also permanently damaged in prison by the loss of an arm.

At the beginning of 1917 Makhno was liberated from prison by the Revolution, and he immediately began to do educational work and agitate among the peasants in the area surrounding his home village. He organized local soviets and unions, and became the soul of the revolutionary peasant's movement. Many landowners were driven off their property and even put to death. Following the peace treaty of Brest-Litovsk between Germany and Austria and the newly founded Soviet Union, in March 1918, the Ukraine became temporarily independent from Russia. Pavlo Skoropadsky, however, as leader, deployed German and Austrian troops, rapidly occupied the country, and thus temporarily ended Makhno's activities. In June 1918 Makhno visited his idol Peter Kropotkin in Moscow, who was interested in learning about the mood of the Ukrainian population and the activities of the Anarchists.

In July Makhno returned to Huliaipole, where his military genius was soon revealed. Under the black banner of the Anarchists he recruited a peasant army of up to thirty thousand partisans, which at times controlled up to one-hundred thousand square kilometers of the Ukraine with seven million inhabitants. The core of this army was an extraordinarily rapid and flexible cavalry, supported by coaches armed with machine guns, which could strike with lightening speed and disappear instantly leaving no trace. He put an end to the Skoropadsky regime and involved the occupying troops in constant battles, dealing with the White Army under monarchists Denikin and Wrangel in the same manner. At the end of the First World War, and with the retreat of the German troops and their allies, large parts of the Ukraine at the beginning of 1919 were territories where the Anarchist goal of a social order free of domination had been realized to a large extent. Victor Serge writes in the already cited book:

For the Ukrainian peasants the spirit of the revolution, the ability to organize themselves, the necessity to rely only upon themselves when they came up against the Whites, the Germans and the Yellow-Blue Nationalists, who often defended harsh and ignorant Moscow commissioners constantly announcing requisitions, called forth an unusually lively and strong movement, known as the "Revolutionary Peasant's Movement," which itself was founded in the region of Huliaipole by an Anarchist teacher who came out of prison, Nestor Makhno. [...] These peasants showed a truly heroic ability to organize themselves and to fight. Nestor Makhno, a drunkard and daredevil, uneducated, idealistic, proved himself to be a born strategist. He captured his weapons from the enemy.

There soon followed, however, extraordinarily capricious battles, in which more than once Makhno found himself in life-threatening situations. Trotsky wanted to prevent an independent Ukraine at all costs, and in 1919 things had gone so far that he instructed Cheka agents to murder Makhno. He undertook a military attack on his base in Huliaipole where the Red Army destroyed the self-governing body. All that remained was liquidated shortly

afterward by Denikin's approaching troops. In spite of these events, and although a collaboration with the Bolsheviks was impossible from an ideological point of view (the Bolsheviks aimed for a central state, in which only the Party would have power, and the people would have no rights), Makhno once again allied himself with the Red Army. Denikin was threatening to march on Moscow with his well-organized volunteer army. Makhno had always perceived the "Whites" as his main enemy, and in the ensuing battles he succeeded in decisively weakening Denikin's forces, above all by breaking through his supply lines. One year later, in October 1920, events followed the same pattern: Denikin's successor, Baron Wrangel, again threatened to push northwards from the Crimea. The Red Army once again secured the help of Makhno and even promised the liberation of Anarchists from prisons and camps. Makhno won a decisive victory against Wrangel. Both sides were so weakened, however, that the Red Army was now able to make short shrift of them. In the last week of November 1920, Makhno's officers in the Crimea and in Huliaipole were captured, and shot immediately.

In a frantic retreat, Makhno and the last of his troops, followed by a band of fleeing peasants, succeeded in escaping to Rumania in 1921. Finally, with many halts, he succeeded, like Sasha Shapiro, in reaching first Berlin and then Paris where, more or less forgotten by those around him, he set about writing his memoirs. He died in a poorhouse in 1934 from the consequences of tuberculosis.

Nestor Makhno was not an educated man. He was an unredeemable dare-devil and drinker, who had a tendency to excessive behavior and often acted in an unpredictable manner. Communist propaganda made an effort to depict him in as negative a light as possible; for instance, they falsely accused him of instigating pogroms against the Jews. But to this day his memory is alive in the Ukraine – as a national hero, a freedom fighter, a modern Stenka Razin or Robin Hood.¹⁷

It will be clear to the reader after this short account of the Makhnovist movement and the biography of its originator, that it is difficult if not impossible to find a trace of Sasha in this chaos. The above mentioned books by Arshinoff, Volin, Serge and other such related literature do convey a detailed picture of the major events during this revolutionary period, and by using internet one can also find much pertinent information about this dramatic time. But Sasha's role on this stage remains hazy and blurred, and in the end we can only rely on our fantasy and imagination. All the extensive literature available has failed to provide any concrete evidence about him or his militant group.

In *Eine Frau* there are only one or two episodes that describe events from these years. One concerns a chance encounter with an officer of the White Army, recounted in Sasha's voice:

That was in Poltava. Kiev was at that time already occupied by Petliura, and the Red Army kept pulling back. It wasn't actually an army, but just battalions. Earlier on, in Sevastopol, the sailors had killed officers by the hundreds.

Then a waiter comes into my room and says a man wants to see me. -- Yes, please. -- So he comes in. At that time I was wearing an officer's coat, only without epaulettes. The machine gunners in Jaroslav had given it to me a while ago, when I got out of prison. It was cold in the room, and I had the coat on. And he says to me: I've already seen you for a couple of days. Are you an officer? – Yes, I'm an officer. – And then he starts speaking with such anguish and grief about the officers of Sevastopol. He's like a child. His brother was murdered there too, he says to me. And he tells me that "our people" have massively gone over to the Red Army, and that a whole organization is going after them. In three weeks at the most Charkov will fall, and then all of the Ukraine.

¹⁷ For a short, very informative and perspicacious biography of Nestor Makhno we recommend *Anarchist Portraits* by Paul Avrich, Princeton University Press 1988. This book also contains a number of biographies of personalities that play a role in this book, i.e. Alexander Berkman.

That was a terrible thing. I was at daggers drawn with the Bolsheviks, but the Whites – well, you understand. And I ask the officer very calmly: How old are you? – That was so unexpected for him that he stared at me with big round eyes: Twenty-two [...] – One can see that! And do you know me? – I stand up, and he goes white as a sheet. – Do you know who you are dealing with? And if I arrest you now, do you know what you'll get? – And I had the power to do it; our boys were in the hotel. And the Bolsheviks would have accepted me with open arms.

And I say to him: Get out right away; I don't want to see you around here again! And by God -- If I catch sight of you again I'll shoot you down without mercy!

Later I ask the waiter: Is he still here? – No, he says, he left right away with his luggage.

And it happened just as he said: in three weeks Charkov and the Ukraine were taken from the Whites. – One can have about this a very different opinion, if I did the right thing. At that moment a lot depended on it. But – that's what I did. And I wouldn't do any differently now.

This scene is recounted in the book quite out of context (and twice, no doubt as an oversight). It probably was meant to demonstrate that these tough fighters were also “just human beings.” Nevertheless, one cannot discern any real relevancy, and it remains unclear what the author's intentions were. But perhaps this only reflects the fact that in any case this war was impossible to understand.

It is fairly sure that Sasha Shapiro did not spend all of the three or four years before leaving Russia in active combat. Presumably he lived for some time in Moscow. What is certain is that during this time he met several prominent Anarchists, with whom he may well have kept in contact throughout his life. Two of these, Alexander Berkman and Emma Goldman, were icons of the Anarchist movement. It is certain that he met Berkman several times in his lifetime (more about this in later chapters). Let us give a quick sketch of his life.

Alexander Berkman was born in 1870 in Vilna, Lithuania, and grew up in St. Petersburg as the son of wealthy Jewish businessman. After the death of his parents he emigrated, at the age of seventeen, to the USA. There he came in contact with Anarchist movements. In 1892 he attempted to assassinate industrialist Henry Clay Frick. There was a sensational trial. He served fourteen years in jail, many of which were spent in solitary confinement. After his release he published in Anarchist newspapers, and participated in the worker's movement, and in campaigns for human rights. At the outbreak of the First World War he agitated against American participation and fought against the draft. He undertook all these actions together with Emma Goldman. In 1919 Berkman, Goldman and hundreds of other Anarchists and Communists were deported to the Soviet Union. Berkman and Goldman at first supported the Bolsheviks (which was later held against them in Anarchist circles). However, as they witnessed the brutal suppression of all liberal movements, and the raging actions of the Cheka, they became more and more disillusioned, especially after the brutal quelling of the sailor's rebellion in Kronstadt and the murders of Lev Chorny and Fanya Baron.¹⁸ In December of 1921 Berkman and Goldman, who were now themselves in danger, left the country; it was only with great effort that they managed to acquire the necessary passports and visas. After a short stay in Stockholm, Berkman managed to reach Berlin. There he frequented numerous anarchist circles, wrote pamphlets and organized meetings. Four years later he moved to Paris, where he spent the rest of his life. He wrote some important books about anarchy and his experiences with the Bolshevik Revolution, organized aid for imprisoned and destitute anarchist fighters, and collected material about political persecution in the Soviet Union. During this time he was constantly threatened with deportation, and finally found himself in the position of having to rely on the support of friends. His health deteriorated, and in 1936 two prostate operations became necessary. On June 28, 1936, due to constant and unbearable pain, he shot himself.

¹⁸ Lenin personally ordered the Cheka to murder Fanya Baron.

His friend and comrade-in-arms, Rudolf Rocker, wrote: “An exceptional personality has left us, a great and noble character, and a true man. We bow our heads in silence over his grave, and swear to work for the ideals that he served so truly for so many years.”

One of the most well-known (and for this biography most important) books by Berkman is *The Bolshevik Myth. Diary of the Russian Revolution 1920-1922*¹⁹. It describes exactly the period that interests us in this chapter: an unimaginable chaos of revolutionary and counterrevolutionary actions, in which everyone fought against everyone else, and the populations of Russia and the Ukraine experienced the most atrocious sufferings and disasters. It would seem that Sasha Shapiro is not mentioned in this book; he was probably not such an important or outstanding personality in this confused time-period. It is true, however, that the book breaks off shortly before Berkman’s journey to Minsk.

When Berkman’s name is mentioned, inevitably the name of his comrade-in-arms of many years crops up as well. She was born in 1869 in Kaunas, Lithuania, spent some years in Königsberg, then, like Berkman, lived in St. Petersburg. At age seventeen she emigrated with her sister Helena to the USA. In St. Petersburg, while working in a textile factory, she had already come into contact with revolutionary and anarchist ideas. After the execution of four young anarchists suspected in the Haymarket affair, she soon became convinced that violent action was necessary also in the USA. She became one of the leading feminists of her time in America. She was often arrested and sentenced to prison, among other reasons for “incitement to riot.” Her American citizenship was withdrawn, and finally, as already mentioned, she was deported to Russia, where together with Berkman she travelled around the country for two years. Afterwards she lived for a long period in England, and later also in France, where Peggy Guggenheim placed a house in St. Tropez at her disposal. She wrote her memoirs, *Living my Life*, and then went to Spain to help the Republican forces in their fight against Fascism. She died in 1940 from the consequences of a stroke in Toronto. On her gravestone stands the motto of her life:

*Liberty will not descend to a people,
a people must raise themselves to Liberty*

In her autobiography she makes an interesting observation about Germany, which shows how strong the cultural influence of Germany was in Eastern Europe, particularly in the Balkans: “But in Germany I was on familiar ground, the language was my mother tongue. Everything I had ever learned came from this country, and my first impressions were German.” Astonishing words, when one considers that she only spent a few years of her youth in Germany.

Alexander Berkman and Alexander Shapiro/Tanaroff certainly had a lot to tell each other when they met. (Incidentally, the existing photographs of the two show a surprising resemblance.²⁰) As already said, one may assume that they met in Moscow. It is certain that a meeting occurred in the icy cold weather of November 1921 in Minsk, when Sasha was fleeing the Soviet Union, and Berkman was preparing his escape. Berkman was able to provide Sasha with money, so that he could cross the border.

Emma Goldman describes her years in Russia in great detail in her autobiography *Living my Life*. Many people are explicitly named, and even Berkman’s trip to Minsk in November 1921 is mentioned. There is no individual, however, that can be identified as Sasha Shapiro, and there is no reference to the meeting in Minsk.

¹⁹ Originally published in 1925 in New York. Internet link: http://wikilivres.info/wiki/The_Bolshevik_Myth

²⁰ Compare i.e. the Photograph with Makhno in Paul Avrich’s *Anarchist Portraits* with the photographs of Sasha on internet.

To conclude this chapter, we should recall the only two friends that, according to his own words, Sasha ever had in his life. About the first, we can quote just one sentence from *Eine Frau* (perhaps one day we shall be enlightened as to who he was): “Nikolai Shvansky was destroyed in the Tsarist prisons, shortly before the Revolution broke out.”

The second, already mentioned, is a well-known figure of Russian Anarchy: Lev Chorny (actually Turchaninov). Hanka writes about Sasha and Chorny:

Sometimes he [Sasha] knew only through the sort of instinct that develops in an atmosphere of constant and immediate danger, that this would be right and that would be disastrous. In this way he lost Lev Chorny, who went to a meeting in an apartment that had already been occupied by the Cheka, in spite of his warning. He hadn't advised him against it out of caution – in that case one wouldn't be able to take a single step - but out of an absolute certainty, as if he had seen the guet-apens [ambush] there himself.

