



An undesired survivor

Ada Lessing and the *Volkshochschule Hannover*

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On January 30, 1933, a new government took office in Germany: the cabinet Hitler-Von Papen, the first one in which the *Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei* (National Socialist German Workers' Party, NSDAP or Nazi Party) was represented, first and foremost in the person of Chancellor Adolf Hitler. Taking part in the government was, however, for the NSDAP not the fulfilment, but rather the start of its seizure of power. One of the very first decisions taken by the cabinet Hitler-Von Papen was calling new elections, to be held on March 5, 1933. By using the civil services, especially the judiciary and the police, to the advantage of its own party, utilizing both legal and illegal means, in the run-up to the elections and even more so in the following months political opponents, in particular communists and leftwing social democrats, were silenced or taken prisoner, if not killed. In conjunction with all this, all kinds of aspects of social life were brought under national socialist control: the press, public education, trade unions, and other societal organisations. Thus, national socialism succeeded in getting its grip on Germany in no more than half a year.

This process, usually called *Gleichschaltung*, was not only a national phenomenon, it occurred in regional and local branches of government and other organisations as well – including, for instance, in Hanover, the capital of Lower Saxony. In this city, the weeks before the elections of March 5 were characterised by lots of violence and blood shedding. Several election meetings of the social democrat party, the SPD, and of the communist party, the KPD, were disturbed by the thugs of the *Sturmabteilung* (SA),

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the paramilitary branch of the NSDAP. On February 21 the building that housed the headquarters of *Reichsbanner* was attacked by the SA – *Reichsbanner* was a joint venture of several organisations that tried to maintain and protect the constitution of the Weimar Republic. This organisation, established on February 22, 1924, was dominated by the SPD. In the attack, two people were killed, seven seriously injured, and about twenty suffered minor injuries. A large crowd turned up for the funeral of both victims. Local authorities tried to ensure that the funeral would not turn into a protest demonstration against the new government. For this reason, carrying banners in the funeral procession was not allowed, nor playing funeral music. A bitter but telling detail was that Victor Lutze (1890-1943), the leader of the local SA branch, had only a week before, on February 15, 1933, been appointed as the chief of police of Hanover. In other words: the one who ordered the attack on the building of *Reichsbanner* was the very one who issued these bans. On Lutze's authority, the policemen called to the rescue when the attack was going on set free all members of the SA immediately, whereas the others present – the victims! – were held and searched for possession of arms. In 1934, Lutze was appointed to *Stabschef* or commander of the SA, as successor to Ernst Röhm (1887-1934) who was killed during the Night of the Long Knives – a reckoning within German national socialism. Lutze would keep this function until he died in a traffic accident in May 1943.

After the *Reichstag* fire on February 27, 1933, the repression worsened all over Germany. Early in the morning of the next day about 10,000 opponents of the new regime – mainly communists and social democrats, but some liberals and Christian democrats as well – were arrested, mistreated, and locked up in prisons or camps. Amongst them were Members of Parliament; parliamentary immunity was simply ignored. In Hanover, more than 150 people were arrested, mainly communists and social democrats, but union leaders and journalists as well. In the following weeks, trade unions and leftwing press organs, like the local social democratic newspaper *Volkswille* were banned, and social democrats with leading positions in all kinds of societal organizations were dismissed.

Dismissal and escape

One of all those who lost their job in this process of *Gleichschaltung* was Ada Lessing-Abbenthern, who since 1919 was in charge of the *Volkshochschule Hannover*, a school she had established with her husband, the philosopher Theodor Lessing (1872-1933). On

March 24, 1933, she was dismissed with immediate effect. Earlier that month, Theodor Lessing had fled Germany and settled in Marienbad in (former) Czechoslovakia. He realized all too well that as a Jew, socialist, and combative writer, having published a number of very critical articles on national socialism, he had brought the hate of the Nazis upon him, and that his life was in immediate danger if he stayed in Germany. Following her dismissal, Ada Lessing issued a statement to her co-workers and students:

Dear students and esteemed co-workers of the Volkshochschule Hannover,

Today's political circumstances force me to retire from my job as manager of the Volkshochschule Hannover. Fourteen years of working at the Volkshochschule, which will form an unforgettable cultural chapter in the history of the city of Hannover, will enter a new era with my departure, and I very much hope that the students and co-workers at the Volkshochschule realize how much such a cooperation rests on mutual trust.

