

Approaching a biography

Rosa Luxemburg, Hildegard von Bingen, Hannah Arendt

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After my film *Hannah Arendt* [2012] came out, Piper Verlag, Munich, which published almost all of Hannah Arendt's writings, suggested I write a book about Arendt. Initially, I was surprised by the proposal, since, as I saw it, there are already so many books, biographies and texts about her that there wasn't really any need for me to add yet another one. But then they explained to me that it wasn't a new biography that they had in mind, but rather that they wanted me to describe my approach to Arendt and how I »unlearned being afraid of her.«

I turned down the offer because I wanted to let my film speak for itself and couldn't imagine that readers might be interested in my doubts or fears. The editor was disappointed by my refusal. Unlike me, she was convinced that people who had enjoyed the film might be curious to find out why I had taken on such a significant woman and philosopher and whether I hadn't sometimes lost my nerve.

Today, in front of this audience, I will try belatedly to comply with this request. And I'll describe the challenges of this approach using not just my film about Hannah Arendt, but also those about two other historical female figures: Hildegard von Bingen and Rosa Luxemburg.

In doing so, I'd like to quote a statement Hannah Arendt made in an interview late in her life: »I would like to say that everything I did and everything I wrote – all that is tentative. I think that all thinking [...] has the earmark of being tentative.« The same is true of anything I may say in and about any of my films.

What does it mean for a filmmaker to »expose« herself to a historical figure? Because, if you don't expose yourself, if you don't attempt to recognize, to see yourself reflected in him or her, to struggle to achieve an intimacy of sorts with someone who started off as a stranger to you, ultimately your viewers won't be able to sympathize with this person either.

As I've already pointed out, Hannah Arendt isn't the only woman in my film-making life I've tried to win over, as it were. That said, I suspected from the start that she would make it even harder for me than the others. Unlike her American writer friend Mary McCarthy, Arendt was extremely reticent about discussing her private life and feelings, especially with strangers. Yet merely exploring a person at the intellectual level isn't enough for me.

There are films that emerge entirely from within you. You sit down and begin to let your imagination roam and it's as if you were opening a zipper to your unconscious and, with it, of course, to your own hidden life. That's what happened to me with my film *Sisters, or The Balance of Happiness*.¹ In it, I presaged or intuited that I have a sister, whom I'd known nothing about until that point.

And then there are films, material or figures that are brought to you from the outside, which you initially refuse to believe you might have anything in common with and for which it takes you a long time to develop a feel for the ›correspondences,‹ in Baudelaire's sense of the term.

It wasn't my idea to make a movie about Hannah Arendt. Martin Wiebel, an old friend, longtime supporter of my films and an editor at WDR, downright ambushed me with the idea after I had finished shooting *Rosenstraße* [2003]. It had been an extremely strenuous shoot and I had been planning to take my time to think about my next film project. So my immediate reaction was to shake my head; his suggestion made no sense to me: A movie about a philosopher whose principal pursuits were thinking and writing? Completely impossible; you can't represent that on film. And, with that, for the time being, the subject was off the table for me.

But after a while I remembered that I'd had a similar knee-jerk reaction before. Rainer Werner Fassbinder's last project had been a film about Rosa Luxemburg, and after his death his producer had approached me, declaring that I owed it to my friendship with Fassbinder to take over the film. Especially since I was a woman. This – in the fall of 1982 – was the first time I was hearing that my being a woman might work to my advantage! I turned down the offer.

At the time, I didn't know that much about Rosa Luxemburg, even though she was one of the icons of the Sixty-Eight generation, her picture showing up alongside portraits of Marx, Lenin and Ho Chi Min on the signs students carried through the streets back then. Just this one lone woman in the midst of all these men. I had noticed that she looked rather sad and not as defiant as you'd expect for a revolutionary. This contradiction had sparked my curiosity. Maybe this was a reason to give in to the producer's urging after all. Contradictions have always appealed to me. I did set one condition, though: namely, that I would be allowed to write my own screenplay; in other words, that I could find out what about Rosa Luxemburg resonated with me – with me personally. In the mood for love, as it were.

