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Alice Salomon – Addressing Injustice

The following is the text of a talk given in German to mark the centenary of the Alice Salomon Hochschule on 23 October 2008 in the Pestalozzi-Fröbel-Haus, Berlin

Ladies and gentlemen, distinguished guests, dear family and friends of Alice Salomon, in the name of the Alice Salomon Archives, I would like to extend a very warm welcome to you this evening.

It is a great honour for me to talk to you here today, and to report on materials from the Archives which have not yet reached the public, but which undoubtedly enrich our recollections of Alice Salomon. I have called my short talk ‘Alice Salomon – Addressing Injustice’.

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Instead of a traditional introduction I would like to begin with a quote from a letter written in 1958. To be more precise, a letter written almost exactly 50 years ago; on 19 October 1958. Allow me to read an extract to you:

‘I can still hardly believe that I will be in Berlin so soon. The anniversary gives me great joy, and I am touched to see that the love and sacrifice which my aunt invested in the school will bear fruit in years to come. And if I do come, thanks to your so friendly invitation, this “step back” might also work as a kind of catharsis against all that I have not yet managed to overcome in the 25 years since I left. I thank you for making the decision much easier for me.’¹

The letter was addressed to Dr. Erna Runkel, the Director of the Seminar for Social Work (*Seminar für Soziale Arbeit*), as the Social Women’s School (*Soziale Frauenschule*) was called in the 1950s. The author of the letter was Maria Hepner, one of Alice Salomon’s nieces. And we are happy to have among our guests this evening two of Maria Hepner’s nieces: Käthe Cahn (one of our oldest guests) and her sister Eva Jacobs. For many years, Alice Salomon spent her summer holidays with the Hepners in Switzerland. She was known there as Aunty Lie (*Tante Lie*), an aunt not only dearly loved but also greatly admired for her modernity and intellectuality.

Maria Hepner's joy at the thought that Alice Salomon's work would bear fruit in years to come is, from our perspective today, both visionary and also quite realistic. Following the remembrances of 1958 to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the school, Alice Salomon once again slipped from memory. It took a further quarter of a century before she was rediscovered in Germany and at the school; before political and historical interest in her work began to develop; interest, that is, in how she understood social work. Her understanding of social work went beyond considering it a stabilizing factor in society or a support for social peace. It should also contribute to change in society; it should 'make the world a better place to live in'. This was her formulation from January 1946 – drawing on the English social philosopher Karl Pearson, who was a source of inspiration in her early years.² She recalled this phrase soon after the Second World War, as details of the horrors of the Nazi period became known. It appears in a letter she wrote from her New York exile to a former colleague, also living in exile at the time, Emmy Wolff.³

It is only in the last ten years that Alice Salomon's work has begun to be recognized and discussed for its contribution to scholarly knowledge. Two signs of this – and indeed part of this wider recognition – are the recent new edition of her writings and the existence of the Alice Salomon Archives which is located at this historic location and which I am delighted to represent today.

As her work has been (re)-discovered, there has been increased recognition of Alice Salomon as the impressive organiser that she was. Projects which she founded and established have proved to be of long duration. Even those which were destroyed by the Nazis have been re-established. As we celebrate the Alice Salomon University of Applied Sciences today, we should recall that as early as the 1920s Alice Salomon had already anticipated the models which seem so new, modern and trendsetting to us today, i.e., the two-part Bachelor and Masters degree structure. The National Socialists may have destroyed her life's work, but they could not stop it from returning, albeit in many small steps and with large setbacks. That this was possible at all is due primarily to her work itself; to the fact that although Alice Salomon created a school and a university, she did not create a static or dogmatic system of theories.

So what gives Alice Salomon's work such lasting appeal? She laid great weight on enabling the students and pupils, the future social workers, to learn how to make judgements. Not to pre-judge, nor to pass harsh judgements, but to evaluate. Not only that, they were to learn how to judge right from wrong; to distinguish justice from injustice. Alice Salomon's writings, speeches and lectures are themselves an excellent example of how injustice can be identified and made public. They also show that this is an important task for social work, an important task for social workers. It is not enough – so the teachings of Alice Salomon tell us – to see injustice and to individually attempt to redress it. Only if we address injustice, so that it receives a public hearing, can it be overcome; only then can a

more just society emerge. She was not speaking of an abstract justice. It was difference and distinctiveness, the individuality of every single person which should be noted, protected and encouraged. Justice, as Alice Salomon understood it, means that every individual has the same right to be happy. It should be clear by now that the questions with which Alice Salomon's work deals are questions which remain deeply important to us today. Alice Salomon noticed them at an early stage, raising them again and again in ever-changing political and social contexts.

