



BERTHA VON SUTTNER AND THE NOBEL PEACE PRIZE

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Peace Palace
Library

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First of all, may I be a little autobiographical? As a graduate student at Harvard in the 1930s, my doctoral dissertation was on peace societies in the 19th century. I was a Sheldon traveling fellow in Europe in 1936-37, where I was able to look for documents and interview survivors of the peace movement of that era. I naturally learned a great deal about Baroness von Suttner, who was regarded by her colleagues as the *general-en-chef* of that movement.

In Stockholm at the Nobel Foundation I made one of the most significant finds of my whole year abroad, a file of the letters from Bertha von Suttner to Alfred Nobel. In her letters to him she would often say, jokingly, that he was not taking her letters seriously, so after you finish this, throw it in the wastebasket. However, Nobel was much more methodical than the Baroness. He filed all her letters carefully, and it was the Baroness who, after his death, had to look in her wastebasket for his last letter. And many others had disappeared.

In Vienna I had a good interview about the Baroness with Herr Schuster, the secretary of the Austrian Peace Society, which she had founded. I learned some things that she had not wanted to write about in her memoirs. And he had pointed to a vial on his mantelpiece which he said contained ashes of the Baroness after her cremation. I was much impressed with what I thought this told me about the closeness of Schuster's relationship to the Baroness until I learned later that this was a custom in those days, and that there were a number of her associates who had received one of these vials with her ashes.

In Geneva at the Library of the League of Nations, where the new buildings of the League were just being completed and the Library was in the process of transition to its new site, they did not know quite what to do with this young researcher. Fortunately, they put me in the care of the Assistant Librarian, Dr. A.C. Breycha-Vauthier. I wrote in my journal that he was "a young fellow, an Austrian Baron, a very clever chap." He was most helpful. He found me a desk in the office of the League geographer, and he would bring me precious documents to work on, several at a time, destined eventually for the safe in the new Library, which had not yet been installed.

Among these documents were the papers of Bertha von Suttner. Dr. Breycha-Vauthier was the one who had negotiated the purchase of this invaluable collection from the widow of Alfred Hermann Fried, the close collaborator of the Baroness, to whom she had left it in her will. The von Suttner manuscripts included five dossiers of correspondence concerning her relationship with other peace leaders and with others, including Alfred Nobel. Unfortunately, all this material was waiting to be organized, which did not happen for some years. I was able to make use of parts of it for my dissertation, but it was only some years later, after the



collection was in better shape, that I was able to return to examine in detail the letters from Nobel. What I published in 1962 in a scholarly journal based on this correspondence was something of a landmark article, correcting certain earlier publications which claimed that the influence on Nobel of the Baroness had been very much exaggerated. A few years later Dr. Beatrix Kempf, who wrote the first good biography of the Baroness, using the best sources, gave me a complete copy of this correspondence, which I have used to my great profit, but which unfortunately was never published. Finally in 2001 these important letters were made available in the very well edited publication by Edelgard Biedermann.

I've retold their story many times, including in an article for Scanorama, the magazine of the Scandinavian Airlines, for which I was told to write simply, since the passengers might not know English very well and could be drinking. The beginning of the relationship is like the libretto of a Viennese operetta. There was first a want-ad in the Viennese newspaper, Die Presse, in 1876: "A very wealthy, highly educated, elderly gentleman, living in Paris, seeks a lady, familiar with languages, also of mature years, as secretary and overseer of his household." (German in Bertha von Suttner, *Lebenserinnerungen*, edited by Fritz Böttger ([East] Berlin: Verlag der Nation, 2. Auflage, 1969, p.162. [also Brigitte Haman, *Bertha von Suttner München/Zurich: Piper, paper-back, 3. Auflage*), p.46].

