

Leaves From Life's Tree

Helene Raff

Translated by Alan Howe

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Helene Raff
1865-1942

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Translator's Note

The translator's task involves an awesome responsibility. He must render the original text into another language as accurately and faithfully as possible; he must acquire a feel for the author's idiosyncrasies of style and syntax; and he must do all this and also produce a translation which reads well in that other language. In the case of Helene Raff's autobiography, the author's style is relatively straightforward, although, by the standards of today, somewhat old-fashioned. After all, she may have been a woman for the new century – i.e. the twentieth – but she was also a product of the nineteenth.

If you have heard the music of Helene's father, Joachim Raff, you will recall that he often says a lot within a relatively brief span of time. His music is busy, active, alive. Helene herself writes in a similar manner: her style is often clipped and compact, allowing her to cover a lot of ground within the space of just a few pages. She comes across as a highly intelligent woman, sensitive and yet slightly distant. There is, in other words, a certain detachment, a certain objectivity, in her writing, although her own views on matters as diverse as the burgeoning women's movement, the arts, especially painting, and politics are clear enough.

The reader will no doubt be struck by the sheer number of names which Helene drops into her narrative. Yet we should remember that these were by and large familiar names in her day – and that, after all, she did meet and get to know many of the most prominent men in the German-speaking world and beyond. What a privilege it is to encounter, for example, Franz Liszt and Johannes Brahms, Hans von Bülow and Henrik Ibsen; if most of the others are unknown to us today, we should take time to familiarise ourselves with them in order to enter fully into Helene's extraordinarily rich and diverse world. Her world was a stage bestridden by giants and battered by extraordinary events, including two major wars. We can learn much from her experiences, so crisply and fluently recorded in this autobiography.

Alan Howe

Editor's Note

When I suggested to Alan Howe that he translate Helene Raff's autobiography, my interest was primarily to see what additional light it shed on the life of her father, the composer Joachim Raff. I had no inkling that her own biography would reveal such a vivid and fascinating portrait of the vibrant artistic and cultural life in Munich and elsewhere, during Germany's brief empire. It is an era of which we now remember hardly anything and yet her story teems with the once-famous writers, sculptors, musicians, actors and painters in her circle, whose names clearly needed no explanation to her readers, even in the late 1930s. The book's final chapters deliver a chilling account of the more familiar anxieties and privations of a civilian caught up in the Great War but, again, from the entirely unfamiliar viewpoint of an intelligent, patriotic German and her well connected, prominent friends.

These once celebrated ghosts of an era swept away by the disaster of war are fleshed out for today's readers in footnotes and photographs, which we have added. The footnotes also help remind us of the geographical, cultural and political landscape of southern Germany through which Helene lived her first 53 years. That said, they can all safely be ignored without spoiling her story.

Alan Howe's masterful translation allows English readers to hear for the first time Helene's 72 year old voice, as she looks back with a surprising lack of nostalgia to a milieu which probably seemed almost as distant to her in 1937 as it does to us now, another seven decades on. What better measure of his achievement than that she still speaks so clearly, her intellect, prejudices and enthusiasms still so obvious, even though usually cloaked in her generally straightforward, unemotional style.

Mark Thomas

Foreword

These pages record my experiences of the 47 years from the foundation to the fall of the Second Reich¹. However, it is impossible entirely to separate one's experience of individual events from what is happening in the wider world. Therefore I was concerned not to lose sight of this broader picture and, as far as was possible, to report faithfully what I saw, whether good things or bad. The bad things became more evident in the final third of the 19th century and continued into the new century as signs of a decay that had already begun; if these things had not happened the collapse of 1918 would have been inconceivable.

Nevertheless, before the fateful watershed when those signs of internal decline turned into reality, the spirit that prevailed in Germany was still the one which had been so powerful in the wars of liberation and the great yearning for unity of 1848. Representatives of that spirit - descendants of the old bourgeoisie who, with their modest expectations and unending capacity for hard work, held firmly to their ideals and convictions - held sway in all areas of German culture. All over the world these men brought great honour to the name of Germany.

