

A “New Woman” and her Involuntary Myth* - One hundred years ago the German fencer Helene Mayer was born

By Volker Kluge

*The “New Woman”:
title page of the
“Berliner Illustrierte
Zeitung” of 18
November 1928,
showing Helene
Mayer duelling with
her brother Ludwig.*



On 18 November 1928, the well-known German magazine “Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung” (BIZ) featured a young woman who had plaited her blonde hair over her ears. Dressed in a black protective jacket, black silk trousers and stockings, and holding a foil: Olympic champion Helene Mayer was pictured in the yard of her parents’ house at 18 Bahnhofstrasse in Offenbach. She was shown in a practice duel with her brother Ludwig, six years her junior. The magazine ran a two page report entitled “HELENE MAYER: schoolgirl and Olympic Champion”.¹

As was often the case at that time, the article was unsigned. It may well have been by Vicki Baum a female journalist who had leapt to prominence at the same time as Mayer. In 1925 Baum, encouraged by her publisher Hermann Ullstein, had started to write a book about the “New Woman”. It was called: “Chemistry student Helene Willfuer. The novel of a young girl of our time” – and it was a sensational success.² When BIZ began its serialisation of the work in their last October edition of 1928, it was necessary for them to increase the print run by 200,000 copies to two million. To add to the artistic figure who penetrates the academic world of men and suddenly

faces the question “pregnancy or career” (the answer being abortion) the magazine brought another original in the shape of Helene Mayer, even if the 17 year old senior pupil had other challenges to meet before that one.

Who was she – this modern being of whom Vicki Baum’s page-boy look became a synonym? She was young, dynamic and self-confident; possessed of a boyish figure, the legs shapely and well-defined, She could be sometimes chic, sometimes sporty – but fashion was only a first step.

If the first women who embodied this type in the USA were still in the pioneer tradition, by the “Roaring Twenties” they were, rather, female citizens demanding equal rights, women who took the liberty of making their own decisions about their body and their choice of career. The “New (Picturebook) Woman” cut off her skirt above the knee, like the graceful Viennese figure skater Herma von Szabó. She played powerful tennis like the American Helen Wills, was brave like the English girl Bella White, who dared to dive head first from the 17 metre high Saddle Rock near Torquay. Or she performed energetic feats like the German-American Gertrud Ederle, the first woman to swim the English Channel.

Good luck for Offenbach, good luck for Helene Mayer

Helene Mayer was born in Offenbach am Main (near Frankfurt) on 20 December 1910. She grew up in an enlightened family. Her father, Dr. Ludwig Carl Mayer, had lived in the town since 1906; as the company doctor for the local health insurance group, leader of the Jewish community and president of the Offenbach branch of the Central Union of Jewish German citizens, he was one of the best known people in Offenbach – as his grandfather Martin Moritz Mayer had previously been in Mainz, where he had risen to become mayor. Helene’s mother, née Ida Becker, came from Silesia. On marriage she had converted to the Jewish faith.

As a child Helene went to ballet classes. This helped her when in 1920 she joined the Offenbach Fencing Club 1863 (FCO). Few made more startling sporting progress than she did. Swimming, skiing and riding contributed to her physical development. Lithe and lissom – Helene Mayer made a great impression, a girl who fought in a spirited and at the same time carefree manner and had a strong will to win.

It was a stroke of good fortune that she had been born in Offenbach. The merchant Jakob Erckrath-de Bary, member of the 1906 Olympic team sabre champion in Athens, was the senior president of the FCO from 1893 to 1921. In 1911 he had been the first president of the German Fencers' League (DFB), an office he held until 1926. At the time the DFB had their headquarters in Offenbach.

In 1899, thanks to the prosperous members of the FCO, Erckrath-de Bary managed to engage the Italian fencing teacher Arturo Gazzera³, a graduate of the famous Roman Scuola magistrale di scherma. The First World War interrupted this progress, but he remained in Offenbach, where he now instructed private students. Among them was Helene Mayer, in whom he was able to awaken a genuine passion for fencing, which was only exceeded only her love for riding. In 1924 she was runner-up in the German championship aged only 13. She lost only to her training companion Stefanie Stern; but in 1925 she achieved the first of her six German championship titles.