I often deal with History in my films and, in doing so, try to draw a connection to my own biography. Rosa Luxemburg was a revolutionary; my mother and her family, as Baltic aristocrats, were expelled from Moscow by the very revolution Rosa enthusiastically supported, and they become stateless and homeless as a result. As a child, all I ever heard was that their misfortune was the ›Bolshe-

1 | Editor's note: *Schwester oder Die Balance des Glücks* (BRD 1979).

viks' fault, and some of them had even been grateful to Hitler for starting the war against Russia.

My mother read the memoirs of Alexander Fyodorovich Kerensky, Wolfgang Leonhard's *Child of the Revolution*², and other writers who had broken with communism. She read neither Marx nor Rosa Luxemburg. Suddenly I saw the offer to make a movie about Luxemburg – and consequently about a period I hadn't experienced myself – as an opportunity to understand something about our past: Where did we come from and what had this century done with us?

It was a long, you could almost say ›rocky‹ road – that is, a road across a great deal of asphalt. In order to consult unpublished texts by Rosa Luxemburg, I had to trek to the Institute of Marxism-Leninism in East Berlin. Every time I went there, I had to take the S-Bahn to the Friedrichstraße station. The platforms were patrolled by Vopos – East Germany's People's Police; at the passport control counter, I would be rudely ordered to show my ear, and I never once managed to elicit so much as a hint of a smile from the impassive controllers. From the Friedrichstraße station, to reach the institute, I had to cross Karl-Liebknecht-Straße and walk to the corner of Pieck-Allee³. It was only thanks to a misunderstanding that I had even been allowed to enter this temple of Marxism.

At the time, access was denied to many West German historians and scholars. The reason I had escaped this ban was that, completely ingenuously, I had joined a West German peace movement that, as I later discovered, was financed by East Germany.

As a result, the censors assumed that I was favorably disposed to East Germany, maybe even a member of the German Communist Party. Even so, I wasn't allowed to take a single unsupervised step; even when I went to the smoking room – I was still a smoker at the time – a historian would accompany me, always having to pretend that he was dying for a cigarette, too.

Luckily, I soon met the institute's Rosa Luxemburg expert, Annelies Laschitzka, whom I'm friends with to this day. But even she, despite our friendship, was required to report back about me – as I learned from the Gauck papers after the fall of the Wall. She did so without denouncing me. She even warned me, despite being a member of the party, not to pursue a co-production with East Germany. »They'll expect you to make a cinematic hagiography, just like our film about Clara Zetkin,« she cautioned me. I took her warning to heart.

For me, this research – like my research for my film *Rosenstraße* later on – ended up being like a belated history lesson.

I not only spent many weeks traveling to East Berlin, but to Warsaw as well, where Rosa Luxemburg spent time in prison at the beginning of the century. Yet the more I learned of and about Rosa Luxemburg, the more insecure I became. A Polish colleague of mine, a vehement anti-communist like so many Poles at

2 | Editor's note: Wolfgang Leonhard: *Die Revolution entläßt ihre Kinder*. Köln 1955.

3 | Editor's note: Wilhelm-Pieck-Straße in Prenzlauer Berg (Berlin).

the time, told me: »Leave her in the Landwehr Canal where she belongs; why are you trying to pull her back out?«

In the biographies, mostly written by leftist historians, I found virtually nothing about her private life. They were about the Party, the correct interpretation of Marxism and the class struggle, but not about love or friendships – especially not those that weren't strictly political in nature. And, reading these biographies, I felt a little like Rosa Luxemburg herself, who once complained in a letter to Leo Jogiches, her Polish lover and comrade: »Pages and pages of information about the work of the Party, but not a crumb of normal life. I was so tired sometimes that I almost passed out from your scribbling. When did we actually truly live?« Normal life – where could I find out something about it? Fortunately, Rosa left behind some 2 500 letters. They provided me with information about her likes and dislikes, her amorous encounters and her moments of despair.

