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## **Walking between the lines: Josephine Levy-Rathenau (1877–1921)**

**ABSTRACT:** The paper discusses the case and the role of Levy-Rathenau in German adult education. She is unknown as an early adult educator but remembered within disciplines dealing with guidance and counselling or vocations. Nevertheless, she is relevant for adult education since she was in favor of a wide access to education. It is a core idea of adult education to widen participation access to formal and non-formal learning. Levy-Rathenau considered adult education to be an important part of giving women self-reliance and the power of knowledge. Her ideas were very modern and perhaps so modern that it took much longer to implement them widely. Based on a re-analysis of recent publications from such disciplines, the argument will be put forward that she can, nonetheless, be considered as an adult educator. The paper concludes with ideas for future research.

**KEYWORDS:** Josephine Levy-Rathenau, Germany, guidance and counselling, 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### **Introduction**

The so-called ‘great man theory’ was an idea originating in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which can be, and indeed, must be criticized a great deal for different reasons. According to this idea, history can mainly be explained by the impact of great men or male heroes. It is assumed that they have a crucial importance for history, its developments and its decisions. The idea is chiefly attributed to the Scottish author Thomas Carlyle. In 1840, he published a book entitled ‘On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and The Heroic in History’, in which he states: “For, as I take it, Universal History, the history of what man has accomplished in this world, is at bottom the History of Great Men who have worked here. They were the leaders of men, these great ones, the modellers,

patterns, and in a wide sense creators, of whatever the general mass of men contrived to do or attain; all things that we see standing accomplished in the world are properly the outer material result, the practical realization and embodiment, of Thoughts that dwelt in the Great Men sent into the world: the soul of the whole world's history, it may justly be considered, where the history of these" (Carlyle, 2011, 1840, p. 5).

This was a strong, but today outdated statement of male dominance, since women had almost no place in this approach of Carlyle. Men only are mentioned within his public lectures, on which his whole book is based upon. But Carlyle's point of view was typical for many historians in the 19<sup>th</sup> century throughout the world. Even nowadays, it is still rarely the case that people seek and research explicitly about evidence of famous and important women in history. Historical research often highlights male rulers, policy-makers or thinkers. This is partly understandable because power was, and is often, seized by men and they have from an early age, certain structural advantages. Nonetheless, there are of course also important women. Especially in the past, they had to look intensively for a place and fields of action in order to realize their potentials within oppressive societies and structures, denying them access to education and power.

Thus, the interesting and stimulating project of the editors of this journal to look for articles that present women, who have been recognized as influential figures, as initiators, leaders or inspiring examples, is precious, even today. I am delighted to contribute an article on such a significant woman. Here, her work took place between the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. This period is, in Germany, very important as democracy gained influence at this time, with the goal of the emancipation of women and workers. Women were able to vote for the parliament for the first time in Germany in January 1919. The first attempt of a major and nation-wide democratization of Germany was accompanied with a process, where women also had more rights in finding paid employment and became more independent from their families. It is also no accident that the German *Volkshochschule* became established across the nation in 1919 and afterwards (Schrader, Rossmann, 2019), but it was a result of the German Revolution in 1918 and many earlier social movements.

Summing up, this period was very exciting and transformative in many respects. Josephine Levy-Rathenau was an important figure besides other women within this wider context, and she contributed a great deal to the empowerment of women through the means of education, publishing, guidance and counselling. It is an honor to shed more light on such female figures

and make their stories and their influences on history more widely known. Recently, I have heard the comment in a plenary discussion by a female researcher at the history conference 'Vergangene Zukünfte – Neue Vergangenheiten: Geschichte und Geschichtlichkeit der Erwachsenenbildung/Weiterbildung' that women in adult education in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries did not write down their thoughts and approaches. This is a bold and very general statement. Its validity has to be doubted and debated. Josephine Levy-Rathenau especially, is one example that at least some women did write a great deal, but their books and writings were neglected for a long time as they were not archived, nor cited by successors. Thus, it is very important to have such projects and special editions such as the journal here, to which I can add my contribution. It is a core task of historical adult education research to shed light on historically hidden or lost figures.