In the same year despite opposition from the French, the International Fencing Federation (FIE) allowed the DFB back into the fencing family so that the young girl from Offenbach was now able to gather international experience. Her performances were so convincing that in the 1927 special volume "Das Olympia-Buch", a female writer was confident enough to make a bold prediction: "In one event we can the hope for an Olympic victory with the greatest confidence: If Helene Mayer, the German champion in foil and 'Kampfspiele' champion in foil and épée, continues to develop her style until Amsterdam, she can scarcely be beaten."⁴

That lady was to be proved right. On 1 August 1928 Helene Mayer became the first German summer Olympic gold medallist – and she won in a majestic fashion that no one could have expected. Of her 20 bouts, she only lost two: one each in the qualifying round and in the semi-final. In the seven final bouts she remained undefeated, and suffered only ten hits against her. Bronze went to Olga Oelkers, and another FCO member; Erna Sondheim from Munich was fourth. In the men's foil there was a silver medal for Frankfurt's Erwin Casimir⁵ and besides that Fritz August Gazzera finished eighth. Helene Mayer had been given a lot of practice fights by her trainer's son, in which neither had given any quarter.

Blonde, blue-eyed, and an Israelite

Helene Mayer made a triumphant return to Frankfurt's main railway station on 12 August 1928 with other German Olympic competitors. An enthusiastic crowd of around a thousand had waited hours for her arrival. Helene Mayer was carried shoulder-high to the "Kölner Hof" hotel, where she fell into the arms of her

family. From there she went on to Offenbach, where in honour of the Olympic victor the town had organised a torchlight procession.

In particular, the plaudits for Mayers victory came from the nationalist and conservative press. This went on for days on end. This came about partly because of what happened during the victory ceremony. In those days, it was a simple raising of the black, red and gold national flag and playing the national anthem. During this Mayer had waved a little flag with the Kaiser's colours of black, white and red. "A young German woman performed another feat here", rejoiced the Berlin "Lokal-Anzeiger"⁶, while the "Anhaltinische Rundschau" even struck a lyrical note:

"Der Neuzeit weibliche Geschöpfe / Besiegt sie schlicht im Sportgewand / Und, denkt euch, sie trägt – blonde Zöpfe! / Und schlingt darum ein weißes Band. / Ein blaues Aug', ein deutscher Schädel. / Der Jugend Anmut im Gesicht. / Ein aufgewachsen rheinisch Mädels – / Und ficht, als wie der Teufel ficht!"

[The modern age's female creatures / She sorts out quick in sporting wear /

Her blonde locks compliment her features / She binds white ribbon round her hair /

Eyes of blue, a German cranium / In her face the grace of youth /

A grown-up Rhine girl in the stadium – / Fights like the devil – that's the truth.]

When finally the "Fridericus" celebrated her with the words "Respect for this blonde German lass who, in the midst of this black-haired international mob trying to set the tone in Amsterdam, stayed faithful to her beliefs and to the betrayed and proscribed black, white and red", that was just too much for the well-regarded Jewish "Central-Vereins-Zeitung": "This amazing example of extravagant 'Aryan race doctrine' had to be shown here to readers", said a commentary, "for this blue-eyed and blonde haired Helene Mayer is the daughter of our Offenbach member, Dr Mayer, and thus a Jewish German."⁸

For many this was obviously a bizarre situation, which concerned, among others, a professor called Schneider from Dresden. He demanded to know more about the "racial origin" of the pupil from the headmaster of the Offenbach Schiller-Realschule, one of the first in Germany to allow women to sit the leaving certificate examinations. Thereupon the well-known Germanist Dr. Klaudius Bojunga wrote to him: "To your query I can reply that Helene Mayer is of the Israelite religion. To students eager for knowledge you can perhaps in this respect give the information that belonging to that religious community has little to do with race, for a glance at a picture of Helene Mayer will show any knowledgeable person at once what the situation is. As is sometimes the case in mixed race circumstances, she is completely on the Aryan side according to Mendelian theory."⁹

Young, dynamic, self-confident: to Helene Mayer is due the credit for having raised women's fencing to the level of men's foil.