And yet! To get to the hidden parts of her character, I even resorted to the Active Imagination technique described by C. G. Jung. You sit down on the floor, close your eyes and wait for what your imagination offers up. I decided to meet Rosa in this way, so that she could reveal things to me that I couldn't find in the books. During one of these sessions – just to give you an example of how this works – she told me: »Remember that I had very beautiful long hair, and whenever I was with a man I would spread it out over him.« There are, after all, only photographs of her in which she wears her hair pinned up, like all women did at the time, so we automatically make the mistake of only imaging this chaste version of her.

My search for her – not least using this adventurous approach – took me on a veritable emotional roller-coaster ride. Reading one of her letters to a friend, she struck me as warmhearted and likable; reading a speech against the members of the Party, she seemed self-righteous and arrogant. Then I'd go back to reading her letters, and would find myself admiring her again. Occasionally she'd get on my nerves with her infatuation with plants and birds, and I'd have to pick up one of her incisive political texts again. That's how it went for a while, back and forth, until she became increasingly clear and three-dimensional to me as a person, and increasingly rich and contradictory, too.

As my idea of her become increasingly solid and nuanced, I was once again gripped by fear. How could I convey this complexity, the richness of her personality, in a two-hour film?

Ultimately, my admiration carried the day. How she challenged and goaded the men of the social democracy again and again; how she laid siege – in word and deed – to this phalanx of indolence. And I was moved by her confidence. As a member of the post-war generation, who already knew the horrors the twentieth century held in store, I was touched by her belief that everything would take a turn for the better despite the adverse times. Even from within prison, she encouraged her friends, advising them to have faith in History, so much wiser than humanity.

Two years into my research, I began to trust her and my idea of her. I recognized many aspects of my own life in hers. *Toute proportion gardée*, of course. I, too, often had to defend myself against male prejudices and scorn. For Rosa, there was the added fact that she was Jewish, and many in the society at the time, even in her party, were anti-Semitic. There are caricatures of her that would cause an outcry today. And how often she was dismissed as a ›hysterical woman,‹ even by her own comrades. This allegation of hysteria, usually lobbed at smart women trying to assert themselves and their ideas, is still familiar to us today.

Rosa Luxemburg, however, was no feminist. No more so than Hannah Arndt was. Both were exceptions and, as such, felt no need to take a stand for other women. Seen from the point of view of the present, however, they conform to everything that feminists desire for and from women. And yet, ultimately it was something else that drew me to them: both women – who appeared to be so exceptionally strong seen from the outside – were no strangers to loneliness, sadness, romantic betrayal and pain. It's these hidden aspects of them – their second face, you could say – that allowed me to feel close to them.

In conclusion, I will read to you from one of Rosa Luxemburg's letters that conveys her capacity for suffering and compassion. She wrote it while in prison to Sonja Liebknecht, the wife of Karl Liebknecht, her comrade-in-arms.

Oh, Sonitschka, I experienced a sharp pain here. A few days ago, a wagon loaded with sacks drove into the prison. The cargo was piled so high that the oxes couldn't make it over the threshold of the gateway. The soldier accompanying them, a brutal character, began to beat the animals so savagely that one of them bled [...].

Then, during the unloading, the animals just stood there, completely still, exhausted, the one that was bleeding staring ahead with an expression on its black face like that of a tear-stained child. I stood before it and the animal looked at me, tears streaming down my face – they were its tears; you couldn't wince with greater pain for your dearest brother than I did in my powerlessness over this silent suffering. [...] Oh, my poor buffalo, my poor, beloved brother, we both stand here so silently, united only in pain, powerlessness and longing [...].

Sonjuscha, dearest, in spite of it all, be calm and cheerful. That's life and that's how one must take it: courageously, intrepidly and smilingly – in spite of all.⁴

4 | Editor's note: Rosa Luxemburg: Briefe aus dem Gefängnis. Berlin 2000, Letter from December 1917 (Breslau), online www.lexikus.de/bibliothek/Rosa-Luxemburg-Briefe-aus-dem-Gefaengnis/Breslau-Mitte-Dezember-1917. Original: »Ach, Sonitschka, ich habe hier einen scharfen Schmerz erlebt, auf dem Hof, wo ich spaziere, kommen oft Wagen vom Militär, voll bepackt mit Säcken oder alten Soldatenröcken und Hemden, oft mit Blutflecken [...]. Die Tiere standen dann beim Abladen ganz still erschöpft und eins, das, welches blutete, schaute dabei vor sich hin mit einem Ausdruck in dem schwarzen Gesicht und den sanften schwarzen Augen, wie ein verweintes Kind.