Victor Serge writes in the already cited book:

The tragedies continued. Appalling news came from Odessa: The Cheka had shot Fanya Baron (the wife of Aaron Baron) and Lev Chorny, one of the ideologists of Russian Anarchism. [...] I had known Lev Chorny well, a dozen years ago in Paris; with his waxen complexion and deep, glowing eyes, he seemed to be a figure who had stepped out of a Byzantine icon. He lived in the Latin Quarter, where he washed restaurant windows, and then sat under the trees in the Luxembourg gardens to write his *Soziometrie*. Naturally he came out of some prison or penitentiary. A systematic spirit, a great believer and an ascetic, his death outraged Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman.

Also Volin, in the second volume of *The Unknown Revolution*, mentions Chorny's murder:

In revenge (vengeance was a constant element in the Bolshevik repression) [...] the Lenin regime staged, a little later, a brazen frame-up against some of the same group. For purported "criminal" acts, and particularly for the alleged counterfeiting of Soviet bank notes, its agents shot, (naturally in secret, in the night, in one of the cellars of the Cheka, without the shadow of any judicial procedure) several of the most honest, sincere, and devoted Anarchists: the young Fanny Baron (whose husband was in prison), the well-known militant Leon Tchorny (whose real name was Tourtchaninoff), and others.

In Volin's book there is a photograph of Chorny: a thoughtful, bearded face, supported on one hand. A copy of this photograph can be found in the papers left to Alexander Grothendieck; not just the photograph, but also a wood engraving that clearly was made from this photograph. In all four somewhat damaged corners there are holes made by thumbtacks. Did Sasha post his friend's photograph on the wall of one of his miserable dwellings in Berlin or Paris?

6. Rachil and other Women

Shortly after his liberation from prison (probably in February 1917) Sasha met a Jewish woman by the name of Rachil, whom he married and with whom he had a son, most likely in 1918, named Dodek.

They may have lived together for about two years, but we know nothing about this time. Sasha seems to have loved her above all else, although he could not remain true to her: “Rachil said to me more than once that she would be the happiest woman if I had loved only her. But there were always – at least one other, that I loved at the same time. And how I loved!”

Sasha was then taken prisoner by the Communists, thrown into jail and condemned to death. He spent one year in prison. With the help of a student, Yelena Fyodorovna, whom he had converted to the cause of Anarchism, and with Rachil’s help, he was somehow able to flee. When he arrived in Berlin in the first half of the year 1921, Rachil had already turned away from him. Apparently she couldn’t bear life together with him anymore. “I’m tired of you,” she wrote.

Sasha was aware of the great danger in which Rachil found herself in the Soviet Union. He begged her to follow him to Western Europe, and to make every effort to bring this about. After a few months (letters were sent back and forth illegally) came the answer. She was living together with Senya.²¹ Hanka Grothendieck writes about this:

Senya was a good comrade, still a young man, a solid character; he had belonged to Sasha’s brigade for a long time. Sasha knew that he loved Rachil, but not even in his dreams could Senya have presumed to hope that she would leave Sasha for him: Sasha, the unattainable model of a man and a fighter. She doesn’t love Senya, Sasha knew that. She is the kind of woman who only loves one man in her whole life. There wasn’t a word in her letter about loving Senya. Then why -?

At this time he was already living with Lia. But he didn’t love Rachil the less for that. And it wasn’t the first time that she would have had to share him with other women. One thing she did know: her relationship with Senya – with this she had cut herself off from Sasha as if with a knife. And she herself – never would she want to share herself.

Why didn’t she just leave it at that? Why did she later have the cruelty to tell him the truth?

Sasha was worried about her fate, and that of Senya. As long as they stayed in Russia they were threatened, and it was no longer possible to do any useful work. And he wrote to her (he was already in Paris then): “You must do the impossible to get out, alone or with Senya. And I will take you in like a beloved sister and do everything for you that is in my power.”

Again months went by before the answer came. And this blow was more terrible than the first. “I don’t want to come to you, Sasha, even as your sister. I lied to you when I told you I was living with Senya. That was only to put something final between you and me. Only now, after your last letter, did I go through with it, and I have become Senya’s wife. So now it’s really final. – I’ve grown tired of you, Sasha.”

In 1926 Sasha received a letter from Rachil with some (still existing) photographs of herself and her child. He learned the following:

She has now been let out of the concentration camp on the Solovetsky Islands. The worst camp that exists in Soviet Russia. She spent four years there with her child. She was interned about a year after Sasha had fled following his death sentence, as a reprisal against him. The child was then two years old. During the last year in camp she had done office work, and conditions were not so bad anymore. Now she is free, but as a counter-revolutionary she has no work permit, and therefore no food ration cards, and no residence permit. So she wanders the countryside with her child. The few comrades and friends that are still free take her in for as long as they are able, and help her as much as they are able, menaced as they are every day. Senya, with whom she had

²¹ Hanka invented this name. The true identity of the person remains unknown; in any case it is not the later mentioned Senya Fleshin.

joined her life just before her internment is in prison for the second time. She hopes that he will be liberated once again. This second time is not because of revolutionary work – or as the Bolsheviks say: counter-revolutionary -, that has been impossible for years already. It is because during a workers' meeting in which a voluntary decision to renounce daily wages was to be taken, he said: this is a practical impossibility, as they all must then die of hunger. All things considered, that is counter-revolutionary. Little Dodek is an oversensitive, nervous child, far more mature than his age, because of the things he was forced to experience. But if she didn't have him – he is the only thing that keeps her alive.

“Yes, there,” – With delicacy Sasha takes two photos out and places them next to the grey piece of wrapping paper. Poor quality “photographer's-photos.” Only he can recognize the familiar, beloved features in the woman's face, retouched by the photographer to inexpressive emptiness. In the child's picture, however, the photographer recorded with merciless accuracy the way that the miserable, badly-fitting suit jumps to the eye: the folds of the too wide shirt on the thin little body, the baggy trousers with straps, which one can see are homemade and cut out of stiff material without a pattern. But the little fellow stands there, very boldly and defiantly, straddling his little legs, of which the knees are the thickest part. The short protruding lower lip, characterized by wilful, precocious strength and an almost sceptical expression, and the enormous dark eyes – there is an expression in the tender child's face that is painful. [...]

“Why didn't she come five years ago, as I asked her to! If I could know how to help her –I would give half my life.”

In 1920 the first camp had been constructed on the archipelago of the Solovetsky Islands, in the White Sea south of the Kola Peninsula. Until 1931 more than 70,000 prisoners were interned there. Alexander Solzhenitsyn had these islands in mind when he coined the term *Gulag Archipelago*. The purpose of the camps was the physical destruction of “enemies of the people”: priests, monks, members of the White Guard, Mensheviks, Social Revolutionaries, Anarchists. The camp was infamous for poor medical care, abuse, insufficient and bad food. Many prisoners suffered depression because of the short summers and the never-ending cold winter. During a typhus epidemic in 1925 one third of the prisoners died.

A doubtless very irregular correspondence with Rachil and Dodek must have existed over a long period of time. In a photo album put together by Grothendieck there is a photograph of Dodek from 1930.²² In his meditation *La Clef des Songes* Grothendieck mentions his half-brother in a few lines:

Contact with my half-brother (born in 1917 or 1918) was lost before the World War, and I never saw him or had any correspondence with him. I have read his letters (in Russian), and those of his mother, Rachil Shapiro, which I found among my father's papers. They were the victims of terrible discrimination and lived a very precarious life. A few years ago I spent one or two years trying to find some trace of him, but with no success. . .

It is certain that Rachil Shapiro was still alive in the nineteen-thirties, as there exist letters by her dating from 1930 until 1934 to the well known Anarchist Senya Fleshin, who later emigrated to Mexico. It is somewhat surprising that contact between Sasha and his Son lasted even until the World War. Around 1984, Grothendieck added a handwritten dedication to a copy of his mathematical work *A la poursuite des champs*:

A mon frère, Dodek Shapiro, que j'aurais voulu rencontrer un jour, alors que les seuls signes tangibles que j'ai de sa vie sont quelques lettres et photos d'enfant, anciennes de près d'un demi-siècle, datées d'Ulianovsk en Sibérie, adressées à son père Sascha (qui est aussi le mien) ...²³

²² This album and all the photographs to which reference is made in this biography remain in private possession.

²³ To my brother, Dodek Shapiro, whom I would have wished to meet one day, the only tangible signs of his life that I have being some letters and childhood photographs, almost half a century old, bearing the address Ulyanovsk in Siberia, addressed to his father Sasha (who is also my father) ...

Grothendieck's partner during the nineteen-eighties, Y. L., relates that at one time Grothendieck became almost obsessed with the search for his half-brother: when she once went to visit relatives in the Soviet Union during this period, Grothendieck gave her the task of tracing the missing Dodek Shapiro, naturally a completely hopeless undertaking.²⁴

When one contemplates the relationship between Sasha and Rachil from a distance, it seems rather unbalanced. She loved him more than any other man in her life, and had a child with him, whom she brought up with great effort. She freed him from prison – certainly with great risk to herself – and stayed behind in Russia when he fled to Western Europe. Because of this she was condemned to many years of imprisonment in a camp, and later lived an uncertain and vagabond life. Sasha always saw it as his right to love other women – he was certainly unable to do otherwise. It seems unlikely that he ever did anything tangible for his son. The only thing that really counted for him was the Revolution, to which everything else came second. Naturally he could sacrifice his own life, his happiness, his well-being, his health and his love to the Revolution and Anarchy – but the life of other people? However, that is a question that one probably has no right to ask. One thing is certain: he never left anyone in doubt as to what he wanted and what path he was going to follow. All the women that loved him were aware of what they were getting into: “I am a terrible person, Lyubimaya!”

It seems that Sasha's story with Rachil repeated itself. He again met a young Jewish woman, beautiful, proud and stubborn: Lia from Warsaw. She helped him to cross the Russian-Polish border, and her sixteen year old sister Ite accompanied Sasha to Gdansk, from where he could continue his journey to Germany and to Berlin. Sasha only stayed in Berlin for two months, and then moved to Paris. More about this will be related in the following chapters. Lia followed him first to Berlin and then to Paris, and lived with him for two years. Then she couldn't stand life with him any longer. She had not had a child with him, preferring an abortion. But she too said: “I'm tired of you, Sasha.” She also understood that she only needed to turn to another man – any other man – in order to finalize the separation with Sasha. Hanka Grothendieck reports:

It has been two years since Lia went from him. And for whom, for whom – that was the worst: Josef. Sasha knew him well: a timid, insignificant lad, who looked up to Sasha as if to a half-god. Certainly a very good person, but she knew as well as Sasha what a zero he was. And soft, as soft as a buttered roll. – Sasha laughs half angrily, half-amused: She'll have shown him – poor chap! – The devil! There were other fellows she could have fallen in love with.

But whether it was Josef or the devil – in the first days after the separation Sasha sometimes thought he was going mad. He began to fear that, losing all control over himself, he might run to Lia, and do something that he would regret for the rest of his life. So he locked his door and turned against himself what he had so often successfully used against the whole prison administration: he took up a hunger strike against himself. For twelve days he lay down and ate nothing. Then, finally his body was checkmated enough for him to think about Lia calmly. At that time the comrades in Belgium demanded that he come to work with them. But he stayed another two months in Paris, until he was sure that he could meet Lia without the slightest twinge of feeling. The incomprehensible fact, which filled him with a kind of horror, that she could go to someone like Josef probably helped him to sever himself from her.

“I'm tired of you, Sasha,” Lia said as she left him.

“I'm a terrible person, Lyubimaya!”

There must have been many other women in Sasha's life. Alexander Berkman, whom he probably visited in the Fall of 1924, said admiringly, when he saw Hanka: “Such women

²⁴ All the information in this book given by Y. L. comes from several interviews with the author.

Sasha always has! How does he do it, the devil?” and Sasha answered with contemptuous irony: “Yes, and such an ugly fellow, and a brigand. But you must surely know why.”

There was Lyuba the Fair, and Lyuba the Dark, there was Yelena Fyodorovna, who participated in his escape from prison, there was a woman who declared him to be her husband when he was arrested during an escape in Bryansk, and who thus saved him. Hanka wrote: Unfortunately his seed is apparently very thirsty for life, and all of his lovers had to have abortions. Only Rachil once had her way against his will ...”

5. Flight to Berlin

Before speaking about Sasha Shapiro's escape from prison and his flight to Berlin – we have already said some things about this—we wish to clarify the manner in which we will refer to him from now on. *Eine Frau* relates:

The name by which he goes sounds very aristocratic; that was not intentional, it happened that way accidentally when, near the end of his time in Russia a comrade who was experienced in these matters altered the name on his Russian papers as well as could be done.

This “aristocratic” and in any case non-Jewish sounding name was Alexander Tanaroff. Since 1921 Sasha Shapiro lived under this name, he was deported to Auschwitz under this name, and it is under this name that he may be found in the list of victims of the Shoah. It therefore seems appropriate that from now on we use this name in our book.