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Before I illustrate this with an example, I would like to return to Maria Hepner's letter. In her careful and modest manner, she writes that the visit to Berlin and the appreciation of Alice Salomon's legacy might contribute to a catharsis of all that she had not yet managed to overcome since she left Germany in 1933. Whether the visit fulfilled her hope at the time, I cannot say. But documents in the files here indicate that she must have been disappointed in the following years. Disappointed primarily because injustice was not addressed. This is the topic I would like to elaborate in the second part of my talk today.

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But first to the example provided by Alice Salomon. In 1896 she published one of her first ever articles – her short article in a well-known journal was titled 'The Emperor and Empress Frederick's Children's Home in Bornstedt'. It may be hard to imagine that behind the title lay an examination of justice and injustice. And indeed, the primary focus of the text is a clear description of the children's home in question. This reform project based on Friedrich Fröbel's ideas on childhood development and education – as they have been maintained and developed here at the Pestalozzi-Fröbel-Haus – was founded by Empress Frederick who was known for her dedication to social and feminist issues. The article, however, is far more than an informative account. What is fascinating is how Alice Salomon contextualises her description. To illustrate this, I would like to read you the beginning of the article:

'A recent announcement went round the daily papers which reported in terse brevity that a working woman is to appear in court charged with manslaughter because one of her children fell into a washtub during her absence and died from the injuries thus incurred. A virtuous woman, going to work because the income of her husband is not sufficient to support the family; a mother who loves her child as much as any woman who is in the lucky position of being able to look after her children herself or have her children looked after; a mother whose loss will pain her as much as any other mother; such a woman must face a court charge for the death of her child! And the entire future existence of the woman – who is not responsible for all this misfortune – depends on the verdict of one judge, on the personal opinion of one judge.'⁴

In these few words, Alice Salomon shows the dramatic situation of a proletarian mother who has to work to support the family although no-one can keep an eye on her children. She shows how wrong a verdict is which regards such a case in isolation, allocating blame to the individual mother without considering the constraints she faces. She demonstrates how the process of assigning individual responsibility to the mother obstructs the gaze which could look for the truly responsible parties, i.e., those who create such conditions and are willing to live with these conditions. Instead of questioning their own responsibility, they turn on a mother in a hopeless situation, asserting that it is she who does not care enough and lacks prudence.

As the title suggests, however, Alice Salomon does not stop at this point. She connects the drama of the proletarian mother and her child to the childcare project, which, were it made universal, could help change their situation and make it more bearable. By informing its bourgeois readers, by educating them, pointing out their own responsibility and demanding action, this article takes a first step towards the adoption and implementation of such model projects.

The short article is only one example of issues to which Alice Salomon was dedicated and with which her work deals. Her commitment to socio-political and civil society issues was based on the Jewish-Christian tradition and the emancipatory goals of the Enlightenment. Alice Salomon adhered tightly to the aim of helping to create God's kingdom on earth. She described it with the words of Martin Buber as 'the perfected living together of humans, the true community'.⁵ To reach this, we need emancipated, self-confident citizens who do not blindly submit to power and are not hostile to the other.

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It was this responsible civic involvement and understanding of the social which was exiled from Germany in 1933. I refer her not only to the symbolic level, but also to the very concrete dismissal and forced emigration of a large number of social workers, including Jews, socialists and all those who dared to resist publicly.

