

## Charlotte Selver Biography

by *Stefan Laeng-Gilliatt*

**This is an excerpt of an unedited chapter of the biography – a work in progress.**

### Leaving Home

*“Meine Tochter wird kein Photographier-Fräulein”*

*Paul Wittgenstein*

*“After I retire I want to photograph trees.”*

*Charlotte Selver in her 90s.*

“I had it put in my head that I would become a photographer, because I had visited two women photographers who had a very beautiful studio in a high riser, which was sparsely decorated with very beautiful furniture and beautiful things standing around. Everything was so aesthetically pleasing.”<sup>1</sup> It was an eye opening experience for the 17 year old girl growing up in the embroidered satin environment of the German *Bürgertum*. Here were two apparently independent women breaking with bourgeois traditions, opening up spaces where oak-salons had left little room for the expanding spirit of a generation ready for dramatic cultural changes. Charlotte admired these women and she, too, wanted to become a photographer.

But her father wouldn't hear of it: “My daughter won't become a *Fotografierfräulein!*” “But what then?”, Charlotte asked: “You could become a philosopher or a writer or a doctor; anything but a photographer. No!” So Charlotte went on strike. She didn't study, missed school, did not answer to her teachers, did not make the grades. By the end of the school year her teachers wrote to Charlotte's parents that she did not have the ethical maturity to move on to the next grade. “I was stuck. My father and mother didn't know what to do with me, so they sent me to relatives in Holland. There I was able to go into the galleries and see these wonderful paintings, which was very interesting. Later they sent me to relatives in Bonn. One of them studied at the university and I had a wonderful time with the young students.” Her father's hope was that through these experiences Charlotte would change her mind, finish school and then study anything she wanted at a university. Charlotte eventually did go back to school: “I made it till Prima but then I decided I wanted to become a photographer. I was very stubborn, you know. So, at last, my parents gave in.”

But first Charlotte had to learn how to run a household. After all, the expectation was that she would eventually come to reason, marry into a proper family and settle down. The suitable finishing school was found in Freiburg. However, Charlotte showed little passion for such mundane matters. In her old age only few things were worth remembering: Sitting on the countertop in the kitchen, reciting poems, while the other girls were busy cooking. And – meeting the love of her life, Heinrich Selver. Charlotte lived with his sister, Lotte, in the stately home of a host family on Goethestrasse: “Lotte was a bundle of energy. When she got excited about something I had to lock my room lest she'd run me over. When she received a letter from Heinrich

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<sup>1</sup> CS, *More Memories*

she carried it on her bosom and whether you wanted to hear it or not, she pulled it out and read it to you, shouting: 'My brother Heinrich!'. She adored him. I was of course very curious to meet this brother and the opportunity arrived when Lotte fell in love with a boy in the dance class. Our boarding mother was so terrified, she wrote to Lotte's family in Chemnitz to please send someone and they sent Heinrich and a son-in-law. I was in the kitchen reading poetry when Lotte stormed in, grabbed me by my white apron and pulled me into the waiting room, where Heinrich was. There I stood, clad in apron and bonnet, and Lotte said to Heinrich: 'This is the artist in our house.' And Heinrich, with a sardonic smile, bowed and said: 'I am honored to meet you'."

Charlotte would later claim that she was kicked out of finishing school on account of her disinterest but records in the city archives suggest that she stayed through the end. Both she and Lotte left Freiburg in early August 1920, and after a short time back at her family's Ruhrort home she left for Berlin to follow her passion.

Charlotte spent the first year of vocational training for photographers at the 'Photographische Lehranstalt' of the 'Lette-Verein' in Berlin. Founded in 1866 by [Wilhelm Adolf Lette](#), the purpose of the Lette-Association was to promote vocational opportunities for women at a time when women had no access to universities. The Lette-Association's Institute for Photography, established in 1890, was the first of its kind and pioneered a variety of professions associated with photography. By the time Charlotte entered the program the institute also accepted male students.

The earliest existing letters from Charlotte to her boyfriend Heinrich date from that time in Berlin: "School starts at 9 today. Yesterday we had portrait lessons with our teacher. You always make fun of my 'snapping' but it is very demanding and one can achieve a lot. I did not decide to become a photographer on the fly but carefully considered it for many years. Your irony will only be justified if I don't accomplish anything. Time will tell."<sup>2</sup>

The handful of letters from that time do not reveal much about Charlotte's life in Berlin. We can only imagine that for a young woman from the *Ruhrpott* to live in 1920's Berlin would have been quite an experience, though her mother's childhood friend, Aurelie Marx, with whom she lived, would have kept close watch. "Aunt Aurelie was a couturier. She designed garments for the noblewomen at the royal court. She had the most beautiful textiles. I arrived in Berlin not with a suitcase but with a long, rectangular basket. Aunt Aurelie pulled my dresses out, one by one, and finally said: 'So, that's what your mother did to you?' She always liked to make fun of my mother. And when she came to the wonderful prom dress she exclaimed: 'That's for a barn dance!<sup>3</sup> You can't show yourself like this in Berlin. Let's see what we can do.' So she called her tailors and they made me a beautiful wardrobe from wool and silk fabrics. Aunt Aurelie was very funny. Sometimes, when we had a fine dinner, she would say: 'Now let's treat our corpses.' She was later murdered by Hitler."<sup>4</sup>