A small remark may be added about this: The text quoted above maintains that his name was altered in his Russian papers. It does in fact seem relatively simple to transform the name Shapiro, written in Cyrillic, into Tanaroff. That would indicate that his birth date really was October 11, 1889 or November 10, 1889, and that his mother's maiden name was Dimitrievna (spelling uncertain)²⁵.

Tanaroff arrived in Berlin without incident, and received a residence permit with relative ease. This could hardly be denied to him as a victim of political persecution and a refugee from Russia, a land still shaken by violence. Hundreds of thousands left the country in those days, and many found a haven in Berlin. He also received a small pension from a charity for emigrated Anarchists, and he himself stated that he could have lived comfortably in Berlin for years. It can be assumed with certainty that in this city he met again with many of his comrades-in-arms, first and foremost, presumably, with Nestor Makhno himself. Also Alexander Berkman, Emma Goldman, Souchy, the “other” Shapiro and many others were in Berlin in 1921, and lived there at least temporarily later on. Legally or illegally, it was not very difficult to get a residence permit in the melting pot of Berlin during the inflation crisis. Everything was possible. In his book mentioned earlier *Memoirs of a Revolutionary*, Victor Serge describes with admirable vividness the Berlin to which Tanaroff had fled.

At the police headquarters in Berlin, for ten dollars and a couple of cigarettes, I purchased with no trouble at all an authentic residence permit, which transformed me from a Belgian into a Pole. [...] In this Germany of the Versailles Peace Treaty, under the Social Democratic president Ebert and the most democratic of all republican constitutions, one breathed the air of a dying world. Everything was kept properly, the people were modest, kind, hard-working, declassed, destitute, corrupt, and easily provoked. Right in the middle of the city, over the black river Spree and the Friedrichstrasse a big train station was built. The war-disabled, wearing decorations on their chests, sold matches from door to door at night clubs, in which young women – for sale like everything else – danced naked between the sumptuous tables of the guests. A Capitalism floundering in madness, whose soul seemed to be Hugo Stinnes, amassed huge fortunes from bankruptcies. The daughters of the bourgeoisie were for sale in bars, the daughters of the people on the streets! The officials were for sale, the import and export licences, government securities! [...] The portraits by Oskar Kokoschka, lines, colors, forms, nourished themselves from a cosmic neurosis. George Grosz drew with metallic strokes figures of piggish bourgeoisie and automatic jail wardens, under whom prisoners and emaciated proletariats pursued a maggot's existence. Barlach sculpted peasants petrified with fear.

²⁵ Yuri Manin has brought to the author's notice the fact that the name « Tanaroff » sounds distinctly non-Russian, therefore the assumption of a forgery « as well as could be done » seems plausible. Grothendieck confirmed this to Y.L., describing how each letter in the name Shapiro could be changed to the corresponding letter in Tanaroff with minimal effort.

However, Tanaroff left Berlin after only a few weeks, in order to settle in Paris, the second largest center of Eastern-European emigration. The decisive factor in this step was a rather grotesque affair, which involved the Italian Anarchist Francesco Ghezzi. After having carried out an attack at the Opera in Milan, he fled to Berlin, and somehow came into contact with Sasha who helped to hide him. Sasha found this demonstration of violence appallingly senseless and mistaken, but that was no reason for him not to take in a comrade. They got along well together, although they could only communicate with difficulty: Ghezzi spoke almost no German and Sasha only very inadequate French. And neither of them realized that the police had already become aware of Ghezzi. Several days earlier, they had installed themselves in a room next door, and were trying to listen in on the conversations between Tanaroff and Ghezzi. Both used several different cover names, which completely confused the police. A passage in *Eine Frau* describes how the police finally arrested Sasha as well as Ghezzi. They showed consideration in waiting until Lia, who had spent a first night of love with Sasha after having had an abortion, left the room at five o'clock in the morning. There must have been some slapstick scenes during the questioning at police headquarters. In *Eine Frau* the end of the interrogation is described:

Before releasing him, the officer clipped the first pages with loving care inside a new folder, and said to him very obligingly: Indeed, I personally hold your world view to be very idealistic. But as an officer I must tell you that the German state doesn't want to have anything to do with people like you. Unfortunately we are bound by your right to political asylum, and we can't deport you. But if you had the chance to move to another country – you would be doing us a big favor. – In any case: as soon as we can prove the slightest connection between you and politically active circles here in Germany..." And he made a cutting gesture with his hand.

Tanaroff then made the disastrous mistake of following the "advice" of the officer. He knew that the right of asylum only counts in the first country in which one has found refuge, and only as long as one lives continuously in that country. However he could not find any way to earn his living in Berlin, and he did not wish to live on the support of his comrades, as so many others did. He went to Paris. Not a few of his comrades lived there undisturbed. Was not France the land of freedom, the refuge of all those driven from their homelands? Thus he lost his chance to legalize his status – but presumably as an Anarchist this held absolutely no importance for him.

We will not meet Francesco Ghezzi again in this book, and therefore his tragic story should be briefly mentioned. Although Sasha warned him that he was heading towards certain death he went to the U.S.S.R. He was arrested in 1929; it could hardly have been any different. There was a big, international campaign for his release, which led to only a temporary success. He was arrested again in 1937, and in 1941 the completely healthy man died in a Siberian camp of "tuberculosis."

In *Eine Frau* a certain Feldmann is often mentioned, apparently a Russian Anarchist, who only spoke "a halting German" and who had known Sasha well in Russia. In any case, he was able to tell all kinds of stories about Sasha's arrival in Berlin. This could be Alexander Feldmann, who belonged to the group of Taganka Anarchists. They undertook a hunger strike in the notorious Taganka Prison and were released under international pressure. In 1922, ten of them (including Volin) were deported to Szczecin, using forged Czechoslovakian passports. Feldmann was already in Berlin when Sasha arrived there for the first time.

As already said, Berlin was not only a center for Russian refugees, but also for the Anarchist movement. Many international conferences took place there, which were of great importance for the organization of Anarcho-Syndicalism. The already named activists (Arshinoff, Berkman, Fleshin, Golman, Sania Shapiro, Souchy, Volin) participated in these, sometimes in leading roles. Of particular importance were the International Syndicalist

Conference in October 1921, another one from July 16-19, 1922 (in the course of which a final break was made between the Communists and the Syndicalists) and especially the founding conference of the “International Workingmen’s Association” (IWA) from December 25, 1922 to January 2, 1923, and in which participated representatives from thirteen countries of Europe and North and South America.

6. Sasha in Paris

After just a few weeks in Berlin, Sasha Tanaroff travelled to Paris. At this time he still spoke, as we have just heard, a “highly inadequate French”. (His German was evidently much better, although he had just arrived in Germany a few weeks before, an indication that he had, after all, perhaps spoken Yiddish in his youth.)

Because of the political asylum laws described earlier, it was not so simple for him to enter France. *Eine Frau* recounts his adventure:

In Paris it was not as simple as he had thought. The French authorities probably had enough of this tidal wave of Russian refugees. They were not obliged to take him in. Twice Sasha was sent back and forth between France and Germany. To the inspector in Cologne who informed him for the second time that he must quit Germany immediately, and that he would personally make sure that he didn't get lost on the way, he said, “I have to stay somewhere in the end. I would gladly go to Mars, but ...”

He shrugged his shoulders: “Stay where you can and wish, but not with us. I have my instructions. Entering German territory is prohibited to you; you are already guilty of breaking the ban. That is punishable by six months in prison. And when you have served your time you will be immediately deported across the border. This time we'll make it simpler. I'll have you brought to the border right away, whichever one you want, the French one or the Belgian one.

At least the police on both sides know the places where one can slip unnoticed over the border much better than a clueless foreigner. So that is how he came back to Paris.

And then Sasha had another of those strokes of luck that are indispensable to those who lead lives like his. In Paris, he told the French wife of a Russian comrade about his difficulties – and she simply said: “Don't worry, Sasha, I can straighten that out for you.” She spruced herself up and went to the inspector who was working on his case at the *Service des Etrangers*, and when she came back, it was officially ascertained that Sasha had just arrived straight from Russia, and therefore could not be denied the right to asylum. When he asked her admiringly how she had arranged it, she merely laughed. But the residence permit didn't turn out to be so reliable, because he later had difficulties when returning to France. Probably the same rule was applied as in Germany: one had to remain without interruption in the land that had granted one asylum.

One can assume that Lia soon followed Sasha. We do not know how she managed to get permission to enter France. We do not know any more about her than has been said already: she was beautiful, she was Jewish, perhaps from Poland, perhaps from Russia, she had a younger sister called Ite, and she couldn't stand life with Sasha for more than two years.

In Paris, just as in Berlin, there were “networks” of emigrants of all categories, who supported each other. In this manner work was soon found for Sasha. *Eine Frau* tells us about this:

When he came from Russia in 1921, the German comrades gave him a small sum of money from their solidarity fund for his living expenses, and he could have lived that way for years, as Makhno also did. But that didn't go down well with him. And after a few weeks, as he couldn't find any work in Berlin, he went to Paris. There the comrades found him a job in a small workshop. The “boss” took him on at piecework rates, as he thought he certainly wouldn't be able to work as much as the others with only one arm. But after a short time he got the hang of it; a few turns of the hand that accomplished the repetitive gestures in such a rational manner that soon he was achieving more than the others. The patron then wanted to change and pay him by the hour, but he wouldn't accept that, and left. At this time he heard that some comrades in Belgium were going out on the streets and to fairs with instant cameras, and making a living from this in a wonderfully independent manner. He travelled to Belgium, and for a while he worked with a borrowed camera, until he was able to get one of his own. It is certainly not the most pleasant way to earn one's bread, but it is one of the few employments where one neither is exploited nor exploits anyone else: one lives on the direct product of one's labor. [...] And one earns well with it. The comrades only work in the good season, and they earn enough to live without care during the

winter. “But with me it was always different; I didn’t work less or earn less than the others, but never was even a pfennig left over. There were always comrades that had no job, and they had to live too...”

Perhaps this portrayal is somewhat compressed in time. We have already heard that when Lia left him, presumably in 1923, he received an offer from his comrades in Belgium. From this time on he had worked on and off as a street photographer, probably – with some interruptions – until the year between the Spanish Civil War and the outbreak of the Second World War. There are many photographs that show Sasha at work as a photographer, some from Berlin, one clearly from Paris. This “instant camera” produced pictures on small metal plates of about six by nine centimetres; at that time they were the latest technological fad. Some of these photographs still exist today, among them the very first photograph of Sasha that the author saw, and a picture of Hanka with the newly born Alexander in a baby sleep sack. *Eine Frau* contains a fascinating portrayal of a street photographer’s work and the psychological tricks that he employs. We will speak of this again in chapter 13.

It is not known how long Sasha remained in Belgium, nor what contacts he was able to establish. It is certain however, that his sojourn there ended abruptly. He was arrested on the street with his camera, did not even receive permission to go home and pack his things, but instead was brought at night-time to the border. As he had no residence permit for any country, the Belgian authorities didn’t even try to have him cross the border legally: apparently he was sent across in the foggy darkness and was again given only the choice of which border it should be.

This event had serious consequences for Sasha, and we come with it to a fundamental aspect of Sasha’s life that until now has not been touched upon. His greatest goal in life, besides his vocation as an Anarchist Revolutionary, was his desire to become a writer. Both things were inseparably bound together, as he wanted to write the history of the Russian Revolution, as he himself had experienced it. In trying to report on this, the greatest difficulty is naturally that to all appearances, not a single line of his literary work has survived. We are wholly dependant upon what his partner and his son have said about it. Grothendieck writes in the meditation *La Clef des Songes*, from which we have already quoted:

Both my mother and my father had remarkable literary gifts. In the case of my father he even had an imperious vocation, which he felt as inseparable from his revolutionary vocation. From the small fragments which remain I have no doubt that he had the stuff of a great writer. And during the long years after the abrupt end of an immense epic adventure, he carried within him the work to be accomplished – a rich fresco of faith, hope and suffering, of laughter and tears and blood that has been shed, crowded and vast like his own indomitable life, and keen like a song of liberty... It belonged to him to realize this work, which made itself dense and heavy, which pushed and demanded to be born. It would be his voice, his message, that which he had to say to all men, that which no other could know or know how to express...

If he had been true to himself, this child that wished to be born would not have appealed in vain, while he was casting himself to the four winds. He knew this well, deep down inside, and if he allowed his life and his strength be gnawed away by the petty concerns of an emigrant’s life, in some way he was in collusion with this. And my mother also had blessed talents, which predestined her to great things. But they chose to neutralize each other mutually in a passionate confrontation without end...

What had happened in Belgium? He had begun to write again – perhaps had really begun for the first time, in the evenings and nights after working with his camera on the street. When he was arrested, he was not allowed, as already mentioned, to pack his things. In vain he pleaded with the police when they took him prisoner, at least to send him his manuscripts. “But they didn’t do it. And everything is lost, also what I had already written. And some things cannot be done all over again.”

That is perhaps the decisive sentence; every author, every artist knows that: some things cannot be done all over again. Even if he was still hopeful: “But should we have a calm period, then we’ll create something again!”