The first time I read this letter, I knew I had to include it in my film. It allowed me to contradict the image of ›bloody‹ red Rosa that many people still predominantly had of her at the time.

In the 1970s, there was a postage stamp with a portrait of Luxemburg on it. And there were actually people who refused to accept a letter if it had this stamp on it.

I've already mentioned the importance of letters in helping me approach a historical figure. The same is true of Hildegard von Bingen. Approaching her was, on the one hand, more difficult because the era in which she lived seems so infinitely far from us – an era in which people still believed that the world was flat; on the other, for that same reason, I also felt freer towards her. When we think about the beginning of the last century, we still feel a certain connection – there are photographs of the period and even moving images. But the Middle Ages?

Hildegard was born in 1098 and died in 1179, reaching the age – very unusual for the time – of 81 years. Nun, visionary, abbess, healer, researcher, composer, believer. I am neither a nun, nor a scientist or composer, and I grew up Protestant. So what could possibly lead me to her? Nothing but my curiosity and many questions. The most important of which for me was: What did this distant era have to ›offer‹ – in today's sense of the word – an intelligent and talented woman? Did she have the opportunity to recognize her gifts? And how was she able to assert them?

The women of the early years of the so-called new women's movement in the 1970s – the Nazis had also amputated and rendered grotesque the women's movement – were looking for role models from the past. Did they even exist? After all, women almost only appeared in history books if they were rulers like Queen Elizabeth of England or Catherine the Great of Russia. Apart from them, world history was made and described by men. And while these men may have had mothers, wet nurses, governesses, cooks, lovers or wives, apparently they didn't have much to say about them – unless they possessed a certain political power as lovers, like Madame de Pompadour.

I begin the film by showing a group of people at the end of the first millennium. Many people then believed that the world would end during the night to

Es war direkt der Ausdruck eines Kindes, das hart bestraft worden ist und nicht weiß, wofür, weshalb, nicht weiß, wie es der Qual und der rohen Gewalt entgegen soll ... ich stand davor und das Tier blickte mich an, mir rannen die Tränen herunter, – es waren seine Tränen, man kann um den liebsten Bruder nicht schmerzlicher zucken, als ich in meiner Ohnmacht um dieses stille Leid zuckte. [...] O, mein armer Büffel, mein armer geliebter Bruder, wir stehen hier beide so ohnmächtig und stumpf und sind nur eins in Schmerz, in Ohnmacht, in Sehnsucht. [...] Sonjuscha, Liebste, seien Sie trotz alledem ruhig und heiter. So ist das Leben und so muss man es nehmen, tapfer, unverzagt und lächelnd trotz alledem.«

the year 1000 and they prepared for it with self-chastisement and prayer. Not unlike how we feared the year 2000, because we thought the computer world would collapse. I imagined how inconceivable it must have seemed to people back then when the sun came up again the next morning, the world still existed and they were still alive. The sun. Light. The night was over; a new era was dawning. And it was in the first century of this new era that Hildegard was born and received messages from the living light.<

In the very beginning of the film I let the young Hildegard ride gradually from blurriness and indistinctness into visibility. To me, that means: she is approaching us from the distant past. And we will watch her through the eyes of our present-day secular knowledge.