*[... supporters/members can read more about Charlotte's time in Berlin and the transition to Munich]*

Accompanied by her parents and her sister, Ruth, Charlotte arrived in Munich on September 11, 1921 to continue her studies at the "Lehr- und Versuchsanstalt für Photographie". The family

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<sup>2</sup> CS to HS: undated letter from 1921

<sup>3</sup> Also, *das ist zum Lämmerhüpfen!*

<sup>4</sup> CS, more memories

lodged in the Hotel Excelsior and together they enjoyed the city while looking for a proper place for Charlotte.

Munich in 1921. A city reeling in aftermath of war, a hub of political and cultural innovation, clashing violently with tradition – and frequently with each other. Some, like Thomas Mann, saw their quaint bourgeois world threatened by such phenomena, even though they were not completely immune to them: “We live in a world who’s contemptible gayety tends to get on our nerves, a time of true jazz-band-mentality, who’s heroes are boxers and movie stars, a time in which shallowness and brutality celebrate unheard-of orgies: amusing orgies I will admit, superb orgies, I admit that too; it would probably be philistine and petit-bourgeois to whine about these new times. But I believe protest is still the truly German response to the stupid wonders of this time.”<sup>5</sup>

Charlotte and her family may well have had a similar reaction. Their preferred mode of ‘protest’ may have simply been disregard, a response granted to those who had the means to stay at the Excelsior. To them, Munich was simply beautiful: “It seems that a new color has awoken in me since I’ve come to Munich. My sensorial palette has been broadened through the joy of the eye seeing the streets and the design of this wonderful, old, German city. I have never seen that much gothic architecture anywhere. Its citizens are filled with pride and contentment and every stranger feels at home immediately. The language flatters the ear and people have such a sense of humor!<sup>6</sup> I am in a constant state of delighted shock. One walks the wide streets and there is always something new and beautiful to see, the dome no doubt still being the most awesome of it all. It may be the Jew’s yearning for peace that compels him to be in the presence of these gothic buildings. He stands there in sacred awe, longing to be hauled up high along these incredibly straight lines, up to the blue dome of the sky with its glistening stars. True art has its home here among these old church paintings. Simple but deeply soulful, they are the highest yet most humble expression of the pure heart. I love the catholic religion for this dome. How powerful it must be that men build such abodes for it. And the church windows, Heinrich! I would love to have a room like this, made of stone and arched, with a gothic church window. It would have to be high as the sky. I told mother already that I will spend much time here. She loves these churches too and so does father. How beautifully I will be able to pray here, I just don’t know to whom.”<sup>7</sup>

Charlotte adored the classical cultural achievements of Germany and she had great respect for the cultures of old but once lodging was found and the parents had left it wasn’t long before she realized that there was more to Munich than gothic cathedrals. She soon discovered a world entirely alien to her parents.

Vivid and detailed accounts of Charlotte’s time at the school abound in her letters to Heinrich. Her enthusiasm for the trade reached a new level beginning with the very first day at school.

[... supporters/members can read more about Charlotte learning the trade of a photographer]

Having joined this circle, Charlotte was soon introduced into the political and philosophical currents of the time: “A former student who now wants to become a painter is also with us. He has experienced a peculiar transformation in Munich. He came as a very handsome, drifting

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<sup>5</sup> Quoted from: [http://www.historisches-lexikon-bayerns.de/artikel/artikel\\_44722](http://www.historisches-lexikon-bayerns.de/artikel/artikel_44722): Die Goldenen Zwanziger Jahre, by *Waldemar Fromm/Andreas Katsimardos*.

<sup>6</sup> CS to HS: undated 1921, “Second greeting from Munich”

<sup>7</sup> CS to HS: Munich, 1921-9-13

lieutenant, who suddenly discovered that he had a lot of dormant intelligence. He was so amazed, even intoxicated, by that discovery that his development now progresses with much intensity and power. [...] His theories are nothing more than wild ideas of an intoxicated, young head. But it is interesting to notice how intensely he suddenly experiences himself and the world around him. He proposes theories of spirit and blood and sees everything from that viewpoint. Much of it is obviously nonsense but we witness his struggle with interest and occasionally point things out to him. He's writing a book, of course! Strangely, the above mentioned Breslauer, who is 18, is infinitely more mature than this 25 old man.