Because I was brought up exclusively by those who inherited this way of thinking and was drawn to explore its source - having been born a decade and a half after the middle of the century - I also inherited the pride in and loyalty to my country which was part of it. So of course I felt all the more keenly the opposing tendencies which came along in my later years: the growth of materialism and hedonism and the egoism which often wanted to give privileges to the individual in preference to the community, something far beyond the natural rights of any person. It was the heroic conduct of our national army in the Great War which proved that, in spite of everything, the old Germany was still alive.

¹ The German Empire which lasted from 1871 to 1918, headed by the Kaiser (Emperor). It only became known as the Second Reich in the Nazi era, during which Helene was writing, in contrast to the Nazi's own Third Reich. The First Reich was the Holy Roman Empire.

I am delivering this book to my readers in a new, rich age which, because it makes provision for the future, is in need of an occasional backward glance. For he who wants to see clearly what is to come must be familiar with the past.

Munich, September 1937

Helene Raff

1: Earliest Impressions

I was born at nine o'clock in the evening on 31st March 1865.

My father was the composer Josef Joachim Raff¹ whose name was just then beginning to become known among his contemporaries. His ancestors were Swabian farmers and he himself was born in Switzerland - his mother's country of birth. He was, therefore, a typical Alemannian² in appearance, with a broad neck, elongated skull, pale skin and bright eyes. My mother Dorothea³, known as Doris, was the granddaughter of Goethe's long-time theatre director, Anton Genast⁴, and the daughter of Goethe's pupil, the actor and singer Eduard Genast⁵, whose memoirs of Weimar's classical and post-classical period were first published under the title "From the Diary of an Old Actor" (abbreviated edition by Rob. Kohlrausch in R. Lutz's Library of Memoirs.)

My parents had married in 1859. My mother's first pregnancy had unfortunately failed and her health had been weakened for a lengthy period. Then, after six childless years, two became three.

From what I have been told, I must have caused my poor mother a lot of trouble: my birth was far from straightforward and I was eventually delivered by forceps. As I was one of those children who initially show no signs of life, Dr Genth, my parents' physician, revived me with a few firm slaps, whereupon I began to scream loudly. According to what my parents told me, the scream was "Nä! Nä!", which in the dialect of my native city of Wiesbaden, which was then the capital of the duchy of Nassau, means "No". All too quickly they concluded that I was of a negative disposition. For two days I suffered deprivation as my mother couldn't feed me and my father spent a long time trying to find me a wet nurse. Babette, who

¹ Raff (1822-1882) was regarded by many in the 1860s and 70s as the foremost symphonist of the age. A controversial figure, his large catalogue was held by some to indicate an unselfcritical attitude to his art. Raff's reputation largely collapsed after his death.

² A native of south-western Germany/northern Switzerland.

³ Doris Raff (1826-1912): a highly respected actress.

⁴ 1765-1831: appointed by Goethe as director of the Court Theatre in Weimar.

⁵ 1797-1866: also a long serving director of the Court Theatre in Weimar.

came to live with us as nurse, was from that moment on the object of my most fervent affection. Whenever she had the day off – as I was later told – I used to cry bitterly, not because I was hungry, but because I missed her so much. After I was weaned and “Babedde” (that’s how I pronounced her name) stayed on with us as a nanny, I found I missed her when she was away more than anything else.

Sixteen days after I was born I was taken to be baptised at the Wiesbaden Catholic Church in the most dreadful April weather. I was given the names of my two grandmothers, two of my great-grandmothers and my mother – as follows: Helene Katharina Dorothea Christine Julie. My mother was still laid up in bed, her mother was no longer alive and my father’s mother was not able to come because she was too old and lived too far away. Thus my father represented his absent mother and faithful Aunt Toni¹, my mother’s sister who had come to help out for a week, represented my grandfather on my mother’s side who was also unable to come. According to both my father and my aunt, I apparently sat through the baptism as good as gold.

Three events connected with light stand out among my earliest memories. The first took place my before my third birthday and is one I only partly remember myself as it is also based on what I have been told by others. On Christmas Eve 1867 I evidently ran to my mother crying as I was overwhelmed by the lights on the Christmas tree. I remember – or think I remember – the tree, but not how I reacted.

The second memory was this: countless lights – little earthenware bowls with tallow – flickered and burned in our windows and in our neighbours’. These were the celebratory illuminations following the news of victory in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-1.