The majority of lecturers at the Social Women's School (*Soziale Frauenschule*) were also released from their teaching duties and dismissed in spring 1933. This included the doctor, Dr. Ida Hirschmann-Wertheimer; the economist Dr. Elisabeth Heinsheimer; the lecturer for singing, Dr. Gertrud Landsberg; the doctor, Dr. Bruno Harms; the Germanist and promoter of social education, Dr. phil. Margarethe Kupfer; the political economist and lawyer, Dr. Margarete Sommer; and the secretary Ilse Vahlen. Jewish students had to leave the school with immediate effect. This was a tremendous loss for the small school. (At this point I would like to draw your attention to albums which are available for your perusal outside this room. They include information on as many Jewish students and lecturers as we have

managed to find out about.) As far as we can see, however, those who continued to run the school did not see the absence of these colleagues and students as a great loss. In her memoirs, written from her New York exile, Alice Salomon wrote: 'A gulf had opened between those who were out of the running and those who hoped to carry on.'⁶

Those who now ran the school, particularly the educator and psychologist Dr. Charlotte Dietrich, School Director since 1925, saw themselves as victims who had been forced to act. They also considered themselves to be the ones who had worked hard so that the school – once a joint project – could be continued. In this situation, they made the most of the opportunity to re-orient the school and social work, turning away from the liberalism of the Weimar Republic to re-interpret the school and its history as a 'holy heritage' and 'asset of our people [*unser Volk*]'.⁷ No longer, that is, should it be understood as a project aligned with women's emancipation.

Yet at the same time the break which was accepted, or perhaps actively facilitated, in 1933 was simultaneously interpreted as a kind of sacrifice to purportedly higher powers. It was this latter view which was adopted after 1945. And it was this latter view which proved to be an effective and long-lasting impediment to addressing the injustice which had been perpetrated.

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As the school distanced itself from Alice Salomon, and as the good of the ethnic-national community (*Volksgemeinschaft*) began to replace care of the individual, she herself was left with a few research projects, her international contacts and those friendly relationships which managed to weather the conflicts. (She gives a moving account of the latter two in her autobiography, which is available today for the first time in non-abridged form.) Alice Salomon had no illusions about the National Socialists. At the beginning of May 1933 she closed the Academy for Social and Educational Women's Work (*Akademie für soziale und pädagogische Frauenarbeit*) to hinder its seizure by the SS. Even before this, she had formed an aid committee, primarily to help younger social workers who were in danger to leave Germany and create a new life in other countries. For the older social workers she thought – correctly – that this would be far more difficult. In May 1937 Alice Salomon was herself forced by the Gestapo to leave Germany. The Gestapo gave no reasons for this decision. No official written expulsion order was issued.

We have to rely on other materials. In our archive, we have a large collection of files under the name 'Dr. Alice Salomon'. This was made available to the Alice Salomon Archive of the Pestalozzi-Fröbel-Haus when the joint archive and documentation centre was first established. I found these files very moving, firstly, in a general sense, since they concern Alice Salomon, whose work has absorbed me for some time now. Unfortunately, I cannot go into great detail about the extensive, complex files here today. It is also not my intention

to provide a legal judgement on the documents. What I would like to do is to discuss two aspects which seem to me to be of central importance for how we now consider Alice Salomon. This leads me to the second reason that I found the files very touching or – more accurately – disturbing. They show in a very specific, material way how the expulsion of Alice Salomon was legalised after she had already left Germany, and how she was turned into a kind of ‘non-person’ until her file was closed in 1941. No less disturbing, albeit for different reasons, is the part of the files dealing with reparations and compensation from the 1950s to the 1970s. These documents illustrate the protracted and difficult process of making claims; they give an impression of how disappointing and hurtful it was for victims and their families to claim the often very meagre reparations they were due.

I would like to read you a short passage from a letter written by the NS town councillor who was also the Deputy Chairman of the Berlin Association for People’s Education (*Berliner Verein für Volkserziehung*). First a few words to set the letter in its context:

The letter was addressed to the Tax Office in Berlin Moabit-West. This tax office is well-known, since it was responsible for conducting seizures and for confiscating ‘assets which have been forfeited to the Reich’ (*dem Reiche verfallenen Vermögenswerte*) as it was called in NS officialese. After the Gestapo had seized Alice Salomon’s assets and initiated her denaturalisation, this office asserted its claim to the pension payments which the Berlin Association for People’s Education were making and had made to her in her capacity as the person responsible for the Social Women’s School. To justify the seizures, the Gestapo referred to decrees and laws from 1933 and 1936 through which Alice Salomon had been declared an enemy of the state, albeit without stating any specific reasons or explicitly naming those affected.⁸ After Alice Salomon had been stripped of her citizenship, the German Reich was the ‘legal’ owner of her assets and entitlements.