Then there is the gorgeous, blond, slender Hedy Matiessen from Hamburg, who is very skilled (for a woman) and Würthle, a boy from Austria, who wants to become a landscape photographer. There are many others among them but today I only wanted to mention the best of the older students belonging to our circle. I am in the midst of it, yet by myself. Many hours let me experience the silence and awesomeness of solitude, many the work and struggle of a new becoming."

Sitting on the balcony of her hotel room in Barra de Navidad on the Pacific Coast of Mexico in early 2000 after a morning of teaching, Charlotte vividly remembers those evenings in the Café Luitpold and the long nights in the *Simplicissimus*: "We had endless discussions about pure and impure blood. The pure blood was arian, impure was everything Jewish and whatever else there was. Our schoolmate Iffland, a descendant of the very famous actor August Wilhelm Iffland, was one of the leaders in the question of *Blutreinigung*."

*[... supporters/members can read more about the cultural and political thoughts Charlotte was confronted with in Munich.]*

"Sensory Awareness is a demanding mistress", Charlotte will tell her students decades later when she, in a somewhat similar manner, wrestled with how to guide a person to be in the moment, trying, as it were, to wear that invisibility cloak while she was leading a class, lest the students would become self-conscious. No doubt Charlotte thought at times that the Sensory Awareness leader is the most pitiful creature in the world. Charlotte was a "demanding mistress" herself, a demanding teacher – and a demanding student: "Our teacher is very understanding. His teaching is simple and good, even though we are not completely satisfied with him. Maybe because *he* makes concessions to the public even though he is a bohemian. He has a good life thanks to his profession and maybe that makes him produce pictures that are pleasing rather than crafted from within. He certainly teaches us – rather wistfully – the true craft and we eagerly go for it but we cannot understand his fickle nature."

"Our working extents into the evening. We often have to force ourselves to end conversations long past the midnight hour but these reflections, this wrestling with our profession may prove to be more valuable than all that practicing." Passionately, Charlotte and her student friends threw themselves into their studies, which encompassed art history, psychology, anatomy and psychopathology lessons at the university, as well as visiting galleries and dance performances. One such performance may have sparked Charlotte's passion for movement: "Last Sunday I saw Mary Wigman, the dancer! It is impossible to describe how people are affected by her. She is supernatural and her simplicity and strength – foreign to us – her ultimate sincerity, show more about the connection of body and mind than ever before. How this woman, her gesture, moves away from the body with her body, is a miracle. All the arts seem to unite in her when she dances without music, harmonies emanate from her, her gestures show the ultimate truth of the poets; her

lines, the structure of her body, its language and spirit are more beautiful and ravishing than sculpture. Her dance is completely detached from gravity. Though nothing is difficult for her and all technique transcended, she dances in uncompromising form. Maybe Breslauer will photograph her some day.”<sup>8</sup>

“After the dance we met with Louison Feiner, a very nice colleague, and her boyfriend, Mr. Jacques. He is a friend of Breslauer and a former student at the academy. These gatherings are always wonderful. Louison and I get cozy with our legs up on the sofa benches which are on either side of the table, listening to the conversations of these young people, occasionally contributing something. I see more and more clearly how different men and women are. At the core of a woman is feeling, at the core of a man initiative. I have often hesitated to think about things – or have found it unnecessary. Now I see how much more deeply young men ponder and how they won’t give up until an idea has been thoroughly explored. When I say that, Iffland’s response is: “This is female laziness.” Breslauer says: “Women live in the present moment, men work for the future.” This may be correct. Breslauer claims that all bright women are masculine and never beautiful. The latter is not true. Maybe the reason for my indifference regarding certain things comes from my life in nature. These hours in the mountains, or anywhere outdoors, always show me how trivial, compared to the serenity of the cosmos, those things are with which we humans wrestle. I doubt that it is man’s task to wrestle with concepts when everything is relative anyway. For example: mundane/sacred, good/evil, free will or determined by external circumstances, heredity, etc.

You know, Heinrich, I am not opposed to the mind, on the contrary! But I am often uncomfortable with this dissection of all concepts and hesitant to approach the gate to emptiness. All of man’s ‘views’ are nothing but crutches in my opinion. People are disoriented and that is why they hold on to beliefs. To be human is not enough for them. But in the end all great men come back to simplicity and realize that all this pondering is useless. I like clear, healthy thinking without the perpetually recurring ‘logical evidence’. Such reasoning is always defeated by counter-evidence.”

Antediluvian views on the differences between men and women aside, these are remarkable considerations, anticipating Charlotte’s philosophical foundation as a teacher of Sensory Awareness: the letting go of preconceived ‘views’ in favor of ‘not knowing’ as a precondition for experiential learning; the rejection of speculation in favor of the simplicity of sensory awareness.

*[.... supporters/members can read a lot more about Charlotte’s time in Munich]*

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<sup>8</sup> CS to HS: Munich, 1921-11-17