The third memory was of my parents who, returning from holiday, just couldn’t wait to see me at home in Weimar and so asked Aunt Toni to bring me to meet them by the Rhine. I can hardly recall anything of the journey back on the river; I was disappointed only when the fabled Lorelei

¹ Antonia Genast (d.1906)

Rock¹ turned out to be just a bare, hilly outcrop. I can't even remember whereabouts we got off the steamer and took a boat to bring us to dry land in St Goar or St Goarshausen. It was already dark and the current lapped behind us with a gentle murmur, like someone breathing - I was lying curled up, almost asleep, in my aunt's lap, blinking as I watched the lights along the bank scattering shimmering gold into the black waters. For me, the way they lit everything up and the stars shone above us looked incredibly beautiful. I felt an inexpressible sense of well-being and so fell asleep.

At that time we were living at 26 Geisbergstrasse in Wiesbaden; however I can't really remember anything about where we lived or about our neighbours. I can recall only one thing, which brought me delight every spring: the laburnum tree outside the window of the large parlour on the corner. I loved above all its grape-like blossom: my aunt would make me garlands and bracelets out of them. It was her custom to come and live with us for a year and then with her other sister in Weimar for a year: this was the rule since my grandfather, whom she had looked after at home, had died while visiting us in 1866. This death and the civil war of that year² were the first sad events of my life, although I hadn't been aware of them.

When Aunt Toni arrived to stay with us again my mother would make up a lovely four-poster bed with blossom-white curtains and would carry me in to greet her in the morning. I would struggle, screaming "Hey, I can't breathe!" by which I meant the all-enveloping curtains. Later I knew better, but I never became a great lover of four-poster beds.

Our household consisted of my parents, my aunt, myself and a single girl who also looked after me following Babette's much-lamented departure. The first domestic help I can remember was a tall, slim girl from Nassau - Anna, who was nothing special. After her came Käthe, an exceptionally beautiful girl with black hair and a radiant complexion. She was an

¹ At the narrowest point of the Rhine between Switzerland and the sea, the 120m high rock gave rise to German legends about a siren who lured sailors to their deaths.

² In the Austro-Prussian War of 1866, the Grand Duchy of Nassau had taken Austria's side. After its defeat, it was incorporated into the Kingdom of Prussia.

extraordinarily hard worker too. Then there was Mrs Bolz, the seamstress, who came round almost every week: she was a character – of stunted growth, but full of humour and comical sayings. She would always tell me: “Out of a hundred there’s not a thousand people like you!” – a sentence nobody could argue with.

Two further odd, but kind individuals often came round - they were almost part of the family. These were sisters Marie and Johanna Rehsener who were the orphaned daughters of an East Prussian protestant preacher. After losing all their possessions in the great fire of Memel¹, they had looked after their ailing parents until they died and then moved to Wiesbaden hoping that the mild climate would be good for their own severely damaged health. Both of them were highly gifted in more than one way, possessing an exceptional talent for art: Marie was actually more of a sculptor, whereas Johanna was a painter. They were also skilled in every kind of handicraft. Their abilities as collectors and writers in the field of folklore would only become evident later on; however what Marie did do at that time was to take lessons in counterpoint with my father in Wiesbaden, proving herself to be a very able and eager pupil. Johanna, who had been to university in Düsseldorf, painted two very good oil portraits of my mother and me. The one of me, in profile, showed me looking especially serious, almost melancholy, as did all the pictures from my childhood.

There was really only one reason for seeming so serious: I was occasionally poorly and also extremely sensitive psychologically. An expensive, beautifully-made doll, a little baby that could cry, always frightened and upset me because of the way it screeched; and the first time I saw a Punch and Judy show I had to be carried out overwhelmed with tears after I shouted at Punch for beating one of the other characters, sobbing: “You horrid fellow, stop hitting that woman!”

Towards the end of every year there was a big retail fair with market stalls: the so-called Andreasmarkt². It was regarded as a pre-Christmas market because it began on the evening before St Andrew’s Day (30th November)

¹ A city in East Prussia, now Klaipėda in Lithuania. The Great Fire occurred in 1854.