At this time it was not yet problematic politically to be a Jewish woman in Germany. Helene Mayer was thus one of the 13 Olympic participants (among them the Nuremberg horticultural designer Adolf Hensel, gold medallist in the art competition), who received the "Reich Sport Plaque" from Hindenburg's hands on Saturday 13 October 1928. The plaque had been created by the Munich sculptor Hans Schwegerle. At tea afterwards she was permitted to sit between the venerable Reich President and Reich Chancellor Müller-Franken (SPD), during which there was an amusing exchange when Helene Mayer complained she would not be able to see anything of Berlin. That evening the magistrates were opening a week-long "festival of light". Some 20 trainloads of visitors were expected in the capital for the event. Mayer however was unable to stay as she had to be back in school on the Monday. Thereupon Hindenburg had a note prepared for Dr Bojunga by the secretary of State Otto Meissner. The text was as follows: *"I beg you to excuse Helene Mayer's absence on Monday. We are all very unwilling to be separated from her and would not wish to miss out on showing her Berlin under lights tomorrow. Yours sincerely Hindenburg."*¹⁰

One can imagine that the school headmaster accepted the request, for the Reich President's letter hung in a frame until the day in 1944 when the Schillerschule was destroyed by Allied bombs.

After her final school exams in 1929 Helene matriculated at Frankfurt University to study international law, French and Italian, as she intended to enter the Diplomatic Service of the Weimar Republic later in life. That same year she became European champion in Naples, a success on the level of a world title, as the latter did not exist until 1937.

She spent the next two terms at the Sorbonne. In 1931 she won the European championship for the second

time, although a few weeks before she had suffered a severe stroke of fate: her father's sudden death threw the family, in the midst of the world economic crisis, into material difficulties and also put Helene's future sporting career in doubt.

However, as she was considered a potential medallist for the following year's Los Angeles Olympic Games, German Reich Committee for Physical Exercise (DRA) although financially weak, showed interest in helping her until then. Thanks to the support of its president Theodor Lewald, Mayer then received a grant from the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), which it made possible for her to take up studies at Scripps College in Claremont, California, 48 kilometres east of Los Angeles until 1932. But the hoped-for return of form did not happen, and general secretary Carl Diem, whose authority had been questioned several times during the journey to Los Angeles by athletes who were responsible adults, noted furiously in his travel diary: "From a human point of view nothing better can happen than that the swollen-headed people like Helene, Jonath, Peltzer etc are thoroughly beaten. I have just heard that Helene is seventh! Poor Lewald".¹² Another lesson in sports teaching: defeats as a means of education.

In fact Helene Mayer had not been seventh, but fifth, yet her defeat was a bitter blow, especially as the gold medal had gone to a native of Berlin: Ellen Preis.¹³ She had emigrated in 1925 at the age of 13 to Vienna, where her aunt Wilhelmina "Minna" Werdnik, who came from Frankfurt, ran a very successful fencing club, "Fechtsaal Werdnik", named after her second husband.¹⁴

What hardly anyone knew was that in addition to the pressure of expectation Mayer had further bad news from home. Before the final she was told that eight days before, her friend, naval officer Dr Erich Gelhaar had drowned. Gelhaar had studied medicine in Frankfurt with her brother Eugen and the three had been friends. He went down with the training ship Niobe when it sank in the Fehmarnbelt between Denmark and Germany with the loss of 68 hands.

The controversial role as "token Jew"

The elimination of the Jews was Hitler's aim from the start; realisation of this began in 1933 with the so-called "Machtergreifung" (seizure of power). The Reich-wide boycott of Jewish businesses from the 1 April 1933 represented a caesura to which the "Law on the Restoration of a Professional Civil Service" delivered a bureaucratic pseudo-legitimacy.¹⁵ Thenceforward it was legally possible to dismiss all Jewish or other undesirable civil servants. There was also a whole series of provisional regulations like the "Front-line Soldiers' Privilege" which were finally stopped in 1935 with the introduction of the "Nuremberg Laws".

The law served also to encourage the exclusion of Jews from social life, in which the sports federations 'distinguished' themselves by their over-hasty willingness to obey orders. One after another they accepted the imposition of an "Aryan paragraph", which obliged clubs to persuade their Jewish members to leave or to ban them in some other way.

This discrimination also affected the assimilated Jews, including the Mayers, who were treated especially severely. According to Nazi classification the three children were considered to be "Half-Jews", who were to be treated no differently from "Full Jews". In the correspondence with the FCO there was much talk about "the demands of the time", but Eugen Mayer was dead against any voluntary resignation. According to Kurt Heyne, a former chairman, the family was then "*not excluded but not on the list of members*", which amounted to the same thing.¹⁶

Even today the subject remains an open wound in Offenbach, where the centenary of Helene Mayer's birth was marked with an exhibition in the foyer of the Town Hall (from 3 November to 23 December 2010), a series of special events and the German foil championships (from 15 to 16 January 2011).