I express my sincere thanks for the unrelenting loyalty to this work, to all those who together with me developed and carried the work of the Volkshochschule.¹

But Ada Lessing was still combative. In a letter to her husband from April 24th, 1933, she wrote:

Both of us were more loyal to our hometown than all those among us, who, going with the wind, change residence. This will be said time and again, I nail it down. Fourteen years of work at the Volkshochschule, twenty-five years of work by you, I will not have it brushed out of the history of the city of Hanover, it will be inscribed with indelible color ink.²

The following weeks Ada Lessing, assisted by her daughter Ruth, focused on a number of practical issues, for instance getting to safety some personal possessions including a number of manuscripts of her husband that still were in their house in Hanover. Then, in

¹ Quoted from Charlotte Ziegler, *Volkshochschule Hannover 1919 - 1969: eine pädagogisch-historische Studie*, Hannover, 1970, 79. Translation mine.

² Quoted from Jörg Wollenberg, 'Ada und Theodor Lessing: Rückkehr unerwünscht', *Sozial. Geschichte*, 21 (2006), nr. 2, 52-66, quote at 54. Translation mine.

July, 1933, she joined him in exile in Marienbad. But Theodor Lessing was not safe in Marienbad either. On the night from August 30 to August 31, 1933, he succumbed to the wounds inflicted some hours earlier during an assault by two hitmen, instigated by the SA. Thus, he was the very first victim of German national socialism outside of Germany.

After the murder of her husband, Ada Lessing remained in Czechoslovakia. She moved to Prague, where she committed to the publication of the collected works of Lessing. She took the initiative in establishing a Theodor Lessing Fund; members of the Committee of Recommendation including, among others, Albert Einstein, Max Brod, Romain Rolland and Bertrand Russell. The fund should not only enable the publication of his collected works, but translations of his most important books in French and English as well. Moreover, Ada Lessing had the idea of establishing a Theodor Lessing House, where scholars from different countries could stay and study those philosophical topics that were dear to her late husband. Because of developments in international politics, nothing much came of these plans. Of the envisioned ten volumes of the collected works, only one was published: the posthumously issued autobiography *Einmal und nie wieder* (1935).

In 1937 Ada Lessing obtained Czechoslovak nationality. Nevertheless, she did not feel safe at all in her new country. Hence, she planned to emigrate to the United States. She asked Albert Einstein for help, who earlier, in 1933 – in reply to his requests for help – made some unsuccessful attempts to help Theodor Lessing in finding a job as a professor in philosophy in Spain or the United States. Through the agency of Einstein, Ada Lessing indeed got permission to travel to the United States, but the message never got to her: her travel visa was ready to be collected in the American embassy in Prague when she fled Czechoslovakia. Before the German entry in Sudetenland on October 10, 1938, she travelled to Great Britain, where she lived throughout the Second World War, initially working in a home for children from foreign countries which had to close because of financial problems, later as a farmworker in Wales where she worked together with English conscientious objectors. After the war, she tried to get back her job at *Volkshochschule Hannover*. But her reappointment was blocked: according to the new authorities, her return in this job was “undesired.” Why was this survivor undesired?

