Chapter 5: The History and Presence of Motherhood and Academia

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Over 20 years ago, I sat looking over the application forms for the University of Basel, hesitating about which field of study to choose. My hand went back and forth from medicine to history. After several days, I finally ticked "history." I always had a profound interest in the subject, despite terribly boring history classes in high school. The application form also required to choose the planned final degree — licentiate or doctorate. Growing up in a family of teachers, education always had a very high standing, but no one in my immediate family had a university degree, and a doctorate seemed very frightening. But I got their support and the support of some teachers at university when I decided to go for it. I never regretted choosing history over medicine. At times, I might struggle with the structural settings of academia, but never with my choice to become a researcher and historian.

Transnational migration, cultural transfer, and transfer of knowledge are key focal points of my research. In my dissertation, I studied the history of Jewish watchmakers in Switzerland, an immigrant community of originally rural commodity dealers who entered a new industry that not only brought profound inner-societal changes (secularization, urbanization, social advancement), but that also enabled the industrialization of watchmaking in Switzerland. My second book (my habilitation) is a biography of Salman Schocken, a German-Jewish entrepreneur, philanthropist, publisher, and cultural Zionist who was forced to leave Germany in 1933 for Jerusalem. The study is more than the description of Schocken's life; it is an analysis of how the cultural area of German Jewry

was constituted and changed outside of Germany after 1933. In my current project, my team and I work on Switzerland in the transnational network of science in exile from 1933 to 1950, understanding Switzerland and its political and academic landscape as one location within the transnational academic networks of German Jews after 1933.

In my research I often focus on individual people. Attention to a singular life allows us to reconstruct "how social, economic, cultural, political and ethnic networks form, solidify and intersect, or dissolve."[1] A biography is hence "neither structure nor agency, but always both."[2] Writing a biography in context takes into account that "the autonomy of the agentic subject is an illusion,"[3] but understands the person according to the social groups in which they were educated and of which they were a part. People are, to use the phrase of the historian Anthony La Vopa, "positioned in a dense cluster of historical contexts."[4] My interest goes beyond the merely biographical: I aim to analyze the development of the interplay between the individual, structures, institutes, relationships, and knowledge across time and space. Following this line of thought and drawing on my analysis of the confluence of the biographical and structural strands of history, I will argue that both academia and motherhood are social constructs.

This theoretical approach to historiography has shaped my thoughts on my own paths as an academic and a mother in the current system of higher education. The cover of my second book in poster format hangs on the wall behind my desk, framed by numerous drawings by my children. This background is visible in every video call, in lectures as well as

1 Simone Lässig, "Introduction: Biography in Modern History – Modern Historiography in Biography," in *Biography between Structure and Agency: Central European Lives in International Historiography*, ed. Volker R. Berghahn and Simone Lässig (Berghahn Books, 2008), 20.

2 Ibid.

3 Pierre Bourdieu, "The Biographical Illusion (1986)," in *Biography in Theory: Key Texts with Commentaries*, ed. Wilhelm Hemecker and Edward Saunders (De Gruyter, 2017), 210–16.

4 Anthony J. La Vopa, *Fichte: The Self and the Calling of Philosophy, 1762–1799* (Cambridge University Press, 2001).

in courses. The posters and the drawings represent my two realities. I am a PRIMA assistant professor of modern history without tenure-track; in this role, I am the supervisor of three doctoral students, the principal investigator (PI) of a major research project, a teacher, and a speaker. I am also a single mother of two young children, aged nine and seven. This work is bigger and more exhausting than being a professor. Ever since the birth of my first child, I have been in the limbo between care work and an academic career. I am writing this text as a scientist and as a mother.

The understanding of science and of motherhood have grown historically in our patriarchal society, and they are diametrically opposed. A central problem of equality between women and men in academia lies in the discrepancy between the image of science as a mental and intellectual activity and the emotional and physical connotations of motherhood. In their book *Maternity and Science*, Sarah Czerney, Lena Eckert, and Silke Martin write that it is not the "incompatibility of activities," but the "symbolic, psychological, economic and political coordinates" that play motherhood and science against each other.[5] Only by demystifying both, "the mother"[6] and "the scientist," will equality be achieved at universities. A look at the local university landscape shows how long the road to equality between women and men still is, despite the historical changes over the last 150 years.

In 1867, Nadesha Suslova received a doctorate in medicine from the University of Zurich, making her the first woman to complete a university degree in Switzerland. Fourty years later, a quarter of all students at Swiss universities were women, 90% of whom came from abroad. At the turn of the century, Switzerland was a stronghold for women's studies. Today, more than 150 years after the first female student, 51.8% of

5 Sarah Czerney, Lena Eckert, and Silke Martin, eds., *Mutterschaft und Wissenschaft: Die (Un-) Vereinbarkeit von Mutterbild und wissenschaftlicher Tätigkeit*, 1. Auflage (Springer Fachmedien Wiesbaden GmbH, 2020), 26.