In the trial of strength between the IOC and Hitler, who for propaganda reasons had given his full backing to staging the Olympic Games, allocated to Berlin in 1931 – though without Jews – the name of Helene Mayer therefore became a litmus test. Initially IOC president Baillet-Latour thought it could be resolved as a purely German problem, but under public pressure from the Americans he began to remember his own principles. Helene Mayer's degree of celebrity grew when in June 1933 she won her first US outdoor title in Chicago. The short trip to Canada that followed and her immediate return to the United States brought her "permanent resident" status, so that she could stay there for the immediate future. On return to Claremont, however, she found a letter informing her that her bursary had been removed "on racial grounds", but Scripps College intervened with financial support. In the spring of 1934 Helene Mayer achieved a Baccalaureate degree, which was followed by a Masters.

In the summer of 1934, Hitler had agreed through gritted teeth to allow German Jews to be included in Olympic preparation, to forestall the danger of an Olympic boycott. But among the Jewish athletes, from whom all training facilities had been removed since 1933, there were now hardly any candidates with a serious hope of an Olympic team place. Besides Helene Mayer and the popular ice hockey player Rudi Ball, who lived in Italy, the only exceptional talent was the high jumper Gretel Bergmann, who despite winning the AAA championship in 1934 was still relatively unknown internationally.

It was a grotesque situation: to be able to prove their loyalty to the IOC, the Nazis needed Jewish "exhibition" athletes, and the focus was narrowed down to the famous Helene Mayer. The Reichssportführer Hans von Tschammer und Osten wrote on the 24 September 1935 to ask if she would like to compete in the Berlin Games. "In the case of a affirmative answer I will regard you as a member of the German team squad, which after further elimination contests in the spring of 1936 will discover who is finally selected. If you are unable to take part in the eliminatory competitions, I am prepared to recognise the American championship as sufficient qualification."¹⁷

In the meantime the "Nuremberg Laws", depriving the Jews of "Reich citizens' rights", had been announced at the "Reichsparteitag", so Helene Mayer's answer was less than enthusiastic. On the 2 December 1935 the Nazis then forced her mother to send a telegram reminding Helene that her mother was subject to Nazi control along with Helene's brothers. This message was decisive. The timing was perfect, for four days later came the annual congress of the Amateur Athletic Union (AAU). This was the umbrella organisation of American sport, which after controversial debate had by a narrow majority given its blessing to taking part in the 1936 Olympic Games.

This decision had been preceded by hectic activity on the part of German diplomats. For example the Oslo Embassy announced to the German Foreign Office on the subject of "Jews and the Olympics" that the nomination of Helene Mayer had attracted some attention with "the local press and public". "One can assume that as a result of these measures the rumours, widespread here and elsewhere, that Jews would not be admitted to the Olympiad or disqualified, will fall silent."¹⁸

The former editor-in-chief of the "Vossischen Zeitung", Georg Bernhard, a Berlin Jew also feared that this would happen. In 1933 after fleeing Germany, he had founded the "Pariser Tageblatt" and transformed it into the most important platform for the 35,000 German emigrants living in France. Bernhard, who was feared on account of his aggressive style of discourse, carried a leading article to Helene Mayer which took up more than one third of the front page on 30 October 1935. Even though she had still not confirmed her participation, he was already describing it as an "Untat" (crime), which was to be absolutely condemned. As she had not yet emigrated, he was not sparing of unfriendly remarks: "She has, even now, fought for Hitler's Germany. Even for that there are human excuses. For she came from that circle of German Jews who had no contact with the pogroms in the Berlin ghetto, because they thought it impossible that such things could spread as far as the genteel people of the Fasanenstrasse."¹⁹

Even after that Bernhard did not spare Helene Mayer and included Rudi Ball in his Philippics as well as Gretel Bergmann, who was later thrown out of the team. The fact that she had accepted the Nazis' invitation at all was regarded by him as a "special case of 'race betrayal'", "which consists in German Jews involving themselves in promoting the propaganda and tissue of lies of the Third Reich".²⁰

Whether Helene Mayer, far away in sunny California, ever found out about such diatribes is not known. The 25 year old had meantime moved from the south to the north. The Pacific Rim opposite San Francisco was no bad place for a self imposed exile, especially as Helene Mayer had accepted the generous offer of the President of Mills College, Dr Aurelia Henry Reinhardt, to work as German lecturer and fencing trainer at this first all-female liberal arts college on the West Coast.