This was brought to the attention of Countess Bertha Kinsky, governess of the von Suttner daughters, by their mother, who had learned that her oldest child, Arthur, and the governess had fallen in love with one another. Bertha was of aristocratic birth, but not of the highest nobility, and after her mother had gambled away the family funds, although Bertha could have been supported by relatives, she had decided to support herself by taking this job as governess. An unusual decision at that time for a young woman, whose father had been a high army officer, but she was an unusual young woman. Although she was beautiful, well educated and talented, she was not considered the appropriate match for Arthur who was supposed to have a marriage which would improve the von Suttners' financial and social situation. Consequently, his mother told Bertha that obviously she had to leave, and she showed her the want-ad and advised her to answer it.

So Bertha began the correspondence with the "elderly gentleman," who was Alfred Nobel, the dynamite magnate, and not so elderly, only ten years older than Bertha, who then was 33. He offered her the job and she went to Paris, but after a week of grieving for Arthur and he for her, she returned to Vienna, they were secretly married and then left to spend nine years in the Russian Caucasus in what was to be the state of Georgia, invited by a friend of Bertha's.

They returned to Vienna as successful authors, were forgiven by the family, and joined them to live in Harmannsdorf, the family estate. Bertha had kept up some correspondence with Nobel, and she met him again in a trip with Arthur to Paris. It is there that she first learned about the peace movement and decided to use her literary talents to further peace.

I will concentrate on letters Bertha and Nobel now exchanged, mainly those about peace and the peace prize, referring to my essay for the exhibition in Geneva at the United Nations Library in 1993, commemorating Bertha von Suttner's 150th birthday. For the best recent references to this correspondence, see the excellent biography by Brigitte Hamman, for the English translation of which I was privileged to write the introduction.

In these letters in which the Baroness and Nobel usually address one another as "*Chère Baronne et Amie*" and "*Cher Monsieur et Ami*," one senses that "Ami" is paramount. They delight in framing their thoughts in different languages. Most of their letters are in French, but they also use English. Sometimes Bertha writes in German. Nobel, often skeptical, writes



charmingly with a light touch and ironically, mocking his own melancholy. Bertha is optimistic and enthusiastically parades across her pages each hopeful advance of the peace movement. She pursues a ceaseless campaign to win him for the cause, and there is style and eloquence in her pleading.

When the Baroness tells Nobel that she has written an anti-war novel, *Die Waffen nieder*, (later translated as *Lay Down Your Arms*), he responds in his customary amusing way that he hopes to read it, but in case of universal peace. where would he place his new smokeless powder? (21/11/89). When he reads it, he is much impressed and tells her that it should be translated into every language. He looks forward to shaking her hand, "that hand of an amazon who so valiantly makes war on war." He chides her for calling "Down with arms," when she is making such good use of her own weapons: "the charm of your style and the grandeur of your ideas... would have a far greater range than the guns "and all the other implements of Hell." He signs in English, "Yours for ever and more than ever." (1/4/90).

She had hoped that Nobel would attend the International Peace Congress at Rome, which he did not do, but he sends the money which makes it possible for the Baroness to go. These congresses were just beginning as the peace movement was becoming international, and this was her first appearance at one of them. She played an important role, helping to keep the peace between the German and French representatives, who were much divided over the question of Alsace-Lorraine.

Nobel supports her Austrian Peace Society, but he asks why the peace societies have such large expenses. What they need is not money, he says, but a program, something more modest than working for disarmament or arbitration. What about an agreement between the European governments to defer for one year all differences to a tribunal or even to defer any act of hostility for a stipulated term? (31/10/91). The Baroness does not pick up on this ingenious suggestion but writes about the need for "simultaneous demonstration of public opinion in all the countries" (16/4/92). Nobel has more faith in actions by government than in public opinion. Later he makes another practical suggestion, envisioning collective security. He proposes that the European boundaries be accepted and that the states agree to defend any state which is attacked (6/11/92).