6 Susanne Mierau, *Mutter. Sein.: Von der Last eines Ideals und dem Glück des eigenen Weges*, 2. Auflage (Beltz, 2019); Franziska Schutzbach, *Die Erschöpfung der Frauen: Wider die weibliche Verfügbarkeit*, Originalausgabe (Droemer, 2021), 166–209.

all bachelor's degree students at Swiss universities are female. If you include the universities of applied sciences, this figure rises to 52.3%.[7] But does this mean that the universities are female, as Urs Bloch concluded in a 2013 article in the Neue Zürcher Zeitung?[8] Clearly not. To describe Swiss universities as female institutions just because women have made up a slight majority of students since 2010 seems a bit far-fetched. The high number of female students contrasts with the still very small number of female professors — at the higher hierarchical levels the percentage of women decreases drastically. After graduation, the women's majority is over. There are more male doctoral students in Switzerland than female doctoral students and there are six male professors for every female professor.[9]

The reasons for deciding against an academic career and leaving after a doctorate or even after a habilitation may seem individual at first glance, but they are not; they are structural. A scientific university career enables an exciting, intellectually challenging life with numerous freedoms, inspiring encounters, and travel. But the road to a professorship is an uncertain, rocky path, especially for mothers. "Leaking pipeline" is a figure of speech used when trying to explain the declining proportion of women in science at higher qualification and career levels. Women are slowly but steadily dripping out of the scientific community.

In his 1993 work on the history of the university, Walter Rüegg wrote that the university, a creation of the Middle Ages, is "the European institution par excellence." "The university," he continues, "is [. . .] the only Eu-

7 "Universitäre Hochschulen," Bundesamt für Statistik, accessed April 6, 2025, https://www.bfs.admin.ch/bfs/de/home/statistiken/bildung-wissenschaft/personen-ausbildung/tertiaerstufe-hochschulen/universitaere.html.

8 Urs Bloch, "Die Frauen sind in der Mehrheit," *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, August 13, 2013, 185.

9 Philipp Dubach et al., *Frauen und Männer an Schweizer Hochschulen: Indikatoren zur Chancengleichheit in Studium und wissenschaftlicher Laufbahn: Im Auftrag des Teilprogramms Chancengleichheit von Frau und Mann an Universitäten SUK P-4* (Schweizerische Eidgenossenschaft, 2017), https://www.swissuniversities.ch/fileadmin/swissuniversities/Dokumente/Forschung/Chancengleichheit/CGHS_Indikatorenbericht_22-06-17.pdf.

ropean institution whose fundamental structures and social roles have been preserved, even strengthened and expanded throughout the course of its history."[10] Rüegg refers to the corporate organization of teachers and students, to the reputation of scientific achievement and the awarding of titles, and thus to structures with a high persistence.

Universities were, and to many extents still are, elite institutions. At the first universities, which came into being in Italy in the eleventh century, only sons of the nobility were admitted to study. Until well into the modern era, a university education was the preserve of a very small section of society. A university career, even a life as a scholar in the service of science, often without significant merit, was reserved for a small, privileged circle, and this remained the case for a long time.

Although the understanding of science has changed over the course of the centuries and admission to university has opened up, there have been only slight changes in the path to an academic career. The structure of the academic education system in German-speaking countries — master's degree, PhD, habilitation — but also the structures of the academic teaching body with the full professorships at the top of the hierarchy, have survived in their basic features to this day. These structures, with a small number of well-paid permanent positions at the top and a much larger number of temporary, precarious positions at the lower hierarchical levels, prevent the scientific community from diversifying because they act as a deterrent. Until well into the 20th century, scientists were, with very few exceptions, white, male, and financially privileged. After all, anyone who decides to pursue a university career in German-speaking countries is taking a risk with an unclear outcome, since only a very limited number of scientists can ever achieve a professorship. Studies show that women in particular are less willing to bear this uncertainty than their male colleagues.[11]

10 Walter Rüegg, *Geschichte der Universität in Europa*, Bd. 1 (Beck, 1993), 13.

11 Jutta Dalhoff, "Frauen in der Wissenschaft: Zeit, die Geduld zu verlieren," *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, June 3, 2013, https://www.sueddeutsche.de/bildung/frauen-in-der-wissenschaft-zeit-die-geduld-zu-verlieren-1.1685299-0#seite-2.