But even there, Helene Mayer failed to make any public statement about the Nazi regime. When for instance in the student newspaper "Mills College Weekly", there appeared a provocative article whose author maintained that she could no longer return to Germany without danger, since the censors had intercepted a letter to her mother which was critical of Hitler, she issued a denial through the college administration.²¹ This reluctance to speak out is more understandable when one knows that her family had already been extensively harassed. In 1934 for instance, her brother Eugen had not been permitted to sit his degree exams, although he was fortunate enough to be able to get a job in his father-in-law's firm, which produced leather goods.

"Die fromme Helene" and misused love of home

Although Helene Mayer had not fenced anywhere outside the USA since 1934, she was well enough prepared at the Olympic Games in Berlin to win the silver medal. In the final rounds she lost only to the Hungarian Ilona Elek-Schacherer, who had taken the European championship in 1934 and 1935, and the Austrian Ellen Preis, who for her part had lost to Elek-Schacherer and Hedwig Hass, another Offenbach girl. In the photo of the victory ceremony, which took place on 5 August 1936 immediately after Jesse Owens's win in the 200 metres, Helene Mayer can be seen standing erect and raising her right arm aloft in the "deutschen Gruss" [Hitler salute]. In the background the VIP stand is almost empty. Hitler had long since left the stadium. By an irony of history the gold medal also went to a Jewish woman, though she was from Hungary.

With hindsight it is easy to condemn Helene Mayer. Certainly the criticism that she was used by the Nazis as a "token Jew" cannot be ignored, but Gretel Bergmann also dreamt of mounting the victory podium in order – so she said – to express her contempt for the National



The woman who saluted Hitler – however the latter had left his box in the Berlin Olympic Stadium before the victory ceremony. The 1936 gold medal went to the Hungarian Jew Ilona Elek-Schacherer, the silver to Helene Mayer, the bronze medal to the Austrian Ellen Preis.

Socialist regime. Whether she would have had the courage to do so in view of the inevitable consequences must always remain an open question and in the event she was denied her Olympic at the last minute.²²

Truth or propaganda? If a report in the "Landeszeitung für das Rhein-Main und Lahnggebiet" of 26 August 1936 was to be believed, one could come to the view that Helene Mayer at that time was one of the crowd of dazzled Hitler admirers. "Berlin was unique because of one man who made the Games to that extent possible: the Führer" she was quoted as saying after a reception organised in her honour by the town of Königstein in the spa hotel. And further on: "The most delicious souvenir", in the words of Helene Mayer, was a bouquet of roses with a red silk swastika sash which Hitler had presented to her; in addition "a handwritten note of congratulation with the words 'To the Olympic winner Helene Mayer from Adolf Hitler'".²³ No wonder Georg Bernhard regarded her from then on as a hopeless case and insinuated that by denying her father she had bought back "Reich citizen's rights", which however was not the case.²⁴

Nonetheless: the benevolent acceptance into the Olympic team, the cosy feeling of belonging and the experience of brilliantly organised Olympic Games unquestionably left a deep impression on Helene Mayer. In a letter to her teammates in November 1936 she absurdly expressed support for the land of her birth, whose rulers she de facto regarded as "inferior". "Here in America", says the letter, "the press has made the Olympics look extra bad. All propaganda against Germany!! But it didn't do them much good, as all of us, and by that I mean the American Olympic competitors as well, worked against it. I have given lots of talks in clubs, universities and even once on the wireless (National Broadcasting Station) and told them! These gasbags who can't come to terms with the fact that the Olympics in Berlin were the best Olympics ever".²⁵

And yet "die fromme Helene"²⁶ seemed to realise that her love of her homeland would not be rewarded in the long run. "Will we ever meet again in the future?" she asked. "I only know that I would like to return to Germany, but certainly there is no place for me ... I am one of those human beings who have been subjected

to a hard fate. I love Germany as much as you do, and feel and think in just as German a way as you!"²⁷

The short breathing space the Nazi regime had granted its Jewish "exhibition" athlete ended after the first World Fencing Championships held the following year in Paris. Again Helene Mayer showed herself to the best advantage. For the first and only time she defeated Ilona Elek-Schacherer and took the World Championship title, upon which the "Reichssportblatt" published a last photograph of her.²⁸ From then on the ways parted: in summer 1938 Helene Mayer paid a last long visit, for the last time, to her mother, who had found an apartment in Königstein in the "Haushofmeisterhaus" of the Luxemburg Palace. Even by this time her mother had received several visits from the Gestapo. On 10 November 1938 the synagogue of the small town in the Taunus was burnt down.