### Source and approach

This article here is mainly based on a re-analysis of a book from Nürnberger and Maier (2013) from the perspective of an adult education researcher and his place in the present. The book by Nürnberger and Maier perceives and constructs Levy-Rathenau mainly as a key figure in establishing vocational guidance and counselling for women and men in Germany. This is certainly the case and this view is also supported by other authors (Gröning, 2010), who are also conducting research in the fields of guidance and counselling. Nonetheless, I would like to make the argument that Levy-Rathenau was not only important for guidance and counselling, but also an important female adult educator. Perhaps her story and her legacy is even typical for past events and present views on them. She lived and acted in a time, where many academic disciplines were much less fixed and labelled as they are today. Besides the classical professions and disciplines of theology, law or medicine, new disciplines were very much in the making and being established in different ways. Thus, it is in many respects, an issue of interpretation and discussion, who are the foremothers and forefathers and for which disciplines or fields of action (such as adult education). I wish to contribute to that here by the argument that she can be also considered as an adult educator, even if she did not claim that for herself in her own writings which are available to us today. I will return to this argument at the end of the text to justify this claim.

## Josephine Levy-Rathenau's biography

She was born as the third child of four into a Jewish family in Berlin on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of June, 1877. She had three brothers, and was the only daughter. Her parents, and indeed the whole family, belonged to the educated and economically well-placed bourgeois milieu. For example, her uncle Emil Rathenau, founded the well-known German company AEG. She was also a cousin of the later minister for foreign affairs, Walther Rathenau, who was killed in 1922 in an attack by right-wing extremists. He was later named as the 'first victim of the Third Reich' (Sabrow, 1998), because of the anti-semitic and belligerent motives of his assassins. Many of Rathenau's relatives were later deported to concentration camps in Nazi Germany and some of them were killed there.

Josephine Levy-Rathenau grew up in the Berlin district of Tiergarten. Her father owned a textile company, but retired early as a wealthy pensioner. He was voluntarily and actively engaged in supporting and leading welfare organizations within the Jewish community. The whole family belonged to an educated secular Jewish milieu, which influenced Josephine a great deal (N rnberger, Maier, 2012, p. 75). During her relatively short life, she became an engaged activist at an early age, which will be explained in more detail within the next chapter.

Despite the educated background of her family, she was not allowed to go to high school like her brothers, who received a classical humanist education, as was typical for bourgeois families at this time. This might have contributed to her strong engagement for the better access of women to education. Education for women, and especially for women of the bourgeois, was at that time, often only seen as a means for keeping a household and educating the children, but not as a means for participating in the labor market and receiving their own income. Nonetheless, she was very talented and educated in many languages at school. Her husband later described her as being fluent in many languages like English, French, Italian and Spanish (N rnberger, Maier, 2012, p. 76).

In 1900, she married Dr. Max Levy, who was an engineer and an entrepreneur. Both lived in Berlin, close to her childhood home. The marriage did not result in children. Her husband was also socially and politically active and belonged to the city council of Berlin. He supported his wife a great deal in her diverse social and educational engagement (N rnberger, Maier, 2012, p. 76). Josephine Levy-Rathenau died on 15<sup>th</sup> November, 1921, in Berlin after a long period of limited health and illness, which had started in 1915.

## Ideas and works of Josephine Levy-Rathenau

She lived only to be 44 years old, but the volume and the depth of her engagement was tremendous. Nürnberger and Maier (2012, pp. 78–93) list the main activities, which contribute to her lasting legacy:

- Co-Initiator of the ‘Berliner club for women’ in 1900,
- Head of the ‘guidance office for female interest’ in 1902,
- Author of the book ‘The German Woman in her Vocation – Practical Advice to choose a Vocation’ in 1906,
- Co-Founder of the ‘Association for the Craft and Trades of the woman’ in 1909,
- Editor of the journal ‘Female Vocation and Employment’ in 1910,
- Head of a nation-wide network for female guidance and counselling in 1911,
- Author of the book ‘The Woman as Technical Clerk’ in 1914,
- Public activist for female suffrage in early 1918,
- Author of the book ‘Democratic Vocational Policies for women’ in 1920,
- Speaker at conferences, gatherings and meetings.