Certainly Grothendieck judges his father too severely, when he reproaches him with having allowed the pettiness of an emigrant's life to eat away at him. Life was inhumanly tough for Sasha, there was never any money and there were always worries: where one should live, how to pay the rent, how to pay for an abortion, how to get through the winter, how to help friends and comrades, and later there were two children to support. The poverty in which these people lived is inconceivable. How should one pay for the doctor, or for new eyeglasses, or for a pair of shoes? It was life at the lowest subsistence level. On the other hand Grothendieck is also right: how easy it is to lose sight of a great goal, to constantly procrastinate, in order to do what seems absolutely necessary at the moment, instead of finally taking a true resolution. In regard to Grothendieck, one thing is nevertheless difficult to comprehend: in 1991 he burned the few still existing manuscripts by his father, an act that perhaps can only be explained by Grothendieck's mental illness. After all, his descendants might well one day have become interested in the life of their forefathers!

Eine Frau relates a short episode, in which Sasha discourses on his artistic principles. In this way we may receive a very pale impression of Sasha's mode of expression. There is no doubt that he strongly influenced Hanka, who follows similar maxims in her own book:

Over and over again, cross out, cross out, cross out. An author may not be a nightingale, who gets drunk on its own song. Sometimes even Lott²⁶ is horrified when, after reading it out loud once again, he energetically strikes out half the page which they had spent a long time perfecting together the last time, leaving just a single sentence. "Should you never mourn for your beautiful words, that you can't strut around with them like a priest with his beard. The beard of a priest, so they say, is greasy. A work of art can't be greasy. And it doesn't need a beard, even when it shines ever so brightly. A work of art only emerges when you carve off everything superfluous, like with a sculpture, and carve a little more, and scrape a little more, until you have the exact musculature, that you feel the tendons and the bones underneath. You have to work that out beautifully and wholly – precisely, that it isn't a starving and plucked lame duck; in this you must put your whole strength.

From Belgium, Sasha Tanaroff returned to Paris.

In spite of its hardships, life in Paris certainly also had its pleasant aspects. Above all, there would have been numerous interesting acquaintances. Sasha particularly mentions the important Yiddish author Sholem Asch, and the painter, sculptor and journalist Aron Brzezinski; both were Polish Jews. One met with many artists in the *Café du Dome*, at that time a meeting place for the whole artistic elite of Paris. It is fascinating to think that there, at this time or later in the thirties, Sasha could even have met people like Picasso, Kokoschka and countless others.

Even if we digress somewhat from our subject matter, we should say a few words about Brzezinski in this place, as his life illustrates perhaps better than any description the milieu in which Sasha also lived;

Brzezinski was born in 1889 in Warsaw. He came to Paris apparently before the First World War, but served in the Polish infantry towards the end of the war. He also spent some time in London, and during the Bolshevik Revolution he travelled to Moscow. In 1921 he went to Paris and studied sculpture with Jean Boucher at the *Ecole des Beaux-Arts*. He completed a bronze bust of Sasha, that was exhibited in 1925 at the *Salon de la Société Française*, and of which pictures were printed in various art periodicals.²⁷ There exists an impressive photograph taken at this time, which shows Brzezinski with colleagues in (his?) atelier. Later he also participated in some artistic exhibitions. In *Eine Frau* we learn that Brzezinski lived in great poverty, and from time to time tried to earn his living as a porter at the train station. There, however, he was chased away by the "real" porters. Soon he could no longer afford an atelier, but instead moved into a dark, empty plumber's workshop. He

²⁶ In *Eine Frau* Hanka calls herself Charlotte, and later Lotte Babendeerde.

²⁷ A small newspaper cutting with just such a picture still exists today.

became involved as a journalist for the Jewish cause, and died in 1940, ill, forgotten and impoverished. There are many reasons to believe that the bust of Sasha made by Brzezinski still exists. (One could imagine that it lies somewhere in an old Paris apartment, buried under antique furniture, paintings and souvenirs. It has been impossible to find out anything more precise, but this is the most likely case.)²⁸

One may assume that in Paris Sasha sometimes had contact with Makhno and his circle; Makhno had fled Russia at the same time as himself. It is known that Sasha participated in the Anarchist movement. In the newspaper *La Revue Internationale Anarchiste*, which appeared for a short time, one can find two articles written by him, dated November 15, 1924 and February 15, 1926. Remarkably, they describe the Anarchist movement in Bulgaria. He used his cover name Sasha-Piotr, or Sasha Peter. A footnote implies that his original text was translated into French. His collaborators for this newspaper were, among others, Souchy, Volin, S. Faure, G. Vidal, and R. Nagorski.²⁹ Since Sasha was one of the authors of the first issue of this newspaper, one can guess that he also participated in the organization of the enterprise. One can also add that later in Berlin Sasha received visits from Bulgarian Anarchists. It is not known how these contacts came about.

²⁸ I have E.G. to thank for the anecdote which is recounted in the Prologue, which she witnessed as a little girl. We have every reason to believe that the unknown young man was Alexander Grothendieck, and that the bust was that made by Brzezinski. But there is no certain proof.

²⁹ I would like to thank Marianne Enckell from CIRA, Lausanne, for referring me to this article.

7. Sasha in Berlin

In the fall of 1925 Sasha Tanaroff received a permit to enter Germany for eight days from the German consulate in Paris, in order to settle some “family affairs”. These eight days became eight years. He didn’t leave Germany again until the takeover of the National-Socialist Party in the summer of 1933. This is the period of Sasha’s life about which we know the most, because Hanka recorded with minutious detail the manner in which she met and fell in love with him, and the impression he made on his surroundings. She was so overwhelmed by his personality that more than twenty years later – when she began to write her novel – this period sprang to life complete with every detail before her eyes.

The “family affair” that Sasha had to settle seems rather to have been a misunderstanding. It concerned disputes within the circle of Russian emigrants and Anarchists. Apparently the question had been raised as to how it was possible for Sasha, alone of his entire group, to have succeeded in fleeing the Soviet Union in 1921, a feat that must have appeared “miraculous”. In order to clarify this matter, and remove any suspicion, whether spoken or unspoken, Sasha, revolver in hand, visited some of the Russian Anarchists in Berlin to demand an account of their words. The scene was more theatrical than truly dramatic, and nothing serious happened.

After the purpose of his visit had been realized, or rather, had dissolved into thin air, there was no money for the return trip to Paris. He first had to earn a sufficient sum with his “instant camera” on the streets and squares of Berlin. And there weren’t only practical obstacles, but also bureaucratic ones. He needed a trading licence, and to acquire that a residence permit, and for that valid papers – the officials merely shook their heads over his stateless Nansen passport – after all, he had already been deported once before. Ultimately it was quite out of the question for him to legalize and extend his stay.

At first he hid out with some “comrades” in cellar apartments, crudely furnished rooms, store rooms, or the cheapest possible hotel rooms. By coincidence, he encountered the circle frequented by Hanka Grothendieck and her husband Johannes (Alf) Raddatz. Perhaps it was not pure coincidence after all, because the area north of Alexanderplatz was a center for Russian emigrants; many anarchists and also people who thought they were anarchists lived there. At that time Hanka had gone to Hamburg to have an abortion, and Alf Raddatz wrote to her in a letter of the unusual Russian guest, about whom the wildest rumors were circulating.

That is the strangest head that Redy has ever seen. Naturally this eccentric idea of having one’s head shaved, that already creates an imposing effect. And the face is worthy of it: Caesar, neither more nor less. That someone like that can be alive today! “Sasha?” Redy pronounces questioningly. “Isn’t that a nickname for Alexander?” And thinks: lousy taste; how can a guy like that use a nickname! Alexander would fit him perfectly.³⁰

If one is to believe the account given in *Eine Frau*, Sasha saw Hanka’s photograph by chance, probably one of the photographs that still exist today, and immediately informed the dismayed husband: “I will take your wife away from you!” A few days later Hanka appeared, still rather weak from her abortion –and it was love at first sight.

“Love” is perhaps not quite the right word: a chaos, a tempest of uncontrolled feelings are what broke out between them. Both were passionate, proud, arrogant, uncompromising and inflexible characters. From the very first day there were misunderstandings, Sasha occasionally spends all night long running as one possessed through the streets of Berlin, there are “final” separations that last only days, or hours, and lead to promises and vows and passionate reconciliations. Alf Raddatz throws himself, utterly destroyed, at his wife’s feet,

³⁰ Redy is the cover name for Alf Raddatz in “Eine Frau.”

threatening alternately to shoot himself or Sasha. But in the end Sasha and Hanka cannot let go of each other. One does not get the impression that it was a happy relationship. It was a fateful meeting, and even Sasha, who only ever followed the directives of his own will, had to submit.

As already mentioned in the last chapter, Grothendieck is of the opinion that his father sacrificed his “remarkable” literary vocation to the Anarchist cause and that he “allowed his life and his strength be gnawed away by the petty concerns of an emigrant’s life”. As to his literary ambitions, one can only say that Sasha was in the right place at the right time in Berlin. Many Russian intellectuals and writers lived there, the most significant certainly being the young Nabokov (from 1923 to 1937), who, it must be said, belonged to a very different social class. In a biography of Vladimir Nabokov one reads:³¹

In Berlin there lived as many Russian writers (and by no means second-raters) as in a Russian city. Berlin became the capital of Russian editing houses and the Russian press. [...] In 1924 in Berlin there were eighty-six (!) Russian publishing houses. Ever growing numbers of Russian writers came to Berlin, who had not yet decided if they would wait here for the fall of the Bolshevik power, or would remain forever, or would return home ...

Concerning the Anarchist movement, it is certain that Sasha met with numerous Anarchists during his stay in Berlin, although it is unclear how active he was himself. Unfortunately *Eine Frau* contains only very few references to his activity within the movement. Perhaps this is because conspiratorial behavior as an Anarchist had become part of his flesh and blood. Even closest friends were given as little information as possible, so that during interrogations or under torture they would not be able to betray anything. In fact, in *Eine Frau* only a few names are mentioned, but these are revelatory, as they are the names of leading agents that often played predominant roles in their own countries.

In those years Berlin was a city in which Leftists, Social Democrats and Communists dominated politically. It was clear to the National Socialists under the ideological leadership of Goebbels, that in order to win the empire they would have to win Prussia, and to win Prussia they must win Berlin. There were constant demonstrations, parades and brawls. It is difficult to imagine that Sasha, who had been condemned to death by the Communists, would have joined these struggles on the side of the Leftists. As an Anarchist he had no home anywhere.

And now the time has come to delve into the life of Hanka Grothendieck.

³¹ Boris Nossik, *Nabokov. Eine Biographie*, Aufbau Taschenbuchverlag, Berlin 1999

8. Hanka Grothendieck's Parents

At the beginning of 2003 the author showed a photograph of Hanka Grothendieck to a close relative, who thereupon exclaimed: "Oh, I hate that woman!" Another contemporary, who one would never believe could say a bad word about anyone, declared, "She had a very bad character!" Her son wrote: The last five years of her life were an unimaginable hell, her death was a deliverance for herself and for me."³² Other people from her circle of acquaintances who could be consulted gave similar answers. The very least that one might hear was: "She had a very difficult personality." Who was this woman, who could cause such violent reactions half a century after her death?

Already around the age of sixteen, Hanka Grothendieck had left her parents' home and begun a life which was radical, uncompromising, eccentric and in the end self-destructive, similar to that of her future partner. If one wants to understand her personality and her life, one must begin with her parents.

Her grandfather was Albert Ernst Hermann Grothendieck.³³ He was born on January 3, 1971 in Damgarten, and was of the Evangelical-Lutheran confession. At first he lived in Rostock, but moved to Hamburg not later than the year 1900, where he died on March 3, 1945. His parents, as recorded in the marriage certificate, were the trader Friedrich Christian Wilhelm Grothendieck and his wife Friedericke, née Bollnow, also from Damgarten. (This small town lies halfway between Rostock and Stralsund, on the border between Mecklenburg and Vorpommern on the Bay of Saal.) According to the baptismal records, Albert was the tenth child of his parents. It is said³⁴ that his father's violent drove him, as well as some of his brothers, out of the house at the age of fifteen. In Rostock Albert worked in the beer trade. In 1894 he married there Johanne Sophie Friedericke Bender, the daughter of the maritime pilot Peter Bender from Cuxhaven. A daughter was born, Eleonore (Nora), about whose life little is known. The marriage ended in the summer of 1944 with Johanne's suicide.

Albert Grothendieck, now a widower, married for the second time on February 23, 1900, a housekeeper named Anna Luise Lisette Johanna Demmin. She was born on June 1, 1872, was also Evangelical-Lutheran, and came from an "old" long-established family of farmers and inn-keepers in Liessow (district of Güstrow, Mecklenburg.) This is perhaps the right moment to correct a widely spread error (i.e. on the internet): the family of Alexander Grothendieck's mother has no Jewish background.

Anna Demmin's parents were Friedrich Johann Christoph Demmin, whose hereditary professions were farmer, inn-keeper and blacksmith, and his wife Wilhelmine Sophie Henriette, née Sürss. They managed a large farm, to which also belonged a clay and gravel pit, and a grocery store. The wedding of Albert and Anna took place in Knegendorf, a few kilometers south of Liessow. They were in a hurry, because the bride was pregnant; a fact with which Hanka Grothendieck could always reproach her father later on during the many violent arguments over her moral conduct. Four children were born to them: Johanna (who later called herself Hanna, and then Hanka, the partner of Sasha and the mother of Alexander Grothendieck), Fritz, Claus and Siegfried. (The three brothers later led inconspicuous, conventional lives, differing greatly from their sister and their father.)