A year before German fencing fell into the clutches of the SS, who had provisionally appointed SS-Oberführer Dr. Hermann Behrends as successor to Erwin Casmir as "Fachamtsleiter".²⁹ In reality he was to keep the seat warm for Reinhard Heydrich, who for tactical reasons did not wish to succeed Casmir directly, as he had caused the latter to be relieved of his post.³⁰ Heydrich, the boss of the SS Security Service, was a sabre specialist, and was already keen to gather the best German fencers into the SS, and he systematically promoted this project from 1937. One of this circle was from then on Fritz August Gazzera, who had twice contributed to Helene Mayer's preparation for the Olympic Games.³¹

Late homecoming, late happiness in marriage and early death

If Helene Mayer, until then apolitical, still harboured illusions about the Nazi state, she must surely have been disabused of these at the very latest by the start of the War. On 1 September 1939 a prominent Offenbach fencer managed to emigrate to the USA as one of the last German Jews via Amsterdam, after being released from the concentration camp at Dachau. This was Hans Halberstadt. In 1928 he'd been part of the German sabre team which finished fourth.

Halberstadt's family had become well-off through their tannery business before the company had been "aryanised". He settled in San Francisco, where his sister and brother had already taken refuge. There he founded the "Halberstadt Studio", from which grew "Hans Halberstadt Fencers Club" in 1942. It developed into the leading fencing club on the American West Coast. Helene Mayer, who had acquired American citizenship in 1940, also joined it. She won the American title in 1941 and 1942, her eighth such success. Soon after that she left Mills College, where she was treated with increasing hostility during the

war because of her German background. Instead she took up the offer from the University of Berkeley to prepare American soldiers on campus for their tour of duty in Germany. She taught them German and general knowledge. Part of the standard programme was to be able to draw a map of Berlin from memory.

In the last four years of the War, Mayer had no communication with Germany. She did not know how her mother was, nor had she any news of her brothers, who as "mixed race grade 1" were declared "unworthy to serve", so that they did not have to do war service. Through jaundice Eugen avoided being called up to do forced labour for the Todt Organisation – the "Half-Jews" were drawn into particularly dangerous operations in so-called "Mischlingsaktion" [mixed race campaigns] – while Ludwig was able to disappear through a fortunate set of circumstances. Only after the war did they discover the fate of their uncle Georg August Mayer from Mainz, who had been deported to Theresienstadt on the 27 September 1942 where only 15 days later he died under circumstances that can only be guessed at. He was 64.³²

In the summer of 1948 Helene Mayer made her first return visit to Germany, although at this time she could perhaps have competed at the Olympic Games in London. She was still only 37 and remained a world-class performer, as she had proved at the 1946 USA championships, when she was crowned as champion for the ninth time. But when she was defeated the next year by Helen Mroczkowska Dow, she lost her pleasure in fencing and at the same time began to feel ill. Also it is by no means certain that she would have been allowed to compete in London as she had already represented another country and had not yet acquired naturalisation – as demanded at that time by the IOC – through marriage. It took another three decades before this ancient rule was dropped.

What was it that made Helene Mayer, who in the interim was employed as a teacher at San Francisco City College, decide to retire from fencing? Certainly the longing for her family was part of it – she found them in good condition when they met in the American Zone. Like his father before him Eugen was working as a doctor, after being able to re-take his last examination in Munich. Previously, in June 1945, the US military administration had nominated him, as one of the few persons in the area unburdened by a Nazi past, to be "Landrat" [convener] of the district of Ebersberg east of Munich, where he was able to get civilian life moving again. Ludwig had meantime become an electric engineer. A whole two weeks after the capitulation he had married his Erika, with whom he had been since 1942, although love for a "Half-Jew" was punished by the Nazis with sanctions.

As fate would have it, Helene Mayer also met the man of her life during her stay in Germany in 1948: Erwin Falkner von Sonnenburg was a civil engineer who before the war had built autobahns and among

other projects had worked on the Frankfurter Kreuz autobahn interchange. Nine years older than Helene, he came from a traditional Bavarian aristocratic family, but from the start the family found “the Baron” very pleasant and not at all arrogant.

Back in the USA Helene Mayer was soon suffering from homesickness. In February 1952 she took leave of absence from City College for a “recuperation break”, for she was increasingly unable to withstand the eternally Mediterranean climate of Northern California. Three months later – in May – she married Falkner von Sonnenburg in a quiet ceremony in Munich. The couple moved to the hills above Stuttgart before settling in Heidelberg.