The list is far from comprehensive, but it demonstrates impressively her high level of engagement and networking within the few years in which she lived. A wide range of obituaries (Nürnberger, Maier, 2012, pp. 94–95) underlined her main contributions for women and emancipation in Germany. She did this through a mixture of activities in publishing, editing, networking and leadership of organizations. Education, teaching and learning in varied forms were a core interest of hers, although less bound to a certain institution, more widespread. She was part of a wider movement of women living in metropolitan areas like Berlin in Germany. The democratization of Germany after World War I and the increase in female employment in arming factories caused by the war, naturally gave support to her engagement. But already in the *Kaiserreich* and its male-dominated, belligerent atmosphere, despite the cultural changes and industrialism, she was a main driving force towards modernity and more equal rights for women and men. Her core idea was that women must have access to their own income and be given paid employment, rather than the unpaid family and reproduction work. Education was not enough, but secure employment was important for her. Especially in her 1914 book, ‘The Woman as Technical Clerk’, she made clear that she wanted women too, to be able to work in technical professions. This was an almost revolutionary approach at that time. Thus, she wanted to widen and to change the stereo-

types of male and female professions. She was also aware that job prospects in such technical employment were better than in caring professions. A long time before such research, she was aware of the segmentations of labor markets and that female access to employment is important, but also which professions and jobs they choose. Thus, she followed a lifetime perspective in discussing professions and vocations.

These ideas were relatively radical at a time, when women were often characterized as being inferior in relation to men. It needed many more decades until married women were allowed to undertake a paid job without first asking their husband for agreement. This did not happen until the 1970s, in Western Germany. Printed information and personal advice were considered by Levy-Rathenau as an important means to achieve these main goals. She wanted to empower all women, instead of promoting a social policy or caring for women as dependent persons on their fathers, relatives or husbands. Therefore, she used different methods and approaches, and was very communicative. She is described as being a clear leader, as well as being unparalleled in communication and collaboration, which contributed to her manifold success (N rnberger, Maier, 2012, p. 94).

### **The impact on and relation to adult education of Josephine Levy-Rathenau**

What does it require for someone to be considered an adult educator? The scholar Reischmann (2015, p. 88) describes the term adult educator very critically as an ‘everyman label’, which ‘is destructive for the role and perception of the academic discipline and its graduates.’ Thus, he is much more in favor of using the term *andragoge* for people being educated in an academic discipline at universities. This might be a possible strategy beside other strategies to consider for the present. But this strategy certainly does not work for the past, when adult education was not established as an academic discipline at universities. It would result in the loss of any predecessors. Thus, the initial qualification cannot be the criteria for excluding people from being considered an adult educator in historical contexts. Levy-Rathenau did not even have the opportunity to go to a high school, as the first step towards studying at a German university. Universities started to open up for women only in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Generally, adult education was partly also a substitute for the lack of access to universities, which were only available to a very small minority of people. The university extension movement was partly one reaction to that, and supported adult education. Overall, we cannot identify past

adult educators by their study programs, since adult education was not yet established as a science in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century and early 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

But which other criteria can be used for identifying the forefathers and foremothers before study programs in adult education were established? Can we really start the history of adult education solely with the establishment of the first study programs and their teachers and students?

The case of Levy-Rathenau is firstly, from my point of view, certainly relevant for adult education since she was in favor of a wide access to education. It is a core idea of adult education to widen participation access to formal and non-formal learning. This relates adult education strongly to democracy and emancipatory movements.

She focused secondly on the individual decision-making of women after school and in early adult life. Levy-Rathenau wanted to support the autonomous decision-making process by providing information mainly, and partly, advice. Thus, the core of her ideas is mainly democratic since she considers adult education to be an important part of giving women of all status self-reliance and the power of knowledge. Her ideas were very modern and perhaps so modern that it took much longer to implement them widely. Perhaps she was so much ahead of her own time and the national, political, social and cultural contexts of her period that it needed time to accept her ideas more widely? It is even more striking that so many of her ideas and initiatives were worked out within a context that was often not favorable towards them. Thus, Carlyle is perhaps in such a way at least partly correct, that sometimes few engaged individuals can make a major difference? But it is important to add, that such people are certainly not only men, but very often women, although many are unfortunately more often forgotten or less prominently remembered than men. Nürnberger and Maier (2012, 2013) work recalling the legacy of Levy-Rathenau is a major contribution to addressing this.

