

# Helen Rabeneck 1907-2007



*Helen in Germany before World War 2, after her return from Paris in 1937*

*This memoir was written in 1987 by Edouard Rabeneck's daughter Helen. It was reviewed with her by her great nephew, Andrew Rabeneck, at the time of her 100<sup>th</sup> birthday in Wülfrath in 2007, attended also by her Canadian nephew John and nieces, Sonya and Linda, the children of her brother Hermann Rabeneck.*

It was suggested to me that I might like to provide a sequel to the family memoir of my father Edouard Rabeneck (1858-1945), that he wrote in Paris in 1930,<sup>1</sup> and I am happy to do so.

In our escape from Russia my father took us, the three youngest children, with him. There were Eduard (15), Hermann (14) and me Helène (11) as well as our governess Miss Pieper. First we went to Finland, where we spent a year and a half at Vaasa.

In Finland my father celebrated his sixtieth birthday, in 1918. He no longer worked following our escape from Moscow. But fortunately, we had some money in England so father could finance our cost of living and

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<sup>1</sup> See memoir of Edouard Rabeneck at [Lives Retold.co.uk](http://LivesRetold.co.uk)

our education, but we had to be careful with money. Because we didn't speak Finnish we couldn't go to school. At the time we were learning Swedish and were making good progress, but in order to attend school we would have needed both languages, so the boys were taught by father, and I by Miss Pieper.

I should mention here that while we were still in Moscow my father undertook a marriage of convenience with Miss Pieper so that she could leave the country with us on his Finnish passport. She had a Russian passport that would have made it difficult for her to leave. This was a very unpleasant time for me because only six months earlier I had lost my mother,<sup>2</sup> which made all the unavoidable difficulties of our predicament even worse.

We left Finland in 1920 and went to Kassel to stay with the family of Jenny Loos, my father's sister whose husband had died in 1918 at Baku.<sup>3</sup> My brothers enrolled in the upper sixth form school in Kassel, and I went to the Lyceum. While we were there my father arranged an annulment of his marriage to Miss Pieper, who later emigrated to the USA where she lived the rest of her life in Berkeley, California.

By the year 1926 our family had split up, moving to the four corners of the world, and I ought to summarize the destinies of each of them individually. The emigration of my brothers Eduard and Hermann to America in that year helped convince my father to go and live with his daughter Sophie (Sonja) Catoire at Bourg La Reine near Paris, where he wrote his memoir. As he got older he used to spend the summer months travelling to see his children in Germany and England. Thus in 1939 he travelled first to Germany to visit me and the Hilgers, later driving on to England to see his daughter Lessie (Elizabeth) and his son Charles (known as Krot) with whom he stayed alternately when he was in London. The outbreak of war prevented his return to France so he had to live out his days in England at Bushmead, with an aunt of Olga Trapp, his daughter-in-law. He died there on January 25, 1945.

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<sup>2</sup> Else Lasch, Edouard's second wife; he had previously been married to her sister Nelly who died in 1896.

<sup>3</sup> See memoir of Jenny (née Rabeneck) Loos' escape from Russia in 1915, at [Lives Retold.co.uk](http://Lives Retold.co.uk)



*Trapp family home in Bushmead, North of London*

In 1913 and 1917 my brother Charles and my sister Lessie had married Olga and John Trapp, also a brother and sister, in Moscow. Charles was my oldest brother, born in 1888, and had already spent time working in England, before he joined the factory, and he therefore thought that England would be the best place to take his wife and their five-year-old son Leo, and that he would be able to work there.<sup>4</sup> So they left via Finland to reach London, where they lived from 1919 onwards. I remained very close to Olga and visited her often. She died at the age of 94 on March 11, 1987 in a Russian home for the elderly.

I don't know much about Charles' business activities in London, but I know that for a while he had a shirt shop that he ran with Uncle Ludwig's sons, Lev and Artemy, and that he became a British citizen. During the war he and Olga worked as censors in the War Office and were stationed in Bermuda and Cairo. After the war they went to Vienna as interpreters for the British in the resettlement efforts. He died in London in 1967. His son Leo also lived in London, and had a son Andrew from his first marriage, who currently works as an architect in San Francisco, while his wife and two sons remain in London.<sup>5</sup> Leo died in London in 1981. Both his wives are still alive, one in London and the other one in Southern France, but I do not have a connection to them.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> See Charles Rabeneck memoir at [Lives Retold.co.uk](http://Lives Retold.co.uk)

<sup>5</sup> 2007 update - Andrew returned from California in 1987 and now lives in London but remains separated from his wife Jennifer. Their son Felix (b.1971) is married with three children, and Leo (b.1973) is divorced.

<sup>6</sup> 2007 update - Leo's widow Barbara, née Scott, died in 2002. Andrew's mother Norah died in France in 1991. She had a daughter Claire Simon (b.1955) from her second marriage to François Simon who died in 1996.