My first trip this time was to the Hildegard convent in Eibingen near Rüdesheim. There, I met Sister Philippa, who, as a former journalist, is responsible for contact with the outside world. She eagerly provided me with information, like Annelies Laschitzka had for Rosa Luxemburg. She advised me on which biography I should read – Barbara Beuys' *Denn ich bin krank vor Liebe (For I Am Sick with Love)*;⁵ unfortunately, an infinite amount of trash and kitsch has been written about Hildegard – and pointed me to her correspondence in particular. Sister Philippa asked just one thing of me: »Please, not too many herbs. Don't turn her into a herb lady.« As you may know, Hildegard is known today primarily for her herbal knowledge; there are pharmacies named after her, mueslis and teas and all kinds of alternative medicine treatments. But I really wasn't interested in reducing her to her herbal knowledge.

At the end of our first meeting, Sister Philippa invited me to a profession – that is, someone taking her final vows – at the convent two weeks later. A real opportunity for me, since hardly any young women want to become nuns anymore. I was then able to speak with this nun, as well as with her father, who had come to the novices' reception celebration – a craftsman, who didn't hide his displeasure at his daughter's decision from me.

I was very impressed by the young woman and her delight – so seemingly genuine – at being allowed to take the veil. In the Middle Ages, joining a convent wasn't uncommon. Hildegard was given over to the Church already as a little girl, as payment for the so-called tenth (the tenth child), with no opportunity to object. She did not join the convent voluntarily.

How does a person act who is born into an era she didn't chose, into a society that wants to force her to behave in certain ways? Will she try to think »without a banister,« as Hannah Arendt put it? Hildegard's banisters were Christianity, the Bible, the psalms, the Word of God. How did she manage to recognize her strengths and desires within the confines of these clearly defined borders? And how did she manage to express them?

5 | Editor's note: Barbara Beuys: *Denn ich bin krank vor Liebe. Das Leben der Hildegard von Bingen*. München 2001.

Hildegard had visions and was convinced that they were sent to her by God. But at first she wasn't sure if she could even talk about them. After all, she could have been accused of receiving these visions from the devil. Which would have meant excommunication – a death sentence of sorts for a person of faith, eternal damnation.

Today, we know that particularly severe migraines can trigger hallucinations like these – Oliver Sacks has written very impressively about it. We can assume that this was the case of Hildegard's visions, since she suffered from poor health her entire life and repeatedly had to retire to her bed for weeks at a time.

After writing down her ›visions,‹ she turned ›in all humility‹ to Bernhard von Clervaux, the most powerful clergyman of his time, to ask him to take it to the Pope for his authentication. This was, to put it a bit flippantly, her first coup: Hildegard managed to get the Church to recognize her as a visionary. And, with that, she no longer owed obedience to her abbot. Next, the voice ordered her to found her own convent and to leave behind the one where she was supposed to stay until her death.

From a mixed monastery, where both monks and nuns reside, Hildegard now switched to a convent for women only, where, in keeping with the rules of the Benedictines, she was the sole authority. What fascinated me about Hildegard was how this smart woman succeeded in ›emancipating‹ herself, as we would put it today, from the rules of her time even as she continued to believe firmly that she was obeying God's voice and God's voice alone. She couldn't see that it was actually the voice of her own unconscious and secret desires. As a result, she continued to believe that women were weak. She repeatedly emphasized: »I am but a weak woman.« Even so, she didn't escape the wrath of the men of her time. Many revered her, but many would have welcomed her excommunication. The fact that it took almost a thousand years before she was canonized by a pope supports this hypothesis.

So, with Hildegard von Bingen it was once again the contradictions in her biography that appealed to me. On the one hand, as an abbess and visionary, she corresponded with the powerful men of her time, with emperors and popes, even admonishing them and giving them orders – since these orders weren't coming from her but from God. On the other hand, when a young nun, Richardis von Stade, whom she had grown particularly close to, wanted to go her own way to become an abbess in her own right at another convent, Hildegard turned into a completely ordinary, loving woman driven to frenzied behavior by passion and pain.

To try to get Richardis back to her convent and back to her, Hildegard even wrote to the Pope, but he rebuffed her. In the end, she had to resign herself to her fate. Here is an excerpt from a letter she wrote to Richardis von Stade:

Woe is me, mother, woe is me, daughter. Why have you left me behind like an orphan? I loved the nobility of your manners, your wisdom and chasteness, your soul and your

whole life, to the point that many said: »What are you doing?« Now everyone suffering a pain like my pain must lament with me, anyone who has felt love for a person out of the love of God in their hearts and soul, as I did for you – a person wrested from them in an instant, as you were wrested from me.