³² Letter to the Author

³³ In several biographical notes about Grothendieck it is said that the name is of Dutch origin and that his ancestors came from Holland. This is possible, but not proven. It is doubtless a name of either Dutch or Lower German origin.

³⁴ Statements such as "it is said" will now usually refer to Hanka Grothendieck's novel *Eine Frau*.

Albert Grothendieck's professional career went in anything but a straight line, and his character was anything but straightforward. A member of the family, who can still remember him, said literally: "He was a rake, who ran around a lot during his life."³⁵ As already mentioned, in Rostock he was at first involved in the beer trade. On his marriage certificate with Anna Demmin his profession was recorded as head waiter. Soon after, however, his fortunes seem to have risen dramatically. A short time later he owned (or at least managed) the Rathaus Hotel in Altona, Königstrasse, just in front of the Town Hall of Altona. It was a solid middle class hotel in a fine location (the Königstrasse is a westward continuation of the Reeperbahn) with an all-women orchestra and numerous employees. Existing photographs of the hotel and restaurant give an impression of sophistication, and radiate the dignified prosperity which belonged to the respectable middle class world of the turn of the century. The family lived in a large apartment with a certain luxury: nannies and other servants were taken for granted.

In the following years Hanka and her siblings had to live through their family's inexorable economic and social decline, caused above all by their father's craving for status (he went to horse races instead of taking care of his hotel), but also because of fraud, disadvantageous leases and personal misfortunes such as the heavy expenses occasioned by their mother's continuous illness. Later came the war, the economic crisis, and inflation. Around the year 1905 his business collapsed completely for the first time; they had to give up the hotel, and from then on things kept going down. After the hotel they ran a rented tavern in the Bahnhofstrasse, and then, starting in 1911, a tourist café on the Süllberg. That was still classy: until today the Süllberg in Blankensee is considered one of the noblest addresses in Hamburg, with a grandiose view of the Elbe and the countryside around it (and today the runway of the Airbus factory). Albert often had to borrow money from his wife's wealthy relatives; a golden watch pawned on one of these occasions still belongs to the family members.

It was especially humiliating for Albert, who was obliged to earn wages by working as a waiter during the winter, and more than once served guests whom he had greeted splendidly as hotelier only a few years before. As a waiter, he had returned to his starting point. In August 1921, at the beginning of the inflation crisis, he purchased the franchise for the shoe-shine stands and public toilets of the Hamburg train station, and also carried on a small trade in toiletries, tobacco, cigarettes, and cigars. Then even this franchise was lost to competition and he had to work for wages as a shoe-shiner himself. (In fact, during the inflation crisis this job at the train station was not so bad, because many foreign travellers gave tips in hard currency.) The family's apartments became smaller and smaller, and finally they rented furnished rooms, so that some money would be left over. After the inflation crisis he worked among other things as a guard, a packer and a painter in small businesses in Hamburg, always for short periods. Beginning in 1924, he ran a small business with his son, selling fresh fish of all kinds, which he peddled on a motorized three-wheeler. Sometimes he took up his old profession as waiter again.

But Albert Grothendieck never really let himself be dragged under. At a regrettably late date in his life, after years of fighting, he won a lawsuit which revolved around earlier leasing contracts. He received compensation, which allowed him in the middle of the twenties to buy a small property in a housing scheme, which still exists today (although largely rebuilt) in Fuhlsbüttel, and thus he was finally able to have a little solid ground under his feet. Altogether, his story was not atypical for small businessmen in Germany during those

³⁵ The following information about Albert Grothendieck comes from EF on the one hand, and on the other hand from a series of original documents (photographs, trade licences) which are in private possession, and also from an interview with a great-niece and a nephew of his wife.

decades. Countless similar existences in Germany were destroyed by the war, the collapse, the economic crisis and inflation.

The relationship with his children seems to have relaxed significantly after the death of his second wife (in 1928). He may not have taken any notice of his grandchild Alexander, but Alexander's older sister lived as a baby and as a child for quite some time with her grandparents. He married a third time, and died shortly before the end of the war. His relatives still say today that in spite of all his misfortunes Albert Grothendieck never lost a certain optimism and the manners of a gentleman.

Even the few indications that we have been able to give about Albert Grothendieck demonstrate that his life contains enough material for a novel, perhaps a depressing one, but in any case one that would describe a typical life story of the times.

It is easy to imagine (although it remains pure speculation) that these childhood experiences contributed to Hanka's breakaway from the bourgeois world. Grothendieck himself is of the opinion that the problematic relationship between his grandfather and his mother is one of the reasons for the tensions and fractures in his family. It has even been suggested that there was a sexual component to their relationship. This, however, cannot be proven in any way, and seems on the whole rather improbable. Considering everything we know about Hanka, if "something" had happened between her and her father she would never have missed the chance to describe it in great detail in her book. Even if Grothendieck learned more from his mother than what is known today, we can probably assume that he sees this relationship as more dramatic and as having had more serious consequences than it actually did.

It is at present (and will probably be in the future) almost impossible to relate anything with certainty about Grothendieck's grandmother Anna. One of her nephews, who is today eighty-nine years old and still remembers her, expressed himself thus: "She was a lady." Because she herself came from a wealthy, long-established and economically secure family of farmers, the decline we have portrayed must have affected her far more than her husband, who left home at fifteen and afterwards pursued his fortune or misfortune as a self-made man. She was too proud to ask her relatives for support, but her family did not abandon her completely. With this statement, however, we enter into the land of conjecture. Anna died on October 3, 1928; and apart from her nephew no one else is still alive who knew her. We therefore can only rely upon what Hanka writes about her mother in *Eine Frau*.

According to *Eine Frau*, Anna's parents had warned her not to marry the somewhat dubious Albert, a criticism which in time was confirmed: a hotel owner and businessman that drove to races with a team of four horses -- that didn't bode well! In the summer holidays Anna regularly visited her parents in Mecklenburg. There is no doubt that here more than anywhere, in the peaceful solidity of a large farm and everything that goes with it (one imagines old oak trees and boulders at the courtyard entrance) she realized all that had gone wrong in her life, and what kind of unhappiness fate had held in store for her. Indeed, during her marriage she was utterly worn out by her duties as wife, housewife, mother of five rather complicated children under permanently degenerating economic conditions, by pregnancies, and by illness; a destiny not unusual for a German woman of those times. She sacrificed herself completely for her family and her children, but in the end her strength and her health were not strong enough to survive such efforts. Hanka portrays her mother as a sweet, but intimidated, submissive, sensitive and unhappy woman, helpless in the face of the violent temper and inconsiderate behaviour of her husband. Only at the end of her life, when she had lost all her possessions, did she show some understanding for her daughter's rejection of bourgeois life. And one can imagine (though it is pure speculation) that for Hanka the example of her mother acted as a deterrent.

11. Hanka Grothendieck's Youth

We repeat that this chapter relies heavily on the depiction in *Eine Frau*, in which Hanka Grothendieck describes her own life until the year 1927.

Johanna (Hanka) Grothendieck was born on August 21, 1900, in Hamburg. The first years of her life took place in the setting typical of a bourgeois family in Hamburg. But very early on she felt alienated from her family. She writes: "When she was thirteen years old, Charlotte Babendeerde decided to take life into her own hands." She was apparently a good student, but had to give up high school as her family was no longer able to afford it. At the age of seventeen she began a kindergarden teacher training course, which she did not complete any more than she ever completed anything else in her life. At this time began once and for all her radical emancipation from all the traditional conventions and conceptions of a bourgeois society, at least that of Hamburg.

What caused this break in her life is difficult to identify clearly. Was it the oppressive social decline of her family, unknown personal problems, the unhappy destiny of her mother, or simply her temperament – we do not know.

Occasionally she took acting lessons, wrote poems and small works of prose. She had a plan to join the artists' colony at Worpsswede with Heinrich Vogeler. She lived through mental and physical crises. She began, usually without any means of support, a restless vagabond's life. In youth hostels and elsewhere she cultivated chance acquaintanceships; for weeks she accompanied a travelling peddler and trader through the Mark Brandenburg, allowing herself to be "supported" by him, but stubbornly refusing the usual or at least anticipated services in return.

Back in Hamburg she met a clergyman who had been expelled and excluded by the Evangelical church, but who had attracted a large following in the "Fichte High School," a sort of adult education center. A rather sticky relationship developed between the vain and unctuous father of a family and the rebellious nineteen year old girl. But apart from this, the man recognized her talent as a writer, supported her in her artistic plans, encouraged her to write a novel, and promised to help her get it published.³⁶

The Fichte High School was politically oriented in a rather nationalist direction, and at the various events that took place there Hanka became acquainted with different kinds of reform movements, for example Free German Youth, although these played little role in her later life. She traversed an aimless and crisis-filled phase of "self-discovery".

Of great importance for the next stage in her life was the fact that through the Fichte High School she met the famous dramaturge, writer and painter Lothar Schreyer, who was searching for people interested in participating in his expressionistic experimental theater "Kampfbühne".³⁷ She worked in the years 1920/21 as actress and speaker for the Kampfbühne. There are several publications about the extraordinarily interesting and dramatic history of this theater which mention Hanka Grothendieck. In unpublished memoirs that Lothar Schreyer wrote in 1965, one can read about the first performance of the play *Crucifixion*.³⁸

³⁶ Apparently it is E. A. Engelhardt (1887-1961), who resigned from his post as pastor and became the manager of the Fichte High School.

³⁷ Battle Stage

³⁸ Lothar Schreyer : *Expressionistisches Theater*, Toth, Hamburg 1948 ; Lothar Schreyer : *Erinnerungen an Sturm und Bauhaus*, Langen-Müller, München 1956; Athina Chadnis: *Die Expressionistischen Maskentänzer Lavinia Schulz und Walter Holdt*, Europäischer Verlag der Wissenschaften, Frankfurt 1998. I would like to thank A. Chadzis for bringing my attention to the manuscript in the papers of Lothar Schreyer.

How the artless Wandervogel³⁹ maiden, Hannah Grothendiek [sic] mastered the endless weeping of the mother rhythmically and tonally, has always been impossible for me to understand. It was a desperate human battle against demonic forces.

One can make the following comment about the “demonic forces” of which Schreyer speaks: two other Kampfbühne participants, close acquaintances of Hanka, Lavinia Schulz and Walter Holdt, had enormous personal problems, which ended finally in June 1924 with a double suicide (or a killing followed by suicide). Hanka included this episode in her book, in a considerably modified form, however -- the only time that a divergence from historical events may be detected there. Hanka seems to have had a good relationship with Lothar Schreyer, and it is a fact that *Eine Frau* contains details about his personality and influence, and also about his Kampfbühne around 1920, that would be historically of great interest in the study of the theater.

Athina Chadzis’ book, mentioned in the last footnote, gives extensive information about the life of Lavinia Schulz, which ended in such catastrophe. Lothar Schreyer terminated the Kampfbühne experiment after her withdrawal; she was his most important actress. A short time later he became master and director of the stage class at the Bauhaus in Dessau. It seems that after these events Schreyer and Hanka did not meet again.

It is worth recording that the Kampfbühne gave a performance in Berlin, on the invitation of Herwarth Walden, in which Hanka participated. Hanka received a fee of 300 Marks, and considered buying a small, recently exhibited painting by Paul Klee with this sum. (Herwarth Walden, a central personality of German Expressionism in all its facets, acted as “agent” and gallery owner for Klee.)

If one considers Hanka’s situation at this time from the perspective of an outsider, one can certainly see prospects for her future. She was young, talented, perhaps even attractive, and in any case very sure of herself. She had reaped her first successes as an actress, she had met important and influential people, she even had a goal in life, namely to become an author. She had become familiar with expressionism, the most significant artistic movement of her time, which was important for her own development as a writer, and all this at a time when cultural life, particularly in Berlin, was receiving a fresh new impetus. One could say for her what we said for Sasha: she was in the right place at the right time. In *Eine Frau* she writes that she “was beginning to be known among the intellectual youth of Hamburg: Pranger, Prolet-Kult--some had perhaps even gotten wind of the Kampfbühne.” With hindsight it appears, however, that exactly at this time her life took an unlucky and even tragic turn for the worse.

In this seething environment, which was characterized as much by its avant-garde artistic tendencies as by the reformist events such as those at the Fichte High School, in countless discussion circles of young people, in the Wandervogel movement, but also against the backdrop of the economic crisis after the World War, which led to the impoverishment of broad layers of society including her own family members, Hanna Grothendieck (as she called herself at that time) came into contact with Anarchist, Socialist and Communist circles.

The next phase of her life began by mere chance: she relates in *Eine Frau* how her brother one day showed her an issue of the weekly paper “Der Pranger,”⁴⁰ a newspaper published in Hamburg which was the “mouthpiece of Hamburg’s control girls”, the prostitutes of Altona and St. Pauli. (The expression “control girls” is a reference to the fact that prostitutes were under the control of the authorities and the police.)

³⁹ *Wandervogel* (migratory bird) is the name of a popular movement of youth groups in Germany starting in 1896. Their goal was to shake off the restrictions of society and get back to nature and freedom.

⁴⁰ The Pillory

Hanka was immediately inflamed, and found a new field of activity. She decided at once to get involved as editor (but in fact as “general dogsbody”). The articles for this paper were not signed, unless they had been written by prominent people such as the well-known communist Ketty Guttman⁴¹ or the neurologist and sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld. It would therefore be difficult (but perhaps not impossible) to find out which contributions were written by Hanna Grothendieck.