² St Andrew’s Market.

and went on into the beginning of December. However, for the discerning music-lovers of the neighbouring streets it was a trial on account of the cacophony of pipes, trumpets, hurdy-gurdies and people shouting. The then conductor of the Assembly Rooms Orchestra, Carl Müller-Berghaus¹, a friend of my parents, portrayed it in a delightful tone poem for orchestra "The Andreamarkt in Wiesbaden, or All Kinds of Torture". Every year I looked forward to this market with a mixture of pleasure and horror. On the one hand I liked the colourful hustle and bustle, the sweets which the girl who took me there would buy me, and also the merry-go-round which I always loved and the "market item" (junk) which my parents would give me. Yet, among all the buskers and showcases full of wax figures one couldn't avoid the sight of gaudy, blood-drenched paintings: murders, executions and public burnings, which affected me most terribly.

I was horrified by violent people, even by violent arguments between living people; my whole body would shake and I could hardly hear nor see. If I myself was shouted at harshly, I would react in a sudden fit of stupidity which revealed itself in blank stares and quite senseless answers. Because most of the time I lived among nervous and temperamental people, I didn't have many completely good days. Furthermore it was not the custom in those days to make allowances for the disposition of a child. Just as he or she had to eat everything that was put on the table (even when it regularly made him/her feel sick), so everything that big people said or did had to be accepted as right, with no possibility of contradiction.

My sense of authority was well-developed in any case – almost certainly as a result of the mental stimulation which I received, and quite apart from the tender love of my family. Twice a day my father would go for a walk with me. From time to time he would fall silent and gently beat time with his hands; that's when I knew he was composing and that I wasn't to disturb him. Usually, however, he would tell me stories – real life ones or sometimes historical ones; or he would let me tell them, insisting on clarity of expression and proper style. He had great reverence for everything in nature that blossoms and grows, thus stopping me at an early age from thoughtlessly pulling up flowers, whereas he gladly went with me "to the

¹ 1829-1907: best known as a conductor and first violin in the Müller Brothers String Quartet.

cherries” on the Kirschberg or picking berries which grew abundantly in Wiesbaden’s woods. I learned an awful lot from him on these walks.

My mother saw to different aspects of my upbringing. She insisted on good behaviour, not tolerating any bad language or selfish conduct (although both my parents had a strict expectation of obedience.) She clothed me from head to foot; there was no little dress, no little coat that she had not tailored, sewed or embroidered. Having an unusual talent for clothes making, she made all her own outfits, both for going out and for her work as an actress at the Wiesbaden Court Theatre. Once, when “Mrs Bolz” helped to make a wonderful brown moiré dress, I picked up the big scissors thinking deludedly that I could help too and, before anyone could do anything about it, cut a chunk out of the costly material. The awful scream let out by my mother brought my father to the scene: he gave me a fearful telling-off and repeatedly threatened to beat me, with the result that I began to sob, terrified: “I deserve it!”

It should be noted here, however, that corporal punishment was rare in our household; usually the threat of it was enough. Once, when I was naughty at the meal table and my father again put the stick nearby, in full view, I am supposed to have had the nerve to ask boldly: “Is it time for eating or for beating?”

I would serve up quotes from poems or stories more often than things I had made up myself. My Aunt Toni, who devoted a lot of time to me - she had the outstanding gift of being able to imagine what a child is thinking - would continually be telling me stories, or reading poems out loud. I caught on quickly and, after a short while, was able to repeat what I had heard. I didn’t forget it afterwards either.

I really liked hearing my aunt recount the plots of the operas and plays which she had seen performed, growing up, as it were, in the shadow of Goethe’s theatre. Here I should point out, however, that the content of classical plays didn’t fascinate me half as much as the libretto of, say, Marschner’s *Der Vampyr*¹ or Cherubini’s *Der Wasserträger*².

¹ Marschner’s opera *The Vampire* was first performed 1828.

² Cherubini’s opera *The Water Carrier* premiered in 1800 as *Les deux journées*.

