

Return to Germany and Marianne

In the nick of time, I succeeded in making the first measurements of the ionization cross section of mercury atoms and then the Rockefeller year was over. The Berkeley Physics Department very kindly offered me an Assistant Professorship which I turned down but I left many friends behind. They all knew of Marianne and promised to visit us.

Being still a slightly naive adventurer, I took a steamboat to Vancouver and wired ahead requesting that a horse be delivered to a railroad station in Canada for me to ride over the Rockies to Banff. My friends brought me to the steamer and answered my last question: "Is the American dollar guilty in Canada?" with a rousing "Yes, Arthur, it is guilty!"*

I detrained at a desolate railroad outpost in Canada, found a cowboy waiting with a horse. He handed me the reins and disappeared. There I stood alone with a map, a semi-wild horse and hopeful intentions of arriving two days later at Lake Louise.

Riding up the mountains, I was passing through a rocky canyon when a violent thunderstorm arose and a herd of horses -- scared by the lightning and crashes of thunder -- stampeded down the valley, engulfing the lonely rider. We were taken along for a distance, but at last I was able to disentangle the horse and myself, reached an overnight hut and, in the late afternoon of the next day, Lake Louise. I was dirty all over and was delighted to be able to swim, using the prescribed gold-colored bathing suit, in the hotel's outdoor pool, which was sheltered behind glass walls with a glorious view of the mountains.

After giving a lecture at the University of Wisconsin and nearly demolishing the golf course, I entrained for Chicago and was lovingly received by a von Hippel uncle and his family.¹ He had run away from home in Germany one night, made his way to America, became an engineer and built the street-car system in Chicago. We stayed friends until his death a few years later. I paid a short visit to Boston

* AvH was using the word "guilty" for the German "gültig," which means to have value.

and then returned on the overnight steamer to New York and took a taxi to the dock where my ship was leaving.

I was nearly killed in the process. My New York City taxi driver, apparently drunk at that early morning hour, rammed a water hydrant. It broke off and the resulting water fountain began to drench us. Luckily I escaped from the scene before the police arrived and at last boarded my ship, homeward bound to Germany.

The American interlude had been a wonderful experience. I had lived through adventures, made good friends, seen many unusual sights, was offered Assistant Professorships at three universities and had almost completed a difficult experimental study. And I was on my way back to get married to Marianne von Ritter, who I loved beyond anything. All my friends knew about her and wanted to visit us. But beyond the greatest joy loomed tragedy.

Life and Death

Marianne awaited me at the docksite in Hamburg; we were married in the Albani church in Göttingen with Dagmar Franck as one of the bridesmaids, and went to Lobeda near Jena for our honeymoon (see Figure 45). There we lived for two weeks high above the castle, in a cottage belonging to the warden, in paradise. The mountain meadows were full of flowers and sunshine, the valley below was often hidden in fog. Marianne painted a picture of the valley and also one of our living room, with her husband hammering furiously away at his typewriter, producing his "habilitation" paper, a prerequisite for a German Assistant Professorship.

In Jena, we rented a sunny apartment and Marianne had it painted -- ceiling included -- in the most lively colors. Equipped with modern furniture made by an old schoolfriend in his shop, with some old family heirlooms and with Marianne's paintings on the walls, it became a wonderful home and a welcoming abode for our friends and colleagues -- even for my admired boss, Max Wien.

Christmas approached -- our first and last one together. We expected our first child by late April -- and then, at the onset of the new year, came the deadly blow. The winter was very cold and Europe was suddenly struck by a flu epidemic that killed millions. Although penicillin had been discovered in 1928, it was not used widely as an antibiotic until 1941. The doctors were helpless. Marianne and I got sick at the end of January and mother Ritter came to take care of us. Soon I was up and, at first, Marianne also seemed to recover. Suddenly, however, Marianne's throat infection flamed up again and went into her brain. The child had to be aborted -- it was a boy. We got a room in the university hospital with our friend

Maurer's help and I sat in front of the door hoping for a miracle. I saw Marianne once more for half an hour, when her mind cleared, and we talked hopefully of the future. Then the end approached in the afternoon of the third hospital day and my old life as a dreaming Don Quixote ended with her.