Youth and first marriage

Ada Lessing was born on February 16, 1883, in Hanover as Adèle Minna Abbenthern. She was the eldest of three children, having a brother Bodo (b.1884) and a sister Auguste (b.1886). Her father, Bodo Abbenthern (b.1863), worked in a brewery, but in 1890 he became, together with his wife, Bertha Abbenthern-Degner (b.1858), the new manager of the tavern *Bischofshol* in Eilenriede, a city forest in Hanover (for comparison: Eilenriede is twice the size of Central Park in New York). Thus Ada Abbenthern spent a large part of her childhood in this forest in almost idyllic circumstances, often surrounded by day trippers. In 1902, not yet of legal age, she left her parental home to marry Ernst Grothe (b.1871), a tenant from Bemerode, a village in the vicinity of Hanover (now merged with Hanover). Their marriage did not even last two years, and in 1904 Ada returned to her parental home. Afterwards, she did not want to discuss her first marriage – thus it is not known why the marriage failed, nor why she married Grothe in the first place at so early an age. In 1907, her mother died, and when her father re-married after some time, the family fell apart. Ada Grothe-Abbenthern planned on going to England, but because she felt her English was not yet good enough, this plan was abandoned. She left instead for Berlin, where she took several courses in administration and studied several languages. She additionally trained to be a midwife. Subsequently, she started working in a children's home in the vicinity of Cottbus. This aroused her interest in ideas on the reform of teaching and education that emerged in Germany in the second half of the nineteenth century. This very interest connected her with Theodor Lessing who, after his promotion to doctor of philosophy in 1899, for several years worked as a teacher in so-called *Landerziehungsheime* ("country boarding schools"), in Haubinda and Laubegast (in the vicinity of Dresden) respectively. These were boarding schools in a rural setting where education was not traditional and the curriculum included school subjects like working the land. At the time, but afterwards as well, Lessing got involved in theoretical debates on the principles of education and upbringing that were going on in several journals. Education and upbringing would always interest him. Indeed, after Ada joined him in exile in Marienbad in 1933, they made preparations to start a girls boarding school there. The murder of Lessing ended that initiative.



Marriage with Theodor Lessing

Around the turn of the year 1908-1909, Ada Grothe-Abbenthern, as she then was still called, and Theodor Lessing first met. Lessing, then a *Privatdozent* in philosophy at the *Technische Hochschule Hannover* (Hanover Polytechnic), encouraged her interest in the theory and practice of education and upbringing. One of the results was that she changed jobs and in 1911, she started working for the editorial board of the journal *Die Schönheit* (Beauty). All kinds of questions regarding education and upbringing were discussed in this journal. Ada was partly an editor, partly a secretary: on the one hand she had administrative tasks, on the other hand she contributed herself to the journal, especially as author of book reviews. At this time, Ada Grothe-Abbenthern began several political and societal activities as well. She engaged in the struggle against prostitution, and from about 1910 she was a champion of active and passive voting rights for women, and of women's emancipation in general.

Not until 1912, was a formal divorce between Ernst Grothe and Ada Grothe-Abbenthern finalized. Then on July 27th of the same year, she married Theodor Lessing. For Lessing this was a second marriage as well. In 1900 he had married his first great love, the noblewoman Maria Stach von Goltzheim (1876-1948), against the will of her family. Together they had two daughters: Judith (1901-1989) and Miriam (1902-1912). In 1904, she left her family, as she had started an affair with one of Lessing's pupils, Bruno Frank (1887-1945), who himself later on would have a modest reputation as a literary author. The divorce between Theodor Lessing and Maria Stach von Goltzheim was finalized in 1907. Before their marriage, Ada Abbenthern and Theodor Lessing provided a minor scandal for Hanover as for some months they lived together without being married – at the time something that did not go with prevailing morality. On February 8, 1913, the forty-first birthday of Theodor Lessing, their daughter Ruth (1913-1992) was born.