May the angel of God walk before you, may the Son of God protect you and may his mother watch over you. Remember your poor mother Hildegard, so that your good fortune doesn't fade away.

»So that your good fortune doesn't fade away«! That sounds a bit like a veiled threat, doesn't it. Which can also be understood as a vision, since, as it happens, Richardis died just a year after leaving Hildegard's convent. And it is difficult not to suspect that Hildegard, in some small corner of her heart, wished for her death, just as women today sometimes do when abandoned by their lovers.

And now on to Hannah Arendt! When, after my initial resistance, I decided to at least try to approach her life and work, I began by listening to her famous conversation with Günter Gaus, a German TV-anker, at first just as an audio recording [26 October 1964]. She struck me as arrogant and self-righteous, constantly interrupting and correcting Gaus. To the point that I immediately considered abandoning the project, before I had even really started it. Not long afterwards, I watched the same conversation on DVD and was surprised by what a different impression she made on me.⁶ Charming and captivating. And I could understand Gaus, who, when asked once who his favorite conversation partner was, had answered: Hannah Arendt. He and his wife had been truly in love in with her. I, on the other hand, was far from being in love.

Günter Gaus told another story that may also come as a surprise to us: Hannah Arendt, he said, was so nervous before the conversation started, and even during the recording, that he was worried she might get up and leave the studio. Thankfully, one of the cameramen – in 1964, cameras were still enormous machines, very difficult to move – interrupted suddenly, saying that he couldn't keep shooting like this – there was a nail sticking out of the floor that the camera kept getting stuck on; he couldn't work this way. And so Gaus and Hannah went back to the dressing room, smoked a few cigarettes, chatted and came back to the set once the problem with the nail had been resolved. And from that point on, Hannah was calm, any noticeable nervousness gone. So, as it turns out, we have a nail to thank for this marvelous document.

Later, in New York, Hannah Arendt's last assistant, Jerome Kohn, confirmed to me that Hannah suffered from serious stage fright before every lecture and speech she had to give. I had thought of her as fearless. And no doubt she was

6 | Editor's note: Vgl. Günter Gaus: Die klassischen Interviews. Set B: Politik & Kultur 1963 – 1969. Ed. by Manfred Bissinger. Hamburg 2005 (3 DVDs): Zur Person: Hannah Arendt im Gespräch mit Günter Gaus (1964), online www.youtube.com/watch?v=J9SyTEUi6Kw.

in the way she looked at and analyzed the world. Being afraid of people she had to address publicly, on the other hand, was something I was familiar with and could empathize with.

And so I set off again. Like I had for Rosa Luxemburg and Hildegard von Bingen. Even traveling all the way to New York this time.

During my first trip there, I asked Pam Katz, with whom I'd written the screenplay for *Rosenstraße*, if she could imagine a movie about Hannah Arendt. I was expecting a negative response, like my own initial one. But no – Pam was enthusiastic from the start; in fact, if it had been up to her, she would've started working on the project right away. Pam is Jewish and a New Yorker, so she has two important things in common with Arendt.

The next day, we drove to the Upper West Side to look at 370 Riverside Drive, where Hannah Arendt had last lived with her husband. I already knew the area, because Uwe Johnson, whose *Jahrestage* I had adapted for the screen,⁷ had also lived on Riverside for a while. Johnson had been friends with Hannah Arendt; the two of them even corresponded. But I didn't know that yet at the time. We took pictures of the building, entrance and lobby. An initial approach. I need this sort of concrete image. In my imagination, right away, I pictured Hannah walking in and out of the entrance.

Even so, I couldn't quite believe that Pam was so readily willing to take on Hannah Arendt – that she didn't have to struggle through a forest of doubt first, as I had had to do. And so I suddenly found myself caught between two people pushing me to take the leap. Yet neither of them was a director. Their imaginations didn't have to transform a text into a living, moving picture. That's an enormous difference. Writing may not be easy, but as long as images remain in the imagination, anything is possible and imaginable.