The year 1892 is only their third meeting, but it is the last and most important for Nobel's thinking about a peace prize. We have only the account in the memoirs of the Baroness, but this has been generally accepted. Nobel came to Bern, not to attend the International Peace Congress, but to hear reports about it. Apparently he was impressed with what he learned, as well as with the von Suttners, whom he invited to spend several days with him in Zurich.

When they were together on the Zurich lake in Nobel's little aluminum motor boat, the Baroness teased him about his factories producing explosives, and he responded in words often quoted, "Perhaps my factories will put an end to war even sooner than your Congresses. On the day when two army corps will be able to annihilate each other in a second, all civilized nations will recoil with horror and disband their troops." [German in *Lebenserinnerungen*, p. 302; Hamann, p. 333] Did he foresee that technology could one day bring about mutual nuclear deterrence?

Nobel still had some skepticism about peace societies. The Baroness remembers that his mind was open. "Inform me, convince me," he had said, " and then I shall do something great for the movement." On returning home, she began sending him a stream of materials about the peace movement. He did not forget what he had promised to do. A few months after the Zurich meeting, he wrote her:



I should like my testament to dispose of a part of my fortune by prizes to be distributed every five years (let us say six times in all, for if in thirty years, it has not been possible to reform the present system, there will be a total return to barbarism) to him or her who will have brought about the greatest step in advancing to the pacification of Europe (7/1/93).

The Baroness replies that she has "a more ardent faith" and expects peace before the end of the century. "Oh, the idea of ridding the future from that terrible scourge, which the next war would be, such an idea is so beautiful, so bejahigend. ('aye-saying) that to serve it, there is no need for such incentive. What is needed is only to *know how* and to *be able* to serve it." (29/1/93). Later, after the Peace Prize is established, and she expects to receive it, the Baroness has a more positive idea about the prize.

Apparently Nobel replies skeptically once more, for the Baroness protests, "Don't always call our peace-plan a *dream*. Progress towards justice is surely not a dream. It is the law of civilization." Nevertheless, she adds in jest, "I wish you could invent a little pill to blow up all fortresses and barracks at a single stroke." (in English, 15/2/93).

However, this skeptic can also dream. At this very moment he is preparing to draft a will not only with a generous bequest for her Austrian Peace Society, but with an annual prize for persons who, "by writing or by action, have succeeded in combatting prejudices against the institution of a European Tribunal of Peace." (14/3/93).

The final version of his will, signed by Nobel on 27 November 1895, calls for the establishment of the five Nobel Prizes with which we are familiar. Nobel omits the bequest for the Austrian Peace Society, but he puts peace on an equal basis with the prizes to be granted in the fields of physics, chemistry, physiology or medicine, and literature. These prizes are to be awarded by Swedish bodies, while the peace prize is to be awarded by a committee elected by the parliament of Norway, then a part of the Swedish monarchic union.

The Peace Prize is to be given "to the person who shall have done the most or the best work for the fraternity between nations, for the abolition or reduction of standing armies and for the holding of peace congresses." These are the very activities the Baroness has been sending Nobel information about in her reports on the peace societies. For the leading peace activists disarmament would be a consequence of peace rather than a road to peace, but Nobel may have been thinking of the title of her novel, "Lay Down Your Arms."

Since Nobel does not tell the Baroness about either of these two wills, she keeps on trying to convince him. Just two months before he signs the will which is to establish the peace prize, the Baroness writes to him expressing her hope that her letters will awaken an echo of sympathy

not for the author, but for the work which is dear to her: throw all these little papers into the wastebasket, but keep in the depths of your heart a voice which says to you: here is a woman, who in spite of the indifference and opposition her ideas encounter, perseveres in her task, and a woman who has confidence in me.

Then, some news, still one more invitation to come and visit, and she concludes, "So, quick into the wastebasket!" (26/9/95).