After their marriage Ada Lessing initially focused on her role as wife and mother. But in her diaries she repeatedly complained that while Lessing passionately championed women's emancipation, this did not seem to have any implications for his personal life; he stuck with traditional role patterns, with himself as breadwinner and his spouse as

housewife. This gradually changed during the First World War – one of the effects of the war being that women of necessity started to work outside the home now that so many men were in the army. Together with her husband, Ada Lessing belonged to the tiny minority that was not at all enthusiastic about the war when it broke out in August 1914. But the special circumstances of war strengthened her advocacy of women's rights to vote: if women are good enough to keep the industrial, agricultural, and even military production going, she argued, they are good enough to participate in politics as well. She expressed this opinion in several articles she published during the war, and in several public addresses. Moreover, she repeatedly warned against the increasing militarization of daily life, a development she considered dangerous. By carrying out these activities, she gradually detached herself of the traditional role of being a housewife only – and after the war she did not return to this role, but had a paid job besides her domestic duties. Thus, her societal and political engagement deepened during the war. In the aftermath of the November Revolution of 1918, she joined the Social Democratic Party (SPD), and she would continue that membership until she fled Germany. She was much closer to the party line than Theodor Lessing, who himself for some time was member of the SPD, but whose independent and often unorthodox views made him less suitable for a political party. As a member of the SPD, Ada Lessing continued her efforts for women's emancipation. On behalf of the SPD, she was candidate for the *Reichstag* (German parliament) twice, at the elections of 1932 and 1933, although in an ineligible position.



The Volkshochschule Hannover

Already around 1900, ideas about education for adults circulated in Hanover, as a contribution to the training and education of broad parts of the population. Underlying these was the feeling among local authorities that there was too big a gap in training between groups of the inhabitants of the city. In an effort to at least partially close this gap, proposals were made to offer an introduction to higher education for a modest fee to those groups of the population that, for whatever reason, never had the chance to get acquainted with it. This would not only do those involved good, but the city as a whole as well; if broad parts of the population were better educated, they could help stimulate the local economy. From these considerations, in the first years of the twentieth century courses were offered on topics as divergent as "Climate and health", "German theatre from

the death of Goethe until now”, “Fundamental principles of astronomy”, and “Electric light”. Most of the teachers of the courses also worked with the *Technische Hochschule*.

In the aftermath of the First World War, it was quickly decided to rationalize the organization of these courses by establishing a *Volkshochschule*. It is not known who originally took the initiative – but it is known that Ada and Theodor Lessing were involved from the very beginning. For this reason, they live on in public memory in Hanover as the founders of the *Volkshochschule Hannover*, which, since 2006, bears their name, the *Ada und Theodor Lessing Volkshochschule*.

The initiative to establish the *Volkshochschule Hannover* followed an appeal on February 25, 1919 by Konrad Haenisch (1876-1925), the Minister of Science, Art and Popular Development in Prussia, the biggest state in the Weimar Republic. He asked cities and villages to establish *Volkshochschulen*, notably to help overcome the existing antagonisms between groups of the population. In the wake of this appeal, between April and August 1919, preparatory talks on the establishment of a *Volkshochschule* were held in Hanover, in which Ada and Theodor Lessing were almost immediately involved. It was decided to gather as much of the earlier initiatives – like the courses taught around the turn of the century by members of staff of the *Technische Hochschule*, and courses organized by the trade unions for their members – in the *Volkshochschule* to be established. The formal date of the establishment of the *Volkshochschule Hannover* is September 1, 1919; the courses started in the course of this month. Daily management was entrusted to Ada Lessing, whereas Theodor Lessing was member of the board until 1927 and, moreover, until he fled Germany in March 1933, one of the principal teachers. Just like him, most teachers were connected to the *Technische Hochschule* in Hanover. Ada Lessing herself taught several courses, principally on the societal position of women and on the emancipation of women.

During the first years that Ada Lessing managed the *Volkshochschule*, she pushed for a building of its own for the institution: the courses were taught at different locations all over Hanover, in schools and sometimes even with the teachers at home. As a result of the economic problems Germany suffered after the First World War, her efforts to gather all activities of the *Volkshochschule* in one building came to nothing: around 1930 the courses still were taught at different locations all over the city. Moreover, also as a result of the economic situation in Germany, the *Volkshochschule* almost continuously suffered from financial problems. On this very problem, Ada Lessing wrote on December 1, 1931,

to the city government of Hanover:

*Despite the greatest economy it will never be possible to cover the costs of the Volkshochschule out of the revenues from course fees, because the workers and those in paid employment can hardly pay for the low course fee. Moreover, as extra burden, fifty percent of all students of the Volkshochschule are out of work.*³

At the time, the *Volkshochschule* had only 185 *Reichsmark*, but it still had to pay 1864 *Reichsmark* outstanding bills. But Ada Lessing refused to expel students who really could not pay the course fee; instead she continuously begged for more grants from the city government, which were sometimes provided, and sometimes not. Several teachers – in particular those who already had a decent income from other activities – declined payment, others sometimes had to wait several months until they were paid. These problems did not, however, impede the teaching at the *Volkshochschule*; just like the students, the teachers were highly motivated, and Ada Lessing radiated so much inspiration and commitment that it was contagious on her colleagues.

‘Power, freedom, beauty’

As compared to other *Volkshochschulen* at the time in Germany, the designed curriculum of the *Volkshochschule Hannover* was far more clearly organized – which might explain its comparatively high number of students. It consisted of three different levels. The first level included elementary subjects like German, arithmetic, history, geography, sciences, and foreign languages. The second level focused on subjects that improved the employability of the students, like German business correspondence, accounting, business correspondence in foreign languages, economics, law, and practical subjects like typewriting as well. At this level, the students could earn an acknowledged diploma, which indeed improved their chances to find a job. The third level focused on general academic knowledge, with subjects like philosophy, art history, literature, and educational theory. At this level, the courses often had a more informal character: a group of students, guided by a teacher, would, for instance, discuss the philosophy of Descartes, but might not stop at the end of the term, and simply continue as long as the students and their teacher

³ Quoted from Charlotte Ziegler, *Volkshochschule Hannover 1919 – 1969*, 77. Translation mine

considered it interesting and rewarding to do so.

On the occasion of the fifth anniversary of the *Volkshochschule*, Theodor Lessing gave a speech. He summarized the curriculum of the *Volkshochschule* in three sentences:

Knowledge is power!

Knowledge liberates!

Bildung⁴ is beauty!⁵

Every sentence refers to a level of the curriculum. Knowledge at an elementary level offers, Lessing argues, power over nature – as compared to animals, in nature man physically is a helpless creature. But knowledge enables man to overcome these physical limitations, and thus to survive. With these ideas, Lessing aligns himself with the early modern English philosopher Francis Bacon. Knowledge at the second level liberates man: it develops the ability to think critically and, in particular, autonomously, and thus not to be deceived by false prophets with empty promises. In this, Lessing aligns with Enlightenment thinking, especially as expressed by the German philosopher Immanuel Kant. Finally, *Bildung* offers the opportunity to get acquainted with the experience of beauty – with that which transcends the sorrows of daily life, and thus beautifies human existence.

The curriculum of the *Volkshochschule Hannover* – both the practical implementation and the presentation by Theodor Lessing – emanates the great idealism that underlaid the commitment of Ada and Theodor Lessing, and of everyone involved in the project. And they were successful: the *Volkshochschule Hannover* was one of the best attended in Germany. With highs and lows, on average it attracted 4800 students a year. Especially because of the job-oriented subjects it offered, a good part of the students – around 40% – comprised youth. And it pleased Ada Lessing that the percentage of female students was quite high: it fluctuated between 35% and 40%. The dropout among students was relatively low, and in general they were very positive on the courses they followed. Because of all this, Ada Lessing is still considered one of the most important

⁴ It is difficult to translate the German word *Bildung* in English: it implies education, but general development regarding arts, music and literature as well.

⁵ Theodor Lessing, 'Volkshochschule als Kulturwert', in: Theodor Lessing, *Wortmeldungen eines Unerschrockenen. Publizistik aus drei Jahrzehnten*, ed. Hans Stern, Leipzig and Weimar, 1987, 220 – 228, quote at 223. Translation mine

innovators of adult education in Germany.

Return to Germany

In view of the fact that the years during which Ada Lessing lead the *Volkshochschule Hannover* were considered very successful, and in her own day and age as well, it is remarkable that after the Second World War she was not eligible for a re-appointment.