A director's work begins the moment you have to turn images in your head into externally visible ones – and that's also where the agony begins.

To give you just one example. In the screenplay for *Marianne and Juliane (Die bleierne Zeit [1981])*, I had written, carelessly and succinctly: »They climb Mount Etna.« Just one, harmless-sounding sentence. And then the whole team, plus the actors, had to drag themselves up the mountain. It was especially tough for me because I was still a heavy smoker at the time, and the smell of sulfur was so intense I could hardly breathe. In the end, our gaffer had to push me from behind, which was pretty humiliating.

At the time, I cursed that one sentence in the screenplay. But most of the time it's a question of much more difficult transpositions. An author describes a certain atmosphere – between day and night, let's say, in the twilight of feelings or in a certain landscape. And then there you are, standing on the set, and that atmosphere just refuses to materialize. You're working against the clock, you're

7 | Editor's note: *Jahrestage*. Aus dem Leben von Gesine Cresspahl (BRD 2000).

under pressure from your producer because every day of shooting is tremendously expensive, so you have no choice but to make compromises.

Hannah Arendt! It's easy to write: she is a thinker – or, she thinks. But how can you convincingly show that in a movie? And what was she, anyway? Jerome Kohn wrote:

She is usually called a philosopher and often described as a political and moral philosopher. But I wonder. Was Socrates a philosopher? He was a thinker, to be sure, and a lover of wisdom, which is what *philosophia* means in Greek. But do we know what wisdom is? We should not forget that Socrates insisted he knew nothing. Might that have been the reason the Delphic Oracle proclaimed him the wisest of all men? Hannah Arendt was a thinker with a need to understand. She said she could not live without trying to understand whatever happened, and the times she lived through were replete with events, many of them unprecedented, each of them difficult to understand in itself, and more difficult to understand collectively. Catastrophic events, one after the other, »cascading like a Niagara Falls of History,« as Hannah Arendt put it.

Since the history of the twentieth century – and, with it, Hannah Arendt's life – was packed with events »like [...] Niagara Falls,« where should we start describing her life? With her childhood in Königsberg? When she took part in Martin Heidegger's seminar – the master of thinking, as Arendt later called him? When she escaped from Germany in 1933, via Prague to France? With her exile in Paris, where she met Walter Benjamin and her future husband Heinrich Blücher? When the German armies invaded France and Hannah was sent to an internment camp? Or with her escape from there to Marseille and from Marseille via Lisbon to New York?

Perhaps you're familiar with the excellent film trilogy by Axel Corti, written by Georg Stefan Troller, that describes the fate of Vienna Jews who flee, via France, to the United States, where they are forced to live in extreme poverty at first. Hannah Arendt and Heinrich Blücher didn't have any money when they arrived in New York, either, and they didn't speak English. Like a much younger woman, Hannah Arendt had to find work as an au pair for a middleclass American family to learn the language. In 1941, when she was already 35 years old. Any one of these episodes could have been made into a riveting, dramatic film. So which one should we choose?

It quickly became clear to us that we didn't want to write a love story à la »Hannah and Marty,« even though we undoubtedly would have found the money for it much faster. We were convinced that her husband Heinrich Blücher was the more important man in her life.

After *Rosa Luxemburg* and *Hildegard von Bingen*, I wasn't really in the mood for a so-called bio-pic. Moreover, it seemed like a leap in the dark to me, with no chance to linger, no time to think or reflect.

Luckily for me, I found out that Lotte Köhler, a colleague and friend of Hannah Arendt, was still alive and living in New York. She welcomed me warmly, but also with skepticism.

She couldn't imagine that a film could do justice to her friend, and she had just had an unpleasant experience with a writer to whom, years earlier, she had entrusted Martin Heidegger's letters to Arendt, when they were still unpublished. This writer had used the letters to cobble together a kitschy play that had infuriated Köhler. As a result, she was wary of me. It was only after seeing *Rosa Luxemburg* that she opened up to me more. She told me that Hannah Arendt had been a great admirer of Rosa Luxemburg, that she had even written an essay about her. In time, Lotte Köhler told us many anecdotes nowhere to be found in any of the biographies.