As can be expected, the articles in the paper, viewed from today’s perspective, appear all in all very dated, and in some places one cannot suppress an amused smile. They can be characterized by an earnest, no doubt sometimes naïve, but sympathetic effort to ameliorate the social and personal condition of prostitutes. Typical titles of the articles are as follows: Health, Intimacies from the House of Pleasure, I Accuse, What is a Pimp?, The Liberation of Prostitutes, White Slavery, Secret Prostitution, The White Slave Trade is Booming!, The Unemployment Office Breeds Tramps, Abortion or Contraceptives, etc. It is somewhat grotesque that, in spite of her vagabond life-style and a few erotic escapades, the still quite inexperienced young woman tried to be a counsellor for the far more callous and disillusioned prostitutes.

In this newspaper is the only verifiable publication by Hanka Grothendieck: the poem “Big City Nights,” which led to the confiscation of the issue, and to a trial (which ended with an acquittal.) It is reprinted at the end of the chapter. When reading it, one must remember that it was written by a nineteen or twenty-year-old.

During another lawsuit against the “Pranger” it is possible that Hanka made an acquaintance that was decisive for the life of her future son. The hearing is described in n° 28 of the 1920’s issue of the “Pranger,” and one may read: “After a moral authority as important as Pastor Heydorn expressed himself to the same effect [namely, the same as the witness for the defence] the hearing of evidence was considered closed.”

We will meet Pastor Heydorn again in later chapters; he played an essential role in Alexander Grothendieck’s life as foster father.

Through her work at the “Pranger”, Hanka Grothendieck came into contact more than ever before with the lower and lowest layers of society; with workers, the unemployed, the urban proletariat, with prostitutes, pimps and released prisoners. She became familiar with the problems of alcoholism, violence in the home, homelessness, and with all the enormous social misery of the times, but at the same time she also met convinced Communists and Anarchists, who sought for and found followers in these levels of society. The “Pranger” offered these people a sort of counselling service, and Hanka, for example, wrote letters to the authorities for prostitutes and prison inmates. (Hanka was never a member of the German Communist Party, and felt inwardly distant from the Party and the proletariat. She cultivated, as her son has emphasized on several occasions, a rather elitist consciousness.)

⁴¹ Ketty Guttman founded the “Pranger” and was at this time a representative of the German Communist Party in the legislative assembly of Hamburg.

Hanka Grothendieck's poem "Big City Nights" from the weekly newspaper "Der Pranger", edition 1920, n° 15

Big City Nights

In the Berlin Zoo. August nights lust,
Sultry unheard of splendors heavenwards,
In darkest bushes, where no star's ray shoots
On a low bench sits a man, avid, in rut,
An oh so tired girl, tortured by fear,
Behind her thought-heavy brow hunger's fever blazes,
In her ears a roaring heavy and red.
And how he softly peels her body open
And between her loins steals his greedy hand,
With trembling fingers rifles her pure body,
A desperate sob bursts forth. Shattered with revulsion
Her body revolts. – God in Heaven – money –!
The – hunger – – ! He wants to give her money –
Oh torment of shame – ! But life shrills even louder – !

Wild body writhes on her. A scream shrills – choking – struggling –.
Around her throat a strong hand clamps.
Loathsome breath reeks.
Struggle is broken.
Lustglowing embers sear pure body.

Now she is free. Sucked into the darkness,
The one who crushed underfoot her white body.
Stiff she lies. Staring bent backwards.
Unconscious lips stammer children's prayers.
Lightening stroke of recognition falls. Prayer breaks off,
Despair bounds upward. Glaring inside her and blinding
In letters of flame, the one word: Violated!
Through such torment of hunger pushed to this, then: Self-Judgement.
With feverish glow of unborn eyes she looks.
Shattered she creeps through the metropolis = twinkling lights
To the bridge. The Spree is deep and dark.
And hardly knows herself, what she has done. ...

12. Hanka Grothendieck and Alf Raddatz

In this Hamburg milieu, around 1921, Hanka Grothendieck met Johannes “Alf” Raddatz, a manifestly intelligent, humorous and in a certain manner winning and charming man, who was, however, incapable or unwilling to do any regular work. The account of their first meeting in *Eine Frau* begins with the following words: “A clever and attractively ugly face, like that of an intelligent guenon, on top of a badly proportioned body [...]”

This description does in fact match with surprising accuracy a photograph of him found among documents belonging to Hanka’s relatives. Alf did not at first manifest any special interest for Hanka, but Hanka, as so often, had her way.

Alf Raddatz was born on January 7, 1897 in Hamburg. His parents were Paul Hermann August Raddatz from Stargard in Pommern, and Maria Elisabeth, née Bosselmann from Blankenese. His father, like his grandfather Wilhelm Daniel Robert Raddatz, had learned the metal working trade and owned a machine factory that produced machine parts during the first quarter of the twentieth century. When times were good they employed thirty-five workers. He is described (in *Eine Frau*) as a class-conscious Social Democrat, who refused to send his talented son to high school, where he would have been able to advance socially. The machine factory was apparently sold during the inflation crisis. It seems that Paul Raddatz, an honest man, refused to illegally invest the proceeds in hard currency, and in this manner he lost all his wealth. The factory continued to function with other owners until after the Second World War. Paul Raddatz was originally baptised in an Evangelical church, but was later referred to in official documents as “dissident”. He seems to have left the church, which was rather unusual in those days, even for a Social Democrat.

After the takeover of the Nazis he was active in the anti-fascist resistance. He was condemned for conspiracy to treason, and was imprisoned in the Fuhlsbüttel prison (beginning in 1933/34 it became the concentration camp “Kola-Fu”). At this time, the Communist Willi Bredel was also imprisoned there. He wrote about his experiences in an autobiographical novel entitled *The Test of Endurance*. It was published as early as 1934 by the Malik edition in London, enjoyed worldwide success and was translated into four languages. Allegedly Raddatz appears in this book under a different name. Bredel describes forcefully the atrocious conditions in the Fuhlsbüttel prison. A common practice was to beat and torture the prisoner for so long that he would end up making use of the rope which was left purposely in his cell. It is well known that many of the people responsible were never brought to justice, either in the Federal Republic of Germany or in the German Democratic Republic. According to his youngest daughter H., Paul Raddatz died in 1936 as a consequence of the abuse he suffered in prison.

After finishing grade school, Alf Raddatz completed an apprenticeship to become a machinist and car mechanic (probably in his father’s factory) and obtained a journeyman’s certificate. Then came the First World War; Alf Raddatz eventually ended up in the Air Force, and after having shot down several enemy planes he was decorated with the iron cross second class and the Hanseaten cross. After the war he worked regularly for a short time as a car mechanic and driver. However, his father’s hopes that he would follow in his footsteps and direct the business were soon dashed.

After the World War, Alf became politically active. From 1919 to 1922 he belonged to the Social Democratic Party of Germany, and in 1926 he became a member of the German Communist Party. At the same time he developed an interest in writing, but did not publish anything, except, occasionally, for humorous or political poems in leftist newspapers such as “The Evening World”, “The Red Banner” or the “Berliner Daily”. A job offer as journalist for the Social Democratic press in Hamburg did not interest him.

When Hanka met him, he had just traversed a peculiar episode (perhaps reality and fiction are mingled here): together with a buddy, he had stolen a small cutter, supposedly in order to blast across the ocean to South America. The undertaking failed a few days later off the Danish coast because of damage to the motor during a storm. In Denmark he was arrested and brought to trial, where he defended himself with grandiose speeches. He was condemned to nine months in prison, but most of this time had already passed during his detention awaiting trial. The whole story is described as a single long booze-cruise with great declarations of friendship between all participants. As Raddatz himself opined, “piracy” definitely looks much better on a curriculum vitae than plain old “theft” (in which he is quite correct.)

Hanka and Alf soon lived together – in abysmal poverty. They kept their heads above water with rather odd small jobs – for instance, handwriting analyses – with misappropriations, dining-and-dashing, and small thefts, particularly of cigarettes. In her parents’ home she removed linens from her mother’s trousseau and brought them to the pawnshop. She swiped briquettes and crossed half of Hamburg carrying them in her knapsack to her own squalid apartment. Hanka’s way of earning money occasionally approached prostitution. After a large sum of money disappeared in the circle of their own friends, however, Alf could no longer show his face in Hamburg. The couple traveled penniless to relatives and acquaintances in Hanover and Bremen. They had the audacious idea of organizing a reading of the works of Hermann Löns in a small town in Lower Saxony, and rented a hall and had posters printed. But naturally no one came; they couldn’t pay what they owed and had to effect a hasty disappearance. Hanka generally managed to find someone who, as a “true knight”, would pay her hotel bill. Finally they returned to Hamburg. All this is described in an absolutely fascinating manner in *Eine Frau*.

Above all, the acute poverty widespread throughout broad levels of the population in those times is hard to imagine today. Sugar was purchased by the quarter pound, and when Hanka ate a meal with two fried eggs in her mother’s house, she felt that she would now be able to survive for another two days. Her relationship with her parents, who decidedly rejected the do-nothing Raddatz, was extremely tense. In fact, it was quite drastic: her father raged when he heard the name Raddatz, and her mother wrung her hands in desperation.

Hanka and Raddatz were proponents of “free love”, but they did get married – perhaps merely out of defiance – on May 18, 1922 in Hamburg. Hanka soon became pregnant; it is described in *Eine Frau* how a son (named Alf in the book) was born, but refused to nurse, and died after just nine days. The depiction of these nine days are among the most impressive and oppressive episodes of the book. The scene is so realistic that one cannot imagine that it is just a product of Hanka’s literary fantasy, but is tempted to assume that these are real experiences. Nevertheless the few people who remember Hanka know nothing about this baby. Grothendieck apparently never mentioned him either, and in fact Hanka told him a very similar episode about a baby’s refusing to nurse in relation to himself.

At this time the “Pranger” failed, and Hanka had to look for a new activity. With the support of the owner of a night club, she founded together with Raddatz a “Literary Cabaret,” in which sometimes even the famous Claire Waldorff appeared, travelling especially from Berlin with maid-in-waiting, lapdog and port wine. Hanka also dabbled in work as a door-to-door salesperson for a medical magazine for doctor’s offices. This was around the time when her father, after many years, finally won the lawsuit for compensation because of earlier leasing contracts, and was able to buy a small house in a housing scheme in Fuhlsbüttel, which from time to time served as a welcome refuge for Hanka.

On January 24, 1924, in their Hamburg apartment, a daughter was born to the couple Raddatz; Frode, who was always called “Maidi” by the family. Again, the birth was accompanied by dramatic events which are portrayed in *Eine Frau* in a masterful and

nightmarish way. There were difficulties with the afterbirth, the midwife could not help, and hours went by until Raddatz, desperately running all over the city, managed to locate a doctor. But when the doctor finally came, he gave the barely conscious woman up for lost. Raddatz forced him to attempt anything possible, and Hanka's life was saved.⁴²

But the couple's social decline continued, as far as that was still possible. They travelled on foot from Hamburg to Berlin, pushing the baby in a pram; they went begging, and were grateful when they were allowed to spend the night in an empty prison cell. Fortunately in Berlin, Hanka, and sometimes even Raddatz obtained work as free-lance journalists with the daily paper "The World on Monday". After a while, Maida was sent to live with Hanka's parents, who celebrated their silver wedding anniversary in a somber mood on February 23, 1925.

In Berlin the couple lived from hand to mouth; if they had money in their pockets – however it got there – it was spent immediately. They moved in Bohemian circles, had contact with Anarchists, looked up old acquaintances and made new ones. It was a miserable life in bleakly furnished rooms or damp basements, a life that had few high points and many low ones. Abortions were necessary; sometimes they separated, and then lived together again. There were only two constant factors: the oppressive, inescapable poverty and an unshakeable pride that made them refuse all regular work and anything resembling a bourgeois lifestyle. Especially Raddatz declared persistently that without a well-ironed white shirt and a decent meal he simply could not work.

Until now we have portrayed the visible aspects of Hanka's life, without digging very deeply. We shall often speak about her unhappy destiny and her character in later chapters. But we would like to mention at this point what her son has said, looking back and analysing her life almost three decades after her death, particularly about her relationship with men (ReS, p.604/605):

During her entire life she basked in a barely disguised contempt for everything feminine, she modelled herself as much as possible on excessively masculine values, and at the same time her relationship with men, ever since her adolescence, had been viscerally antagonistic. I was very lucky in that my mother spoke to me with great freedom about her life since childhood, and in that I dispose of very detailed autobiographical notes up until the first years of her life together with my father, not counting a voluminous correspondence.

One more remark about the history of the times should be made: the period with which we are concerned is known as the "golden twenties" in Berlin, a very short period before the inflation crisis and the Great Depression, and a period which brought forth in Germany an almost unique cultural blossoming. Berlin was a city vibrating with activity of every kind, from six-day marathons to the premiere of the Three Penny Opera. Life there never stood still for a minute. But there is no sense of this atmosphere in Hanka Grothendieck's book. She and her circle lived in the shadow of those brilliant years, literally in the dungeons.