The first contact with Goethe that I can remember took place on an early summer's day in 1869. Outside our corner window the laburnum tree was in full blossom; my aunt had made me a necklace and bracelets out of the soft blossom and, decked out in this fashion, I was jumping around like a foal. She called me over, made me pay attention and recited the *Erlkönig*¹. The verses had an effect upon me like a magic spell: I listened motionless, my arms leaning on my aunt's lap. When she had finished I demanded that she repeat it – and succeeded in getting three hearings! Then I began the poem myself and in fact was able to say it out loud with hardly any prompting. My aunt was delighted and had me recite the *Erlkönig* that afternoon as we were visiting our friends, the Schreiber-Schmidts. I didn't really want to, but I was used to doing as I was told and to my powers of memory and intellectual prowess being, as it were, paraded in front of others. This flaunting of children's talents which took place was in particular contrast to the general custom of not allowing children and young people to have a will or opinion of their own; instead their dependence and inferiority were constantly drummed into them. At that time I particularly loved another of Goethe's poems: *Reineke Fuchs*², with Wilhelm von Kaulbach's illustrations. Actually it was chiefly the illustrations that fascinated me, for I couldn't make anything at all of the story. But the animal pictures were a source of great joy as I loved animals very much, although I was rather timid around them because I wasn't used to them. What I thought particularly lovely was the expressive way they moved their tails – something I was almost envious of myself, much to the amusement of my family.

During the year my father gradually began to attempt to teach me to read, even at that early age. He succeeded without real effort, although all our friends feared the worst – and predicted as much – on account of my weak constitution. When I was able to read I was happy and absolutely devoured any book I could get hold of. Once again there was a chorus of warning voices: at the very least restrictions should be placed on my reading, the book cupboard locked, etc. My father countered these admonitions, saying that people wouldn't find any bad, i.e. frivolous books

¹ The Erl-King. Goethe's poem dates from 1782.

² The twelve-canto poem Reinecke Fox was completed in 1793.

in our house; only ones which were too difficult for me to understand. These I would surely get bored with and set aside. However, any book I was able to understand and gain something from was permitted!

My mother was in agreement; so there was no more to be said about the matter. Anyway, I had hardly begun the art of reading when my thoughts were taken off in another direction. This was the war of 1870-71.

Incapable of understanding the gravity of these events, I simply saw in them a welcome and exciting change. The first thing that happened was that we had five men billeted with us. They were all very nice to a little thing like me. Then the streets echoed with the sound of soldiers marching off and of war songs which I set about learning. This even made up for the fact that our summer holiday had been interrupted – we had been staying in a lovely inn with a big garden on Bergstrasse in Auerbach when the news of the imminent outbreak of war meant we had to return home. The only thing that really weighed on my mind was the distress felt by our domestic help, Käthe, to whom I felt especially close: her fiancé, a trumpeter in the military, had to go off to war. Anyway, my mother and aunt insisted on me doing something for our soldiers and so, as my knitting skills were not yet up to the mark, I was made to help make strips of linen. They were made by tearing old, soft linen into strips which were then used as bandages. If you imagine all the big and small hands – usually not very clean – involved in this labour of love (every school took part), then you will be horrified at the thought of all those open, serious wounds bound with this material which would surely cause infection! When I was an adult and had learned about the antiseptic treatment of wounds, I felt pangs of conscience every time I thought about what sins my unwashed little fingers had unknowingly committed.

I prefer to remember the occasional visits to the military hospital where I was allowed to carry round one basket with fruit and another with cigars which I was very proud to offer to the wounded. Some were convalescing, some were not seriously wounded; but I wasn't allowed near the beds of those who were. I knew for a fact that there were seriously wounded because two were being looked after privately by friends of ours. Miss Schmidt, who owned a beautiful villa in Sonnenbergstrasse and gave up rooms for soldiers, had eagerly devoted herself to the war-effort right from

the start, as had many women in Wiesbaden. There were also two sisters, Miss Nanny and Miss Otilie, known as Olly: a third sister was married to a former pupil of Liszt, Ferdinand Schreiber, whom my parents knew from Weimar and who had been steered away from music and forced back into business by his father. Our families saw each other regularly: little Eva Schreiber and her brother Max were my favourite playmates. At this point there were two extremely seriously wounded officers at their house: Captain F... and Lieutenant v. K... - of whom the latter's condition seemed particularly hopeless. As far as I remember Lengenbeck¹, the famous surgeon, had taken a bullet as well as fragments of bone out of his wounded leg, using chloroform to put him under, of course. The operation took two hours; the wounded man's comrade fled into the kitchen in tears because he couldn't watch his lieutenant being hacked about. But the success of the procedure and the devoted care given to the lieutenant made up for everything: he made a full recovery, as did his fellow-patient.