Return to Göttingen -- Privatdozent and Inexperienced Educator

Marianne had a divine spark as an artist and musician and was a wonderful human being, much superior to my stage of development. I remained at the morgue guarding her coffin until Max Wien -- in tears himself -- took me away. After the church service and cremation I fell ill again for fourteen days. My sister, Olga, stayed with me and I had time to sort things out.

It was obvious that my mother-in-law needed help in bringing up her remaining children. Marianne and I had taken care of some of their affairs and I hoped I could be useful. I therefore asked James Franck if he would visit me. With his wonderful helpfulness, he came to my bedside and tried to dissuade me from moving at first because Prof. Wien wanted to give me a junior professorship. But I felt I had to leave and be near Marianne through her family. I therefore transferred to the Second Physikalische Institut in Göttingen as a temporary replacement for Professor Oldenberg while he was at Harvard. My position as Privatdozent [Assistant Professor] became "permanent" when he stayed in America.

Mother Ritter's house, located five minutes from our father's house and two minutes from her mother and sister, could have become a home under different circumstances. Marianne's sister, Berta, about five years younger and her brothers, Christoph and Max, about two and seven years younger respectively, made up the resident family. However, an older brother, Wolfgang, who dropped in sporadically, was not normal and tried to stir up trouble. In addition, mother Ritter's adoration of Marianne made the other children resentful and her own mother and sister contributed to the turmoil through ignorance.

Before my Assistant Professorship in Göttingen could be legalized, I still had to teach part-time in Jena and finish my habilitation there with an exam before the whole faculty and an official debut lecture² for the public. Mother Ritter therefore helped me to buy a car and I drove every Sunday to Jena, staying with my friends, the Maurers. I taught two days and worked the rest of the week in Göttingen. Sometimes, on the way, I visited our friend Curt Bondy in Eisenach, where he was now the Director of a Youth Prison.

Curt and I became very close friends and tried once to establish a speed record by driving down a mountain full blast. We did not quite make 100 km/hour, but in originality of educational approach, he certainly set remarkable records. Once,

while I was sitting in his office, a young prisoner come in and announced: "Dr. Bondy, I have to break out tonight." "Well," said Curt, "let Mrs X. make you some sandwiches and come back soon." The boy stealthily climbed out of the window that night, got rid of his urge and was back in three days. It was in the style of the youth movement -- even for murderers -- to go on long hikes and no prisoner tried to escape for good.

During the summer vacation of 1929, I drove mother Ritter and her two youngest children, Berta and Max, in my car to Switzerland, where the von Ritter-Zahony family had its relatives. The family of Count Mülinen lived in Bern and his oldest daughter, Nora, a cousin of Marianne, was an established artist (painter and sculptor) who had studied in Paris under Rodin. She told me about her love for Rodin's most gifted pupil and pined for a letter from him. In my naiveté, I wanted to come to her rescue and wrote him a note. His answer was devastating.

Nora Mülinen had something like second sight and -- with her reddish-blond hair and greenish-blue eyes -- might have been burned as a witch in the Middle Ages. I had bought a beautiful cemetery plot for Marianne's grave in Jena with an adjacent site for a fountain and birdbath. Nora suggested that she would do the sculpturing; so we two set off for Jena. On the way I got a bad case of jaundice and was hospitalized for a number of days.

The project was afterward executed by another artist but cost me the friendship of the younger Dr. Schott, later director of the Schott glass works. I had a very small salary at that time and was desperately pressed for money to pay for the gravesite and bird fountain. While still in Jena, I had invented a new mercury lamp, patented it and Schott intended to manufacture it. Dr. Harris in the Schott laboratories had effectively streamlined it for commercial production and Dr. Schott wanted to bring it out as the Harris-von Hippel lamp. I wanted it named the von Hippel lamp and to be paid, as the inventor, the several hundred marks needed for the gravesite. It was done, but Schott refused to speak to me when we met after World War II. He never knew what drove me.

In Jena our friend, Gert Lüers, had become city manager³ and gave me a key to the cemetery. I therefore could sit there quietly in the evening after my lecture duties.

Endnotes: 6. RETURN TO GERMANY AND MARIANNE

1. Li Seidler, Arthur's neice, thinks that perhaps he was not a von Hippel but a descendant of Peter Bremer, Arthur's maternal grandfather.

2. Antritts-Vorlesung.

3. Stadt-Direktor.



45. Wedding to Marianne,
August 14, 1928, Albani
Church, Göttingen