⁴² The major part of the family discord seems to go back to this day. The granddaughters describe the events differently. Their accounts are a little unclear and very emotional. The crux of the matter is, however, that Hanka supposedly did not want to have the child because it was a girl. They claim that in later disputes Hanka often reproached her daughter with this fact.

13. The Street Photographer

According to official documents, as of September 1925 there was no longer a state of marital union between Hanka and Alf Raddatz.⁴² Hanka had finally separated from him de facto no later than 1926, and except during short periods of dispute, was living with Sasha Tanaroff. In some aspects it was the same life as with Raddatz: finding a place to stay in shabby furnished rooms, then settling in with various acquaintances or friends, always having some visitors sitting on the edge of the bed, talking, discussing, drinking tea, with no money in their pockets and no food in the larder, cadging cigarettes ... and constant bad conscience because yet again Hanka had not sent her parents the few promised marks for Maida's support.

In the summer Sasha could work as a street photographer (more about this shortly). In winter, when he could no longer take pictures on the street and there was no more money in their pockets, Sasha and Hanka would go pub-singing: in workers' bars he would sing Russian songs, and she would sing along and accompany him on the guitar; a humiliating, degrading way to earn money, no more than flimsily concealed begging. Yet the proletarian workers, who themselves had hardly enough to live on, were filled with a sense of solidarity, and Hanka and Sasha gathered in pfennigs and groschen. In contrast, they were almost always thrown out of bourgeois pubs.

Moreover, Tanaroff was constantly threatened with deportation; several times he was summoned to police headquarters. With the help of Raddatz, who sometimes even lent him his personal papers so that Sasha could pretend to be Hanka's husband, he managed to wriggle himself out of trouble more than once. But one day it came to a head. He was summoned again, and was tersely informed that he had been expelled from Germany, that he must pay a fine of three hundred and fifty Marks for having returned to the country, and that if he was not capable of doing so he must remain in prison for a corresponding amount of time. It was a catastrophe - "but unexpectedly everything was arranged as if by itself, without any effort on their part". A young doctor with Anarchist sympathies declared that Sasha was too ill to be moved, and had him hospitalized for his stomach problems (a consequence of the hunger strike), and the sponsor of a writer who was their friend placed the money required for the fine on the table without batting an eyelid. After this, however, more caution was necessary; it seems that for a time Sasha lived unregistered with friends. It is not known in what manner he succeeded in legalizing his status later on, but on October 30, 1928 he received a valid identity card from the police headquarters in Berlin.

For reasons difficult to understand Tanaroff did not want Hanka to work at the newspaper, although she received quite a good job offer. He seemed to want to support her himself –not actually a very "leftist" attitude. So he intensified his activity as a street photographer, working also outside of Berlin. Needless to say, Hanka procured the trading license; he worked as her "employee". In *Eine Frau* we are told how they went to fairs on the Baltic Sea and travelled into the Elbe Sandstone Mountains. At times the business seemed to be going very well, so well that in the fall of 1927 they were able to take over a photographer's atelier and the apartment that belonged to it.

If one wished to express it thus, one could state that for the majority of the years that Sasha spent in Germany and France he was a "professional photographer". It is therefore justifiable to quote a longer section (slightly abridged) from *Eine Frau*, which describes his activity on the street, particularly as this episode is especially well written. We cite this passage therefore not only in reference to Sasha's activity as a photographer but also to demonstrate Hanka Grothendieck's literary abilities – and as testimony to the admiration she felt for her beloved.

⁴² Application for a declaration of the illegitimacy of the child Alexander Raddatz.

The masses must bring it in!

That is the stroke of genius, which makes people into millionaires. What a pity that the idea came to them so very late. What a plague it had been until now, to hook a client!

Thirty-five pfennigs – first one considers long and well, before spending that much for a little round photo with brooch and glass, even if one really would love to have it. Indeed, for that price anyone else but Sasha would have stood around for half the day without having once pressed on the ball. But that's not Sasha's way. If the mountain doesn't come to Mohammed... He goes straight up to a passer-by, and only Lott can perceive in his apparently languid, sauntering steps how they balk and keep wanting to go back. And with the smile of a determined, good-humored pirate: "Come, I'll photograph you for the publicity."

Berliners are hardened against the harassments of street peddlers, but when this fellow, who makes people turn around in the street, suddenly talks to one, one starts confusedly trying to figure out the connection between the outlandish phenomenon and a publicity photo. And if Sasha then places his hand gently on one's arm, it's already utterly impossible for one to just go on his way. "But I don't have to buy it!"

"If I say you!"

If he said in the usual way: "I *said* you didn't!" it wouldn't reassure the suspicious client at all. But that sovereign "I!" gives one the strong feeling that one's misgivings are offending an unknown majesty.

And Sasha is already behind his cannon⁴³ (the only thing the camera has in common with a cannon is that it looks like a small artillery shell) with the publicity client watching in fascination how, with just his one hand, and with a light shove of his foot or knee against one leg of the tripod, he adjusts the long-legged, precariously balanced camera. Short and crisp: "Lift your head a little higher – there, that's enough; – Ready – one, two, three!" The little ball falls back; a light blow on the short, buttoned-ended handle, which lets the plate fall into the developer, the handle is pulled up to slide in a new plate – "If you want have a look at it, in a minute it is ready." And he begins to turn the nickel pot under the artillery shell, which holds three little cuvettes with the developer, shaking it back and forth on its axis. He doesn't in any way give the impression that he absolutely wants to detain one. The innocent client doesn't realize that this apparently disinterested equanimity binds him more firmly than the liveliest speech.

Sasha's strong accent induces the majority to catalogue him: oh, probably one of these Russian refugees. Considering the way he carries himself even now, he must have been quite a big shot. "You have probably seen better days?" someone kind-hearted asks curiously from time to time; – "Yes, I've seen better days." Sasha cuts him off in a tone which takes away any appetite for further indiscretions. With his pirate's smile Sasha then shows him the little picture. "Now say the truth: is it good or bad?" – upon which the subject of the publicity photo often does decide to keep the picture, although Sasha never says a word that oversteps the convened "publicity photo" arrangement; or else someone else, who's noticed what's going on, stands in line for a publicity photo. Sasha pins the pictures that he can't get rid of to his coat lapel. In the evening, before he packs up, he tears them off like a hated livery. And he always has to bring home a whole bunch of publicity photos, because even his suggestive powers cannot conjure thirty-five extra pfennigs into the pocket of a person whose budget is not exactly balanced.

A groschen⁴⁴ on the other hand – who doesn't have one to spare, if for that price he can take his likeness home with him? If he wants he can have the brooch for another ten pfennigs; the glass costs five pfennigs.

Now there are truly triumphal processions. And now it pays off if Lott helps him.

Ten pfennigs! One groschen! Who doesn't have that? Who would be so shabby as to demand lengthy guarantees?

The first to stand in front of the cannon is Lott. And she feels a funny little thrill in her body, when her lover zeroes in at her over the shiny, narrowing nickel snout. "Ready – one, two three!" And already someone has stopped and looks at the plate: "Your picture in one minute! Ten pfennigs!"

"Only ten pfennigs!" Lott says, beaming at the stranger. "Well, everybody can afford that!" She doesn't exactly pretend to be a client, but the knowledge that giving people a good picture for only a groschen is really a gift allows her to completely drop her habitual reserve. Sasha shows them the still dripping picture: "Now say the truth: is it good or bad?" Another one looks over his shoulder, compares it with Lott, and doesn't wait to be asked to take her place. And in Berlin, whenever four people gather in one spot, the formation of a crowd is as predictable as a law of nature. The first one makes up his mind, Lott shows her picture around with a radiant smile that renders her triumphantly beautiful; another one stands against the wall, and then a lady [...]

Sasha doesn't seem to worry about his clients, fully absorbed in his work; but the vibrating, contained energy in the quick, precise gestures with which he adjusts, takes the picture, adjusts anew, directs the people in front of the wall to the right or left with a gesture of his hand, takes another picture, shakes the pot of developer,

⁴³ Some tintype cameras were all metal, "cannon-shaped" and known as Fotokanonen.

⁴⁴ A groschen was a coin worth ten pfennigs.

removes the picture with a magnet, checks it quickly but attentively, knocks it lightly against the edge of the little metal bucket and drops it in the water, focuses on the already waiting new client – draws them all into the circle of his will as if into a deep pool.

And then it really takes off. Already the people are lining up in front of the camera right across the sidewalk all the way to the wall of the house, like two thick crooked hedges joining together; “Ready! – one – two – three! – Next!” and a curt, authoritative gesture of the hand on the camera cuts the next one out of the mass at the front of the hedge and pushes him into the small empty space. [...]

And the people enjoy themselves, they laugh with pleasure. Sasha never makes a joke, but they are as joyful as children, at how this odd, one-armed man masters his camera and all of them with quick, light, secure movements; they are enthusiastic, fascinated with his concentrated, laconic energy, with his short, commanding: “Next!” with the willingness with which the next one infallibly follows the imperious wave of his hand, and they anticipate with impatience the moment when they themselves they can stand where this authoritative voice, where this sure hand reaches for them and cuts them out of the mass [...]

“I didn’t even want to, but when that guy says: “Next!” – Bing! there ya stand!” says an astonished voice. “He does whatever he wants with ya!” And everyone is delighted, filled with admiration and approval.[...]

The women above all – for them it appears a blissfully exciting moment, when the will of this commanding man concentrates itself on them, when these domineering, almost angry eyes hold them in their gaze. Often an expression of bizarre submission comes over their features: the man over there, crouched over his elongated, phallus-shaped camera like an animal ready to spring, the blunt tip, that sliding slowly seems to seek them, and his knee, that gently and firmly pushes aside the leg of the tripod.

“ – One – two – three! – Next!” It is a party, where everyone gets a present. And even when they already have their picture, some of them can’t bring themselves to leave, they linger and linger, unfailingly charmed at how the magical gesture “Next!” once again causes a figure to spring forth in the narrow space between the two animated hedges [...]

“Yes, if it happens like this, if you don’t need drag the people by force, then there is nothing ugly about the work!” Sasha says, sighing deeply, on this first evening. “Why didn’t I do like this already before, instead of torturing myself, every time I had to tear every hateful thirty-five pfennigs away from the people!”

They are both dead tired. They have been out on the street for the whole day; they have processed almost six-hundred plates. They have made thirty-five Marks. About twenty Marks must be deducted for material expenses. Good earnings for two people on a weekday. Lott feels a little guilty: they could have gotten more if she had been more insistent in offering the brooches. But as the hours went by so arduously, she had reacted more and more mechanically and had let the initiative slip away. They had left the house with one hundred plates, but after only an hour Lott had had to go running to buy new ones. And they had no time to eat [...]

Sasha had taken almost six hundred pictures, an unbelievable feat of nervous energy: [...]

Lott had to bend over and straighten up countless times. Bend over, rinse a picture and dry it – straighten up, hand it over: “Maybe you would like a brooch with that? I can show you how it looks, you don’t have to – ” Bend over to the little box – straighten up, put the picture in the frame, hand it over; while the client considers the effect, bend over, rinse a new picture – straighten up, because the money is handed over; bend over, dry the picture, straighten up, hand it over [...]

Sasha’s strict, concentrated, regular fast cadence keeps the people intent on the magical order created by him [...] But when they are released from the spell and gather around Lott, they find their voice again, and her head buzzes from hearing the same questions repeated again and again [...]

“Does this last at all?” – “Oh, I assure you: I still have a picture of my husband that was made two years ago!” – “Well, goodness, for a groschen you can’t get much – ” – “No,” she says forcefully, and even stops working. “You can see how carefully I rinse the pictures, and every few minutes I change the water at the pub over there. That’s the main thing, so that no acid remains on the picture. And then I dry it nicely over the flame – and naturally, the glass protects it too.” (Immensely proud of the good salesmanship of the last remark.) [...]

“I think I would have looked better taken a little bit more from the other side!” – A sharp, scrutinising glance at the photo: “If you please! You have lots of character this way! Put that in a marriage ad – “

“That’s annoying, no really – the wind just blew my tie upwards, as if I wanted to hang myself! I can’t show my old lady that!” And if he is really not satisfied, Lott sends him back to the camera; “For free?” – “Of course, for free, we’re not cutthroats!”

“Now that came out well! For just one groschen! I haven’t had such a nice picture of myself for a long time!” – “Oh, I tell you, my husband – ” Lott brags. “Yes, he really knows his job! – A real artist!” [...]

“God, no, what sort of a nose have I got there, my nose isn’t like that! And so many wrinkles on my face!” A woman, naturally. – “But it’s lifelike, natural! You don’t have to buy it if you don’t want to, but be honest now – “ and she shows the picture around: “Is it really bad?” – “Not at all! –What does she want anyway?”

The picture is really expressive!" And quick as lightening her mind registers the word "expressive" for her repertory. [...]

And the women in general –! "My hair –my nose –the wrinkles – the shawl isn't arranged right – the sharp shadows – "Well, if you want art photos with lighting and retouching, you should make an appointment with an atelier on the Kurfürstendamm, and pay ten Marks." [...]

Seven o'clock. Closing time. With difficulty Sasha persuades the people that he is not allowed to work longer, that he would have to pay a big fine – "But we'll be back tomorrow!" And they disperse hesitantly, disappointed but cheerful, as if a fair were over, to the refrain that held this street in sway for the whole day: " – One – two – three – Next!"