Thus, one and a half years after being expelled by the Gestapo, a new legal basis had been created which legalised injustice and defined new legal entitlements.

In the letter which I mentioned a moment ago, the Chairman of the Association states that the Association has halted all payments to Alice Salomon and outlines why he no longer believes such payments are justified. After three pages of arguments in support of this position, he adds a final argument which seems to imply he is not yet quite convinced by his own justification. This final argument I would like to quote. He writes:

‘It is certainly not in line with current public sentiment (*das jetzige Volksempfinden*) for a charitable association to be forced to pay contributions today – irrespective of the recipient – which aim to improve the social standing of a Jew.’⁹

To counter any possible objections which the German Reich, represented by the Tax Office Moabit-West, could raise, this chairman of a charitable association, i.e., an association re-

sponsible for the social, proffers ‘current public sentiment’ as the final, highest legal authority to act as judge over, and criteria for, what is socially justified. To strengthen his argument, he then deletes the word ‘current’ from his draft. This letter did not, in fact, manage to convince the tax office. But it laid the groundwork for an agreement in which Alice Salomon’s claim to the pension was simultaneously acknowledged and erased. The association and the tax office agreed on an annual instalment, which meant a reduction on all future private pension obligations. This was later one of the sources of difficulty in resolving the problems of compensation and redress.

During this process of legalisation of injustice, involving various agencies and authorities, the person initially known as ‘Miss Dr. Alice Salomon’, a common term of address in the 1920 and 1930s, became known as ‘Alice Sara Salomon’, then ‘the Jew Alice Sara Salomon’, ‘the Salomon’ and finally ‘a Jew’. She was also completely depersonalised in, for example, the sentence ‘It is, after all, important to us to dispose of the affair once and for all’.¹⁰ The Representative Council of the Berlin Association for People’s Education was informed of the decision on 21 March 1940. Charlotte Dietrich, Alice Salomon’s long-standing colleague and successor, was a member of this council.

As with other National Socialist practices, these events were never addressed. Not even – or: most certainly not – during remembrance services for Alice Salomon. They were not addressed in, for example, 1954 when the school adopted her name again, nor in 1958 when it celebrated its fiftieth anniversary. Public recollection of Alice Salomon was blocked, we could say, by the failure to address injustice; the refusal and/or inability to take responsibility for the injustice which had been done. It seems crucial that this refusal first occurred in the 1930s, during the Nazi period, and perhaps even contributed to the future development of that period.

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When the issue reappeared during the compensation procedures of the early 1970s, it was passed to the school administration, which tried several times to come to a legal resolution. The ‘Dr. Alice Salomon’ file wandered from agency to agency in Berlin for three years. It visited the Compensation Office, the Senator for Schools, the State Administration, the Senator for Justice, the Reparations Offices in Berlin, the Berlin District Court and the Fiscal Authority in Berlin. In the written communication accompanying the file, the specific individual situation slid into the background behind a discussion of fundamental legal issues. The tone became increasingly distanced as it became clear that the gulf between common law and the particular individual ordeal of experiencing injustice could not be bridged.¹¹

Reading Maria Hepner’s letter from 5 July 1973, I can’t help feel that she realised this. After thanking the Pestalozzi-Fröbel-Haus for their hard work, she wrote:

‘I was so naïve that I actually believed the government of Berlin would accept this relatively small obligation in order to commemorate the 100th birthday of one of its honorary citizens [i.e., Alice Salomon], even without a court ruling. [...] If, considering Alice Salomon’s individual service and merit, the senator is still not willing to satisfy this claim [...] – then I will refrain from pursuing the claim any further.’¹²

But this alternative to the bureaucratic process formulated by Maria Hepner, i.e., an understanding of Alice Salomon’s significance to the city and the country, was absent. In 1972 not one article was published in Germany in honour of her 100th birthday. At her former school, which had just become a university of applied sciences (*Fachhochschule*), we were engaging in heated controversial debates on the significance of social work for society, on the root causes of poverty and on the question of what exactly National Socialism had made possible. But something was missing from those debates in the 1970s.