Köhler also put us in touch with Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, Hannah Arendt's first biographer, who had studied with her. She had since become a psychoanalyst, which, by her own admission, would not have pleased Arendt. She, too, helped us – thanks in particular to her different, psychoanalytic point of view. She described Hannah's fixation on older men – Heidegger, Jaspers and Blumenfeld, for example – as a search for her father, who had died much too early.

But it was Jerome Kohn who became – and has remained to this day – our key contact. These three people – Lotte Köhler, Elisabeth Young-Bruehl and Jerome – soon became as important and close to us as this ›tribe‹ had been to Hannah Arendt. Every time I went to New York, we would meet for dinner, feeling a bit like romantic conspirators.

The last member of the ›tribe‹ that we met was Hans Jonas's widow, Lore Jonas, in a senior-citizens home in Philadelphia. She gave us an unpublished letter her husband had written, in which he breaks off his friendship with Hannah after having read her articles in the *New Yorker*.

In the meantime, four years had passed, we had read almost all of Arendt's books and writings, and yet we still couldn't decide what period of her life to focus on and what scene to begin with. Finally, we had our eureka moment: we would concentrate on the Eichmann years. Reporting for the *New Yorker*, Hannah Arendt travels to Jerusalem to witness Adolf Eichmann's trial [1961]. This gave me a counterpart for her: a flesh-and-blood human being sitting in a glass box; not an abstract idea, but a man we could observe together, allowing us participate in her thought process.

Hannah Arendt and Adolf Eichmann were both born in Germany – and even in the same year: 1906. But what diametrically opposed life stories! A German Nazi opportunist and a Jewish intellectual forced to flee Germany. The philosopher and the man who willingly abdicated his ability to think to ›the Führer.‹

It was only when we hit upon this solution that my fear gradually faded and I became cautiously optimistic.

It quickly became clear to me that in order to convincingly portray this meeting of two worlds I would have to use the original black-and-white footage from

the Eichmann trial. Years earlier, before I had even the slightest idea that I'd be asked to make a movie about Hannah Arendt, I had seen a documentary, *The Specialist*, by Eyal Sivan, entirely about the Eichmann trial.⁸ I wanted to be sure that I could use this material. By this point, we had found a producer who was willing to go to bat for the film. She contacted Yad Vashem and managed to get us access to the footage we needed.

As had already been the case for Rosa Luxemburg and Hildegard von Bingen, letters were my main source for understanding both Arendt's political and private self. There was her correspondence with Karl Jaspers, who initially was supposed to play a part in the film; with Mary McCarthy, her American friend; and with Heidegger, though it is almost exclusively his letters that have survived. Hannah Arendt carefully collected and saved them in the drawer of her bedside table, while he seems to have been more inclined to »get rid of« hers – either because they weren't important enough to him or because he feared arousing his wife's jealousy. Arendt also exchanged letters with Kurt Blumenfeld, Hermann Broch, Gershom Scholem and many others, which we were able to consult in the archives of the New School, where Hannah Arendt taught.

Since every person shows every other person a different side of his or her character, I find I'm best at bringing into focus a picture of a complex person from this kaleidoscope of impressions.

The more I read, the more Arendt became a friend to me. Lotte Köhler called her a »genius of friendship.« And, in conclusion, I'd like to read an excerpt from one of her letters that confirms this. It is a reply to a letter from Gershom Scholem, who accused her of not loving her people.

You're quite right to say that I have no such love – and for two reasons. Firstly, I've never loved any people or collective in my life – not the Germans, French or Americans, nor the working class or anything else of that sort. The truth is that I love only my friends and am completely incapable of any other kind of love.

I could say the same of myself.

8 | Editor's note: Eyal Sivan/Rony Brauman: *Un Spécialiste: Portrait d'un Criminel Moderne*. Paris: Lotur Film 1999.