Researchers have long assumed that women are generally more risk-averse than men. However, as recent studies show, gender-specific differences in risk tolerance are less pronounced than previously thought.[12] The fact that women are less likely to aspire to an academic career is not because they shy away from risk, but because of the idealized image of the scientist as someone who is always available. This ideal is based on the principle that for a scholar, there is no place for a life outside of academia. This notion is based on a hierarchical understanding of society and a historical concept of bourgeois gender relations. The academic's retreat into academia is a departure from the world, and this is only possible when the organization of everyday life rests on the shoulders of others. A few years ago, when doing archival work for my second book, I read a male professor in a letter to a colleague referring to his female partner as "my wife and secretary." Not yet fully established in exile, and thus without a secretary who would type his correspondence and papers, he relied on the support of his wife. Professors' wives managed their husbands' affairs, the household, and the upbringings of their children. For male professors, having a family was a normal thing. For female researchers however, the idea that women have both the right to a professional career in academia and "an acknowledged right to the happiness of a family," as it was stated in 1920 at the first conference of the International Federation of University Women, was deemed radical.[13] Family models and life plans have changed drastically in recent decades, but the postulated image of scientists being available at all times stubbornly persists. There is no provision for parenthood, let alone for single motherhood.

For many, the central requirements for an academic career — doctorate, habilitation, and geographic mobility — occur in the years of life

12 Antonio Filippin, "Geschlechterunterschiede in der Risikobereitschaft: Die Unterschiede zwischen Männern und Frauen bei den Risikoeinstellungen werden häufig überschätzt," *IZA World of Labor*, no. 100 (2016), https://doi.org/10.15185/izawol.100.

13 Christine von Oertzen, *Science, Gender, and Internationalism: Women's Academic Networks, 1917–1955* (Palgrave Macmillan US, 2014), 31.

in which children are born. Both of my children were born during my habilitation period — the first when I was living in Jerusalem as a postdoc. Suddenly two realities had to be organized and harmonized with each other. A newborn sets the pace of life, while the academic clock cannot be stopped. Articles need to be revised, applications written, and lectures given. My daughter was only two months old when she attended her first conference (she was not impressed and slept through the whole day tightly strapped to my body). I wrote parts of my habilitation thesis on park benches in Jerusalem. Back then, she would only fall asleep in the stroller. Two years later, now in Basel, I started with the final revisions to the manuscript when my son, my second child, was ten days old. I submitted it the day after my maternity leave ended.

Children are not meant to be a part of an academic career. It is the old structures of the universities and the image of constant availability that make it so difficult for academic careers and parenthood to go together. But not only that. In addition, there is the pressure of the modern meritocracy, which is expressed in the scientific environment by publishing as much as possible: "publish or perish" is the creed. (But really, who should read all the texts that are produced without interruption is another question entirely.) The high performance demands of an academic career, especially when applying for the few permanent positions, collide with the obligations of care work and the exhaustion of young parents. Like many other young mothers, I have heroic stories in my repertoire: completing my habilitation four months after the birth of my second child, for example, or defending my PRIMA project in front of a national panel with a five-month-old baby who at night woke every 45 minutes. (To his credit, he was a great audience for my endless rehearsals.) There is a fine line between resilience and overexploitation of one's own health. The heroization of exhaustion and overwork are integral parts of the science myth and the mother myth. These hostile, neoliberal working conditions, as the editors of *Maternity and Science* put it in a nutshell, must no longer have a place in universities. As long as we do not see scientific work as a "job" with normal working hours, with protected afterwork hours, weekends, and holidays, the leaking pipeline will continue to drip. As long as the maxim "publish or perish" prevails and the value

of a scientist is measured by the number of publications, many excellent scientists will continue to choose a different path. The Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF), the largest research sponsor in Switzerland, is aware of the problem and explicitly supports female scientists on their way to a professorship. As an SNSF PRIMA professor, I am one of the explicitly funded scientists.

There is no lack of initiatives; the problem is addressed at all levels. There are support programs, mentoring, courses, relief offers, and breastfeeding rooms. Women and mothers have become visible, but they are still hardly noticed. A breastfeeding room (which I nonetheless appreciate) does not help with structural issues like meetings that last late into the night and the expectation to travel to conferences all over the globe. What we need to demand are binding working hours (as enforced by the University of Tübingen, for example), reliable infrastructure for childcare (day schools), a newly adjusted understanding of scientific performance (first approaches already exist), and improved employment conditions for scientists below professorships. This change must now be initiated, if necessary, through quotas and incentives. Above all, however, we need a change in mentality: new role models in managerial positions, far removed from previous (male) normal biographies, who exemplify new paths.