Helene Mayer had come home to die. She had been treated for cancer several years before in the USA and fourteen days after her wedding, she discovered that the tumours had spread. She died on 15 October 1953 and was interred in the family grave of the Sonnenburgs in the Waldfriedhof in Munich.³³ The memorial addresses were given by Hitler’s last Reich sports leader Karl Ritter von Halt and Erwin Casmir, under whose directorships in athletics and fencing the “Aryan paragraph” had been enacted 20 years earlier.

Helene Mayer was an extraordinary woman, the “New Woman” in fact, whose name was once on everyone’s lips. Those who knew her more intimately described her as very charming and full of energy. Her great achievement was to have cultivated women’s fencing in Germany and brought it up to a level with men’s foil. Unintentionally she also however created her own myth and in all probability only gradually became aware of her role as an abused victim.

Translated by: Donald Macgregor (St. Andrews)

Notes

- 1 *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung*, 37th year, Nr. 47, 18.11.1928, S. 2043 et seq.
- 2 Vicki Baum, Stud. chem. Helene Willfüer. *Der Roman eines jungen Mädchens unserer Zeit*, Ullstein, Berlin 1928.
- 3 Arturo Gazzera was born on 5 September 1870 in Navarra and died on 5 May 1945 in Bad Homburg vor der Höhe.
- 4 WERTHEIMER, Martha: *Die deutsche Frau und der Sport*, Kurt DOERRY & DÖRR, Kurt Wilhelm: *Das Olympia-Buch*, Olympia-Verlag, München 1927, P. 326. Kampfspiele: These competitions, conceived as a “national Olympics” before the First World War, were held every four years from 1922.
- 5 Casmir (1895-1982) took part in the Olympic Games from 1928 to 1936. After the foundation of the “Fachämter” he was nominated by Reichssportführer Hans von Tschammer und Osten in 1934 to take charge of fencing, but in 1937 he was relieved on the insistence of SS-Gruppenführer Reinhard Heydrich (see also 30). Casmir, who joined the NSDAP in 1937, was from 1949 to 1957 President of the German Fencing Federation.
- 6 *Berliner Lokal-Anzeiger*, 4.8.1928.

The last time in her home country for ten years – and still in full swing: the original photo showing Helene Mayer in Leipzig me 45 years ago by my then fencing instructress, who was friends with her till 1938.



Helene Mayer depicted on a stamp of 1968: For this first special issue in the Munich Olympic Games series the graphic designer Karl Oskar Blase chose the typical motif with the “Obrschnecken” (side-plaits).