Levy-Rathenau was thirdly also an adult educator who sought for a combination of structure and agency. She was part of the wider women's movement. In particular internationally (e.g. Selman, Selman, 2009), it has often been considered as very important or even crucial that adult education has to be mainly a movement. She was certainly, in many respects, an activist for learning. The institutionalization or professionalization of adult education are not always (Cervero, 1992) something to be seriously striven for. The relationships between 'state, civil society and the citizen' (Bron et al., 2009) is complex. Levy-Rathenau sought and was trying to combine all of this. She was like many other adult educators, an activist and part of a social movement aiming for female emancipation. At the same time, she built up structures in

relation to publications (books and editing a journal) and establishing offices for guidance and counselling for women. Thus, she was aware early of the strategy that adult education needs more infrastructures than informal adult learning. She was sensitive to her historical, oppressive context, which did not provide chances for women to choose freely their vocation and to learn informally about their new opportunities.

In order to escape the corporative and hierarchical order of her time, in which people were supposed to live and work in the same jobs and vocations of their ancestors, she was fourthly, an engaged change-maker, which can be considered as a relevant criteria for many adult educators. She worked hard to establish public, but independent structures, which went beyond temporary social movements. She came from a somewhat privileged social background, but she was actively engaged for all classes and asked for public engagement beyond fragmented voluntary work.

The issue of the 'social question' (Hake, Laot, 2009) and adult education shaped her own engagement like others in this period of time, but she did not answer it by solely focusing on deprived groups as many adult educators do. And fifthly, she was in favor of equal access for all, which does not mean only the underprivileged. This makes her again an adult educator, rather than a social pedagogue, who often focuses solely on deprived groups.

Nowadays, equal rights for women and men might be considered as having been achieved in many respects. But Ostendorf (2005) demonstrated, for example, in her empirical analysis of the guidance and counselling of the labor office, that there are still tremendous imbalances. These are less obvious than in the time of Levy-Rathenau, but they are still present. Women and men learn informally a great deal about their assigned role within society and the economy. This makes it even more important to learn formally different views, having access to information and encounters with people such as counsellors, who widen and enrich the perspectives shaped by the milieu at home or at work. This makes her approach towards information and learning within an established framework of guidance services so valuable and modern. The guidance and counselling of adults is today a core subject within German adult education research. (Gieseke, Nittel, 2016; Dörner et al., 2018). Thus, Levy-Rathenau can be considered here as a very relevant foremother who dealt with what has become a crucial issue for adult education research over the last two to three decades. This claim can be criticized as a kind of presentism, since the judgement who is an adult educator and who is not is based on present or historically relative new situations. Nonetheless, it is here rather assumed that of course historians belong to their eras and in-



quiries into history are often informed and nurtured by present discussions and developments. How did our societies and we become what we are today? The historian Kocka defines partly the relevance of history by such an interest in how we have become who, and where we are nowadays (1990, p. 431). Thus, Levy-Rathenau can be discovered as such a relevant historical figure with still a great deal of relevance today.

### Concluding reflections and ideas for future research

Following an old saying and different quotes, we are all “standing on the shoulders of giants” (Käpplinger, 2017), who were female and male. History is not only what happened in the past, but also what we see and make of it. There is of course a certain danger to exaggerate past events and to misinterpret persons and events in order to serve present and future interests. Historical research is often a long quest for the truth and sometimes even a journey with different layers of interpretations by different generations and their contextual embeddedness.

It might be a worthwhile exercise to be aware of early ancestors even if they did not call themselves adult educators or are not part of earlier mainstream historical narratives about our assumed ancestors and key figures. Unfortunately, we do not know how Levy-Rathenau would have perceived herself. How would she have described her own profession? Would it have been important to her? It could be an interesting approach in trying to clarify that, by looking more intensively than possible here in this article into her original writings. These have been interpreted by Nürnberger and Maier (2012) solely from their disciplinary background, which is not the disciplinary background of adult educators. Perhaps there are many more people in the past, who could be giants in other countries and in the past (Käpplinger, 2017, p. 39)?

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