In April 1946, she wrote from England to former acquaintances from the *Volkshochschule* and expressed the wish to lead it again. But her letter did not have the desired outcome. A possible explanation may be that her name was not on the so-called *White List*.⁶ Oddly enough, the *White List* did not include women who, like Ada Lessing, fled Germany because they opposed national socialism, and went into exile. Ada Lessing tried other ways to get her job back. But her re-appointment was blocked by in particular Heiner Lotze (1900-1958), who took charge of the *Volkshochschule* himself. His opposition to her re-appointment was based on a struggle within German the SPD in the early nineteen thirties, in which Lotze and Theodor Lessing had confronted each other. At the time, Lessing was very critical of the SPD, because of its – as he claimed – ‘conservative tendencies’, and because of its much too lenient attitude to national socialism that got stronger and stronger. Lotze supported the very ideas that Lessing criticized. After the Second World War, Lotze appointed solely allies – apparently he was not in need of independent, critical spirits from the circle of Theodor Lessing. Ada Lessing was the most important victim of this policy – to her disappointment, even resentment.

Late in 1946, Ada Lessing did return to Germany after all. Invited by Adolf Grimme (1889-1963), the social democratic Minister of Education and Art in Lower Saxony, she accepted the job of director of an institute for the continuing education of teachers at Schloß Schwöbber in the vicinity of Hameln. One of her assistants was her daughter Ruth Gorny (né Lessing), who meanwhile had married the photographer Hein Gorny. Ada Lessing continued in her new job with much success. Also in 1949, Ada Lessing rejoined the SPD and, at the age of 66, ran and won election to the District Council of Hameln-Pyrmont (Hamlin). When her old friend and immediate boss at the Lower Saxony Ministry of Culture responsible for teacher training, Otto Haase (1893-1961), cautiously asked her

⁶ The *White List of Germans to be used for Adult Education in Germany* was compiled in August 1944 at the request of the British authorities by Fritz Borinski (1903-1988), who emigrated to Great-Britain in 1933. Before he emigrated, Borinski was active in adult education in Leipzig and its vicinity.

whether it wouldn't be better for her to "*stick to her strengths and stay in the educational position in which she established herself with so much success at the evening of her life,*" she scolded him:

*"... I don't understand what you are saying! Don't you know that there is still everything to be done in political education today, and that we must learn from the bitter experiences of the past? Just think of how great the ignorance is, especially among women, who will make up the vast majority of voters. Whenever I am with my group of women, here in the villages through which we drive, I notice how great and how honest their desire is to find their way in life and to learn the simple facts on which our political existence depends. You wouldn't believe the gratitude I receive when I speak to them person to person. Women have so many questions that men cannot answer. We have to help ourselves. So look, that's why I'm going out to them and telling them all that I've learned and experienced."*⁷

On November 10, 1953, she died in hospital in Hameln from leukemia. Her daughter Ruth was her successor, and she led the institute until it closed in 1985.

In conclusion

Ada Lessing had an eventful life. At a very young age, she had a failed marriage. Her second marriage, with the philosopher Theodor Lessing, was very happy, but even within this relationship, Ada Lessing had to fight to find space to realize her societal ambitions. She succeeded with verve, and proved to be a very motivated and capable managing director of the *Volkshochschule Hannover*. Following her dismissal, her escape from Germany, the killing of her husband and her exile in Czechoslovakia and Great Britain respectively, she did not get back her job in Hanover – the result of a struggle in German social democracy in the early nineteen thirties. Despite all this, Ada Lessing remained unbroken and combative. She is rightfully remembered in Germany – notably because several schools carry her name – as someone who courageously and determinedly opposed the rising national socialism, and who made important contributions both to adult education and the emancipation of women.

⁷ Haase, Otto. "In Memoriam Ada Lessing" *Niedersächsisches Schulverwaltungsblatt*. Veröffentl. d. Niedersächsisches Kulturministerium. 5 Jahrgang. 1953. 272



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