- 7 Quoted from *Central-Vereins-Zeitung*, 17.8.1928, P. 455.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Copy of the letter of 28.9.1928 in the correspondence diary of the Schillerschule, in: “Denk mal, Arisch oder nichtarisch?“, edited by the Geschichts-AG der Schillerschule Offenbach, 1993, Institut für Stadtgeschichte, Frankfurt/Main, 99/5.
- 10 *Berliner Lokal-Anzeiger*, 13.10.1928.
- 11 *Archiv Kluge*, copy of letter Halt to Lewald, 29.6.1931.
- 12 CARL UND LISELOTT DIEM ARCHIV KÖLN: *Reisetagebuch Los Angeles*, 3.8.1932.
- 13 Ellen Müller-Preis (1912-2007) is described in many sources as Jewish, which by her own account was not accurate (Interview Kluge 2001). The claim is also contradicted by her participation in the 1939 German Championships, in which she was second to Hedwig Hass.
- 14 Wilhelmine Werdnik (1885-1980) was first married to Michael (Milan) Neralić (1875-1918), who in 1900 took part for Austria in the Olympic Games at sabre (3rd place Masters). The native Croatian from Slunj (at that time Szluin/Hungary) went in 1908 as a fencing trainer to Berlin, where he met his wife-to-be. After the Italian fencing champion Luigi Barbasetti had to leave Austria as an “enemy alien” in 1915 during the First World War, Neralić moved to Vienna to take Barbasetti’s place at the Union Fencing Club (UFC). His wife held classes for women there from 1915. After her husband’s death (17.2.1918) she married the university fencing champion Martin Werdnik.
- 15 Gesetz zur Wiederherstellung des Berufsbeamtentums, 7.4.1933, Reichsgesetzblatt I (1933), P. 175.
- 16 *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 30.9.1978.
- 17 Privatarchiv Erika Mayer. Mayer’s younger brother Ludwig, has preserved to this day the extensive papers left by her sister-in-law. Her brothers Eugen and Ludwig had given the medals, cups and trophies after the death of their mother on loan to the fencing club Hermannia Frankfurt. The club displayed them for years in a window. When the club was dissolved in 1971 and became part of the university of Frankfurt fencing club (UFC), the Olympic gold medal of 1928 remained in the possession of the UFC, although Ludwig Mayer had later asked for it to be returned. That medal and other items were included in the exhibition at the end of 2010 in Offenbach. On the other hand the 1936 Olympic silver medal has disappeared and was probably stolen.
- 18 Bundesarchiv R 8077/223.
- 19 *Pariser Tageblatt*, 30.10.1935, P. 1. Fasanenstrasse: an affluent neighbourhood where the synagogue stood.
- 20 Ibid, 28.1.1936, P. 1.
- 21 Milly MOGULOF, *FOILED. Hitler’s Jewish Olympian. The Helene Mayer Story*, RDR Books, Oakland 2002, P. 79.
- 22 Cf. Richard COHEN, “The Woman Who Saluted Hitler“, in: *By the Sword*, Random House, New York 2002.
- 23 *Landeszeitung für das Rhein-Main und Lahngbiet*, 26.8.1936. The Hitler photo with dedication is in the private archive of Erika Mayer.
- 24 *Pariser Tageblatt*, 28.2.1936, P. 2.
- 25 The November 1936 letter sent to several German female Olympic participants was addressed by her to the Frankfurt athlete Doris Runzheimer-Eckert, with whom she had shared a room in the Olympic Village for women. There is a complete copy in the *Haus der Stadtgeschichte, Archiv*, Offenbach am Main, Mappe 485.
- 26 *Die fromme Helene* (Pious Helene): Title of a satirical picture story by the humorous German writer Wilhelm Busch (1832-1908), in which the descent into sin of a “respectable” girl called Helene, who on that account has to go to Hell, is depicted. Honi soit qui mal y pense.
- 27 Ibid.
- 28 *Reichssportblatt*, 4th year, Nr. 30, 27.7.1937, P. 957.
- 29 In 1934 the Reichssportführer introduced so-called “Fachämter” and nominated leaders of these who were given dictatorial powers. However because of international sports considerations Tschammer left the sports federations in place. In 1944 Behrends (1907-1948) became SS-Gruppenführer and Lieutenant-General of Police. After his capture after the end of the war in Flensburg the British handed him over to Yugoslavia, where he was executed for war crimes which he had ordered, in particular the shooting of hostages.
- 30 Heydrich (1904-1942), who had replaced Behrends as “Fachamtsleiter” in 1941, removed the same year the Belgian Paul Anspach (Olympic champion 1912) as FIE president in order to take over the post himself. The plan misfired however as Tschammer had already promised the post to the Italians, who were wanting the 1928 Olympic épée team champion, Giulio Basletta, to get it. The incident caused Heydrich and Tschammer to fall out, but the feud was ended by the successful assassination attempt on Heydrich. Cf. Bundesarchiv NS 2528/3.
- 31 Gazzera (1907-1996) was an NSDAP and SA member from 1933. He entered the SS on 7 April 1937. In 1939 he changed to the Security Service of the SS (Sicherheitsdienst – SD). From 1 March 1943 the Obersturmführer served in the Waffen-SS. From 7 July to 14 November 1944 he was assigned to the concentration camp (KZ) of Arolsen, an outer camp which was part of the KZ Buchenwald. Next he took part in fighting the partisans in Yugoslavia, where he was captured on 12 May 1945. From 1950 he was active as a fencing trainer with the OFC Bonn. His daughter Sigrid (married name Chatel) represented Canada as a fencer in the 1976 Olympics. Of the 1936 Olympic participants, who were coached by Gazzera among others, Josef Uhlmann, Richard Wahl and Richard Liebscher as well as the Austrian Josef Losert went over to the SS. Among the fencers promoted by Heydrich were in addition the former Berlin waiter and Gestapo-Hauptsturmführer Erwin Kroggel, who worked in Office IV of the Reich Security Central Office [Reichssicherheitshauptamt] (RSHA), which under its chief Adolf Eichmann was a leading participant in the annihilation of European Jews. Kroggel survived the war undamaged and in 1952 took part in the Olympic Games.
- 32 Memorial Volume – victims of the persecution of the Jews under the National Socialist tyranny in Germany 1933–1945, www.bundesarchiv.de.
- 33 Waldfriedhof München, Grave 211-W-12 2138/298.