At that time, families spoke very little about the specifics of the NS period. Partly out of great fear and defensiveness; partly due to the powerful ambivalence facing our generation which challenged its parents with critical questions. In a similar vein, very few specific questions were raised in the family-like environment of the school. We needed 15 more years until we could begin to ask questions about our own school’s participation in the injustice of the Nazi period, and begin the search for answers.

This process has not yet reached its conclusion. Here at the Archive, our goals and tasks include supporting and contributing to this questioning and exploration. This was and is one of the central stimuli motivating the Pestalozzi-Fröbel-Haus and the Alice Salomon University of Applied Sciences to integrate their two archives in the Archive and Documentation Centre for Social and Educational Women’s Work. Our aim is to contribute to keeping the ‘abyss’ which had opened ‘between those who were out of the running and those who hoped to carry on’ from sinking into oblivion. At the same time, we aim to help bridge this abyss. It is the greatest acknowledgement; the highest reward for us that so many of Alice Salomon’s relatives, including some from the youngest generation, and some from such distant countries, have travelled here – sometimes for the first time – to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the school founded by Alice Salomon with us today. I would like to take this opportunity to once again thank you with all my heart.

Translated by Felicitas Macgilchrist

Notes

¹ Maria Hepner to Dr. Runkel, 1958-10-19, File „Jubiläum“, Alice Salomon Archiv / ASFH Berlin (ASA Berlin).

² See Karl Pearson (1857-1936): *The Ethic of Freethought*, London 1888.

³ Alice Salomon to Emmy Wolff, 1946-01-06; DZI Berlin.

⁴ Alice Salomon: *Das Kaiser- und Kaiserin-Friedrich-Kinderheim in Bornstedt*, in: *Die Frau* 4/1896. p. 179; republished in: *Alice Salomon: Frauenemanzipation und soziale Verantwortung. Ausgewählte Schriften*, vol. 1, ed. by Adriane Feustel, Neuwied, Kriftel, Berlin 1997, p. 3; quoted in the following as: *A. Salomon: Selected Works.*, vol.

⁵ Alice Salomon: *Die sittlichen Grundlagen und Ziele der Wohlfahrtspflege*, (1921), in: *A. Salomon: Selected Works*, vol. 3, München/Unterschleißheim 2004, p. 144 f.; see Martin Buber, *Der heilige Weg. Ein Wort an die Juden und an die Völker. Dem Freunde Gustav Landauer aufs Grab. [Rede im Mai 1918]*; in: *Martin Buber. Reden über das Judentum. Gesamtausgabe*, Frankfurt a.M. 1923, p. 164, and Maurice S. Friedman: *Martin Buber: The Life of Dialogue*, London 2002, p. 50.

⁶ Andrew Lees (Ed.): *Character Is Destiny: The Autobiography of Alice Salomon*, Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press 2004, p. 197; see *Alice Salomon: Charakter ist Schicksal*, Weinheim/Basel 1984, p. 266 f.; and the new unshortened edition: *Alice Salomon: Lebenserinnerungen: Jugendjahre – Sozialreform – Frauenbewegung – Exil*, transl. Rolf Landwehr, ed. Alice Salomon Hochschule Berlin, Frankfurt a.M. 2008, p. 318.

⁷ Charlotte Dietrich: *Zum Neubeginn. Ansprache zur Eröffnung des neuen Schuljahres am 12. April 1934*, in: *Vereins-Zeitung der ehemaligen Schülerinnen des Pestalozzi-Fröbel-Hauses I*, 46/1934, No. 188, p. 23 f.

⁸ Geheime Staatspolizei to Pestalozzi-Fröbel-Haus, 1938-10-13, File „Dr. Alice Salomon“, File 2, sh 73, Archiv des PFH, ASA Berlin; quoted in the following as: File 2.

⁹ Berliner Verein für Volkserziehung to Finanzamt Moabit-West, 1939-11-17, File 2, sh 46v.

¹⁰ Berliner Verein für Volkserziehung to Finanzamt Moabit-West, 1939-12-29, File 2, sh 49.

¹¹ See PFH to Maria Hepner, 1973-08-07, File 2, sh 155.

¹² Maria Hepner to PFH, 1973-07-05, File 2, sh 147f.