Lott just let herself collapse onto the curb. Most of all she would have liked to just lie down flat. [...]

It seems that at this time Sasha and Hanka managed to get some ground under their feet, or at least they were in a position to do so. The profession of street photographer described above allowed them to earn enough to take over a "real" atelier. There is a description of this in *Eine Frau*. The listings in the corresponding Berlin address books show that apparently they took over business at the atelier of a certain Anna Feller-Hartmann in the Brunnenstrasse. But life then continued as it had always done before: people invariably came who possessed absolutely nothing, there was always someone in need of a small loan, and when they celebrated, sang and danced, then a few bottles of wine or cognac didn't last long.

In what concerned material things, Sasha thought of himself last of all. In the *Bulletin of the Relief Fund of the International Workingmen's Association for Anarchist and Anarcho-Syndicalists Imprisoned or Exiled in Russia* of November 1927 there is a list of donors from the Berlin section. "Sasha Piotr" is listed as having donated 20 Marks, the highest sum for a single person in Germany.⁴⁵ And so, as usual, there was not enough left over for the weekly money transfer to the grandparents for Maida's support. – But Sasha would not let Hanka work at the newspaper. And then,

Soon Sasha had more reason than ever to become suspicious about the mood of his lover. Lott was pregnant. And pregnant women are subject to the most unpredictable whims; that is a well known fact. Exactly, it is so well known and considered so unavoidable, that women simply abuse these maxims, and indulge themselves. She'd better beware – !

Lott was fortunately of such a healthy constitution that her pregnancies didn't cause her the slightest discomfort. However, in terms of sensitivity, she could just about hold a candle to Sasha at any time, and she had never noticed that pregnancy made her even more susceptible. Otherwise she certainly would not have taken the risk of jeopardizing her life together with Sasha because of her desire to have a child with him.

Because this time she did want a child. And she remained steadfast against Sasha's insistent and convincing arguments against it. People like him, revolutionaries that stand outside of society and do not want a regular, bourgeois life, should not have children. But he didn't demand that she have an abortion. That decision is a woman's choice. And he knew that it would never occur to her that the child could retain him if he decided to leave her.

Later she laughingly admitted to him that she had adopted a war stratagem, so to speak, in order to resist his influence, the extent of which she was well aware. She didn't tell him at once that she was pregnant and wanted to keep the child. She waited for a few months, so that the germinating embryo's own biological desire for life would render her own decision invincible. On the occasion of her various abortions, which had not always taken place during the first month, she had repeatedly had the experience that the initial categorical rejection of the child gradually softens, and gently gives way to a dreamy yearning: "Actually it would be wonderful to have a child." Oh, nature plays quite some tricks on us!

The last pages of *Eine Frau* (at any rate of the still existing part) tell of the arrangement of the apartment belonging to the photo atelier in the Brunnenstrasse.

Perhaps now they can make the necessary purchases, and finish up the last work in the atelier, so that they can live there. It is high time: winter is just around the corner;

⁴⁵ Information from Marianne Enckell

And finally Lott can scrub the floor for the last time, all the tools and pots of paint have disappeared, and they look at their work and see that it is good. And one evening there is a big house-warming party with vodka and Russian cigarettes and many cold dishes; they even dig up a gramophone.

It is odd: the usual custom on such occasions is for every guest to bring something to add to the substantial amount already there; only with Sasha does no one ever have that idea, himself least of all, and not even the relatively reasonable Lott. Only Husch brings a homemade pie, and gets a smacking kiss on each cheek from Sasha, who doesn't even like sweet things. And then Husch is lifted onto the shoulders of enthusiastic cake-lovers and carried through the atelier in triumph; there is song and dance and drink and song again, so that the whole courtyard echoes with the sound of it.

And now winter is here, and they stand there once again, empty-handed.

Perhaps it is not just chance that the book ends at this point in time. It would hardly be possible to find better words of conclusion: ... and they stand there, empty-handed.

14. Theodor Plievier⁴⁷

In the Berlin chapters of Hanka Grothendieck's novel *Eine Frau* (chapter 25), a young Anarchist and budding writer called "Gerd" makes his appearance. A comparison with the biography cited in the footnote reveals that this Gerd was none other than the writer Theodor Plievier, who later achieved great renown, particularly as the author of one of the most important documentary novels about the Battle of Stalingrad. We shall first acquaint ourselves with Plievier by quoting excerpts from the cover text of the already mentioned biography:

Plievier's career was even more adventurous than one would in any case have expected of him. He began life as a bricklayer's apprentice, travelled on sailing vessels, and in his youth he worked for years in South America as a gold panner, vagabond, fisherman, cowhand, barman and cook. During the First World War Plievier was a sailor on scouting boats, auxiliary cruisers and minesweepers. In his sensational book *The Kaiser's Coolies* he portrayed the Sailor's Revolt of Kiel, which provoked the 1918 Revolution. But Plievier still had a long way to go before he would become a world famous novelist. When [Harry] Wilde met him in 1922, Plievier, now a wandering preacher and "prophet" with a full red beard, was standing on street corners attired in a military coat cut like a frock, announcing the gospel of peace to all. Wilde gives an enlightening picture of the early twenties, with the typically frequent appearance of sectarians, apostles of nature, life reformers, do-gooders, "inflation saints", noble vagabonds, and prophets of the apocalypse. For a time Plievier was close to these curious groups, who evolved in part in the environment of the idealistic-reformist youth movement. Plievier, however, also dabbled in publishing, particularly of Anarchist pamphlets, as a photographer, and as a boat builder. He often found himself in a situation of extreme poverty, and had to wait a long time for his first literary success. [...] After the war this rebellious individualist lived for a short time in the Eastern zone, then, after his escape, in the West, and at last in Ticino, where he died on March 12, 1995 in Avegno.

Theodor Plievier's classic documentary novels, especially his great trilogy Stalingrad – Moscow – Berlin, are internationally renowned. They have been translated into thirty-six languages, and new editions continue to be printed.

In order to establish a connection with the lives of Sasha and Hanka, we can start by saying that Wilde's book draws an authentic and vivid picture of life in the Anarchist-Proletarian scene in Berlin during the twenties. Whoever would like to learn more about how Sasha and Hanka lived during those times, and also about Alf Raddatz and other people referred to in this work, should read Wilde's book (as long as Hanka's book remains inaccessible.)

Conversely, it is also true that Hanka's book contains a great deal of interesting information about Plievier and his circle, which is probably not known today. Notably, a liaison between Hanka and "Gerd" was in the offing just at the time when Sasha Tanaroff appeared on the scene. (It is tempting to speculate just a little about how Hanka's life would

⁴⁷This chapter was added in the second edition. The author had not thought that other essential documents concerning the life Sasha Tanaroff and Hanka Grothendieck before 1928 could still be found. Marianne Enckell, who has excellent knowledge of the Anarchist movement, brought to his attention the biography of Plievier by Harry Wilde, in which appear several people already known to us. (*Theodor Plievier, Nullpunkt der Freiheit*; Verlag Kurt Desch, München, Wien, Basel 1965.) Even more astonishing is the fact that Plievier wrote a short story: *Stenka Razine*, whose main character is clearly Sasha Tanaroff, and in which one can recognize Hanka Grothendieck. This text at first remained unpublished, but was discovered by Marc Schweyer and printed in a little-known journal.

have continued if Sasha had not had to settle “family affairs” just at this point in time. And how would algebraic geometry have developed without Grothendieck?)

The cover text quoted above mentions that Plievier worked as a photographer and as a boat builder. This brings us straight to Tanaroff and Raddatz, as Wilde writes in his book:

But now things were better, she [Manya, Plievier’s partner] explained, because on Sundays Theodor earns a lot of money with the “cannon”; that is to say, he takes pictures with a tube-like camera, with which one can produce tiny pictures with stick pins on the spot, the latest technological fad in those days. The two of them got this idea from Sasha Tamaroff [sic!], a Russian Anarchist, who had lost an arm in a Tsarist prison, and who, like Makhno, had been exiled by the Bolsheviks. The one-armed Sasha could only work with an assistant; at that time Lea, Manya’s sister, was helping him.⁴⁸ Plievier followed this example [...]

A few pages later we read:

Plievier’s passion for tinkering suddenly found a new arena where it was least expected. The Russian Anarchist Sasha had also introduced into the Landsbergerstrasse the journalist from Hamburg, Alf Raddatz. Small, and as agile as a weasel, he was a fanatic of aquatic sports, and when he heard that Plievier had been a sailor, he persuaded him to build boats together with him. Overnight the former shoemaker’s workshop was transformed into a boat building workshop, and the promising project of writing short stories was forgotten. Only boat building occupied Plievier, and there were nightlong discussions about whether one should make the frames out of marine-ply or canvas, just as earlier on one had discussed Anarchism, the dying state, the “stamp scrip” money of the *Freiwirtschaftsbundes* or the artistic form of editorials.

Over the course of several years there must have been close links between Plievier on the one hand, and Hanka, Sasha and Alf Raddatz on the other. We will meet again with the “boat builder” Alf in a later chapter. Sasha Tanaroff and his dramatic destiny apparently impressed Plievier so much that he made him into the hero of one of his first novellas (actually only a sort of short story). It is perhaps not such a literary success; the author, after all, only published it in a rather obscure place, namely as an appendix to an issue of the journal “The Syndicalist”. The expressionist style is dated, but the few pages are a testimony to Sasha’s formidable personality:

The city is steaming. On the roofs banners are fluttering. The cross has been torn down from the church – the pope⁴⁶ lies somewhere in the snow, his face frozen stiff. People stand crowded, stand like the frozen sea. On an overturned wagon stands the speaker.

----- Tovarich! ----- !

All is still in the square. A great voice goes over the crowd, fiddles like wind over the ice.

Tovarich Alexander speaks. Yesterday he still lay in chains, behind walls, in the dark dungeon of the fortress. Today he stands in the bright noon and speaks. Erect, beard and hair in the wind, in his deep eyes blazing flames, he weaves the history of a man, of a people, the destiny of the world. [...]

It was seven years ago. Seven years that have raged through Alexander, that have gnawed away at him, more than his former life, which dripped away hour by hour, in jail and exile.

The waters were unleashed, the storm had blown. Alexander wanted to go all over the world. Dreams of prison nights turned into flesh and blood! But there were men who could not ride on wild waters, and they were the masters of the day. They gave shape to the thundering power of the people.

Alexander dug himself into the ground. With those faithful to him he burrowed underneath and undermined the newly arising fortresses. The band grew ever smaller, ever more desperate. They fought underground like demons, until the power, the fist of the newly arisen power dragged them out of their holes. Coffined in wagons they were driven through the land, across the steppe, across fields, through spaces ravaged by snow. Endless tracks and endlessly rolling wheels sang the song. - - -

Death had set its mark on Alexander. Face after face went out by his side. He remained. Death let him remain. After seven years it spat him out – a thousand kilometers to the West.

⁴⁸ Lea is not the “Lia” in *Eine Frau*; instead, Lea was given the pseudonym Mina in the novel, and her sister Manya was given the pseudonym Chaya.

⁴⁶ A pope is a priest of the Russian Orthodox church.

Alexander stands in a strange city. The iron thundering of bridges, the roaring of the rolling wheels of traffic surge about his brow. Snakes of electric lights, red, green, chlorine white, shove themselves over the roofs: “Tom Mix in ‘The Untamed’, Jazz Band, Open Day and Night” – “Smoke Tutankhamun, Quality Cigarettes” - - - [...]

Alexander is no longer Alexander. Hunger devoured his hair, his eyes look coldly. -- One arm remained in the bloody fist of the steppe, buried in the mass grave of his dead comrades.

He goes. His face grey, his clothes blurred, his boots torn. With him is a girl who calls him Sasha. - - -

Night stands before the window; the day goes by like a grey smear, and it is night again. Sasha lies stretched out on a miserable bed. Spread over him is women’s clothing. The girl doesn’t sleep any more; her hands are over the feverish man; she subdues his wild movements with her breasts. When he sleeps, she steals outside.

She stands in the light of the gas flames and sings. Sasha opens his eyelids. Sees two wide eyes in a burning face; the girl is dressed, hat, coat - - - under her arm she has the guitar.

Abruptly he gets up. With her he takes the road into the night.

There is then a description of how Sasha and Hanka go “pub singing.” It is telling that both Hanka and Plievier describe the way Sasha sings about his homeland: *Volga, Volga, mathy rodnaya*, ...

To conclude this somewhat digressive chapter, the author would like to recall something about a person whose name has already been mentioned: Manya, Plievier’s partner during the twenties. She was a skilful milliner and hat maker, as busy as a bee, and had a very well-paid job in a popular fashion store in West Berlin. She had a good heart, and with her regular earnings not only did she keep the heads of the entire clique of do-nothings about whom we have heard above water whenever there was a real emergency, but she paid child support for Plievier’s sons from his former marriage whenever he was low on funds. At the beginning of the nineteen-thirties Plievier separated from her, and Manya emigrated and married a Danish writer. In spite of this, and although almost all of her relatives were killed by the Germans, she continued to support Plievier’s children with food packages and similar donations right after the war. However, Hanka writes rather unflatteringly: “...apart from her obvious energy, she is nothing but a dainty blond Jewess with a too ample bust and a sharp voice, and also her features are beginning to sharpen.”