The healing power of Wiesbaden's hot springs attracted many injured in the war. Even wounded or captured French officers who were allowed to walk around freely on their word of honour were a common sight. The German officers were more friendly towards them than their own soldiers - at least that was the widely-held opinion. Wealthy and aristocratic Frenchmen who dined in expensive restaurants kept themselves away from their poorer countrymen who made themselves a bit of salad or a potato dish for lunch. However, the 1914-18 war, as we know, showed the unity of the French army; the spirit of 1871 must, therefore, have been that of the Second Empire.

Occasionally I was allowed to travel to Mainz with my mother and have a look at the Zouaves² and Turks interned in the castle there. I was astonished at the sight as these were the first coloured people I had seen in my young life.

The high point of the war, however, was the return of the troops in the summer of 1871. Our Käthe, wreathed in smiles, prepared a celebratory meal to which we invited her fiancé who had returned home safe and

¹ Bernhard von Langenbeck (1810-1887): the "father of surgical residency".

² French troops of North African origin.

sound. Geisbergstrasse had a special, honorary gate made out of greenery, with an inscription on it which said something like: in grateful memory of the troops who stormed the Geisberg. On the other side of Weissenburg the population of the Geisberg itself had erected a triumphal arch. The whole city was decked out with flags, pennants, symbols and inscriptions, and in the evening countless little lamps flickered and Bengal lights shone everywhere. The whole day long I waved my special little flag: it was a giant red cotton handkerchief with the words "Rhine Watch" on it, while round the edge between laurel and oak-leaf decorations there were the names of battles we had won in black and white. I have already mentioned the effect of the town's illuminations.

And then the Kaiser¹ came.

Because he was visiting Wiesbaden for the first time since 1866 as the new ruler – and as victor over the people of Nassau² – Wilhelm I was not well liked at all. Any appearance of arrogance on his part would have turned dislike into downright hatred. However, with tact and patience, he had been keeping a low profile. It seemed that he wanted to wait for the people of Nassau to turn into good Prussians! He refused the public celebrations which over-zealous supporters of his had prepared for his first visit, as well as the magnificent chamber and bed which he was supposed to be taking in the one-time ducal palace. Although expressing his gratitude and surprise, he immediately asked for the bed to be removed and his iron camp bed to be installed instead, as he didn't sleep very well otherwise. The people of Nassau were quite impressed: through his simple nobility the emperor had begun to gain their trust. And now the white-haired monarch was returning from this war as the victor, as the chosen one of all Germany! A passionate wave of patriotic German feeling overwhelmed us all. The Reich, the German Reich was no longer asleep with Kaiser Karl³ or that Red-beard⁴ in the depths of the mountains; here, in this white-bearded Kaiser, the whole world could see us!

¹ Kaiser Wilhelm I (1797-1888). As King of Prussia, he became Kaiser (Emperor) on creation of the German Empire in 1871.

² The Duke of Nassau had been deposed after Nassau's incorporation into Prussia after its defeat in the Austro-Prussian War of 1866.

³ Holy Roman Emperor Charlemagne (747-814).

⁴ Holy Roman Emperor Friedrich Barbarossa (1122-1190).

I have no clear memory of the crowds when he arrived at the railway station. A surging, swarming throng – the women were all decked out in their finery, carrying roses in their hands. I too, in my little white dress, held a few roses tightly in my hand. Thanks to Mr Senfried, the Chief of Police who was a friend of my parents, my mother and I were well positioned and someone lifted me up so that I could see over everyone's heads. I saw the Kaiser get out of the ceremonial coach in his helmet and military coat and raise his right hand to his helmet, smiling kindly. Then for a moment everything was submerged in a cheer and a mass waving of hats and handkerchiefs – roses flew through the air and fell to the ground. When the prompt came, whispered into my ear, I too threw my roses. And then suddenly there was silence – and a gentle, old man's voice spoke:

“Ladies, that's too many beautiful roses for an old man.”

That was the only time I heard the voice of the first German Kaiser in the new Reich.