On 28 November she writes the last letter, which he would have received before he died on 10 December. She lists all her accomplishments which his financial support had made possible, saving the Rome Congress, establishing peace societies in Vienna, Berlin and



Budapest, and getting the International Peace Bureau started. Then, still knowing nothing about his final will, she implores him still again:

Give a lever to Archimedes and give a million to our Bureau; it will lift up the world. Also, this is what I beg of you, my hands joined in supplication, never withdraw your support from us --- never, not even from beyond the grave, which awaits us all.

Nobel's last letter to her, written only a few weeks before his death, is witty and mocking as usual." I, who don't have a heart, metaphorically speaking, I do have such an organ, and I feel it." He says that he is delighted to see the progress which the peace movement is making, and he pays tribute to those, like herself, "who chase away prejudices and shadows." He signs in English, "Heartily yours" (21/11/96).

A year before Nobel died, Bertha wrote recalling their first meeting and sending what I have called in print "a perceptive portrait of him." Having gone again through their correspondence for this current exercise, I have wondered whether I was on target. Here is what she wrote on October 29, 1895:

A thinker, a poet, a man bitter and good, unhappy and gay --- given to superb flights of mind and to malicious suspicions, passionately in love with far horizons of human thoughts and profoundly distrustful of the pettiness of human folly, understanding everything and hoping for nothing, so you seemed to me. And twenty years have done nothing to efface that image.

She certainly caught the contradictions which were very much the characteristics of Nobel. But was it true that he hoped for nothing? She balances his "love with the far horizons of human thought" with his profound distrust of "the pettiness of human folly." But where was her own faith in him, especially his loyalty to her and his idealism, which were evident to some extent in his last letter to her? But certainly evident of his idealism were the prizes which in his will he declared were for "those who during the preceding year, shall have conferred the greatest benefit on mankind." "Hoping for nothing?" as Bertha wrote, He could surely have been expected to have had hopes for future discoveries by the scientists who would be endowed by his prizes. And what about the prize for "the person who shall have produced in the field of literature the most outstanding work of an idealistic tendency?"

Finally, the prize for "the person who shall have done the most or the best work for fraternity between nations," the primary phrase characterizing the laureates-to-be who were working for peace. A better translation even at the time could have been "for fraternity between peoples." The Norwegian Nobel Prize committees broadened the interpretation to include those working for human rights, because true peace must be based on human rights, and now to include environmentalists, for a durable peace must be based upon a sustainable environment.

Nobel could never have hoped nor foreseen in any way that his peace prize would become the most prestigious award in the world for service to humanity, but so it has, and it all goes back to the consequences of his putting that want-ad in the Viennese newspaper. Without Countess Bertha Kinsky, who answered it but then became Baroness Bertha von Suttner, no Nobel Peace Prize!

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considered the leading authority on the history of the Nobel Peace Prize. Among his many publications on the prize and on its laureates are *The Nobel Peace Prize and the Laureates: An illustrated biographical history, 1901–2001* (2nd ed., 2001), and *Worte für die eine Welt: Aus den Reden der Friedensnobelpreisträger* (Herder, 1991), with a foreword by President Jimmy Carter. Among his many publications on Bertha von Suttner are introductions to new editions of the English translations of *Lay Down Your Arms* as well as her *Memoirs* (both New York, 1972); introduction to the American translation of Brigitte Hamann's *Bertha von Suttner: A Life for Peace* (New York, 1996); biographical entries in encyclopedias; "'Chère Baronne et Amie ...' - Letters of Alfred Nobel and Bertha von Suttner", in *1843–1993: Bertha von Suttner and Other Women in Pursuit of Peace* (Geneva: United Nations Library, 1993); and especially his pioneering article 'Bertha von Suttner and the Nobel Peace Prize' in the *Journal of Central European Affairs* (1962). In honour of his 90th birthday, the annual meeting of the American Historical Association held in Washington D.C. in 2004 included a panel devoted to his peace scholarship. The papers presented on this occasion have been published in a special issue of *Peace and Change* (January 2005)