My sister Lessie (Elizabeth), the second oldest among us siblings was born in 1889, and like us she fled Moscow in 1919 with her husband John Trapp and their son Fred, who was born in 1918. They went to England, via Finland and Sweden, where they met up with my brother-in-law in London. John worked in the family business, until his death in 1954.

Lessie was an active person. I well remember her running the restaurant at the Russian tennis club in London during the 1930s. She also had become a British citizen, and after the war she joined the British delegation of the Allied Control Council in Berlin as a female interpreter. While there, she tracked me down through the Red Cross where I was working to reunite lost relatives.

Her son Fred had emigrated to Brazil in 1939, just before the war, and when John died in 1954 Lessie also went there for a few years, although she didn't live with Fred, who was working for an American company that installed gasoline pumps at gas stations. Fred was moved around by the company, with postings in Brussels, Rome and Paris. Lessie never really liked Brazil, so while Fred was in Europe in the 1960s he arranged for her to move back to Europe. For a while she lived with her sister-in-law Olga, but she suffered increasingly from arthritis and it became difficult to look after her. Fred, who was living in Paris at the time, found a place for her in a home near to him, where she died peacefully in 1976. Fred later returned to Brazil, where he now lives in retirement in the country. Fred has been married twice, first to an Englishwoman (two daughters), and then to a Russian (son and daughter). I am still in touch with Fred.<sup>7</sup>

My sister Sophie, the third eldest born in 1892, got married in 1914 to Vladimir, one of seven brothers of the Catoire family.<sup>8</sup> The Catoires were second generation immigrants in Russia operating a tea importing business, and they had Russian passports which made it difficult for them to get out. Vladimir, my sister's husband, was even imprisoned for a time. Only when Sophie had succeeded in obtaining Nansen passports for them were they able to leave, but by then it was already 1922. The family, with their two children born in Moscow, went to Paris, where they had a third child. The Catoires set up a bulk coal wholesale business which flourished for many years, but which eventually failed.

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<sup>7</sup> 2022 update on Fred Trapp. He died in 2013. His second wife Marie had died in 2011, leaving a daughter Olga Monroy Trapp.

<sup>8</sup> See memoir of Irène Micol at [Lives Retold.co.uk](http://Lives Retold.co.uk)

As I've already mentioned my father lived until 1939 with Sophie in Paris. When I finished school, I spent six years during the 1930s looking after her household there. Sophie died in 1955, but her husband Vladimir outlived her by ten years. Their eldest son Kyril, who was married but childless, survived Sophie by only four years. Her daughter Marie is married to Louis-Henri Boscher, and has two sons and a daughter.

Sophie's youngest son Jean, who was born in Paris, had a daughter by his first marriage who lives with her divorced mother. I remain very closely connected with my niece Marie Boscher, as well as with Jean. I visited them both in Paris in the autumn of 1986 where Jean, who is retired, still gives music lessons in piano, theory and conducting.



*Jean Catoire (1923-2005) in the 1950s. He was a well-known composer who had studied with Messiaen and whose spiritual music resembled that of Arvo Pärt.*

As I've said, my brothers Ede (Eduard) and Hermann were in the upper sixth form school after we got to Kassel, from 1920. But they never completed the course. Later they studied mechanical engineering at the

Polytechnic Institute at Köthen/Anhalt until they emigrated to Pittsburgh in the USA in 1926. A year later they travelled to Canada, where they found a second homeland and where they remained for the rest of their lives. As happened with many emigrés they stuck together most of the time even though they tried several different occupations as trappers, lumberjacks and later fisherman, owning fishing boats. They lived at Churchill on the Hudson's Bay, and at Winnipeg in Manitoba. On Lake Winnipeg they caught fish for a research laboratory and provided a ferry service.

During the war, although he hated it, Ede worked as a technical draftsman in a company, and Hermann was conscripted to the West coast, where he served on a ship operating out of Alaska. After the war Ede followed his brother West where the two began to repair and build boats, including one for themselves in which they sailed to Nanaimo on Vancouver Island, where they settled down and remained. Hermann, the younger brother, was the first to wed, in Winnipeg, and with Joan McCullough. They had three children, all born at Nanaimo: Linda a doctor (gastric and intestinal medicine) in Vancouver; Sonya, a development scientist at the FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN) based in Rome; and John, an engineer who manages a small boat business at Nanaimo. Joan is still alive, but I cannot communicate with her because she is suffering from Alzheimer's disease, which is very sad.<sup>9</sup> Sometimes Sonya writes to me.

Ede married his Nadia, whom he'd met in Winnipeg, when he got to Nanaimo, after she obtained a divorce from Professor Baikov, who was one of the scientists in the laboratory to which my brothers supplied fish. Ede did not adopt Nadia's four children, but he was very involved with them, especially her daughter, who also continues to write to me from time to time. In the last few years before his death, Ede became a recluse deep in the country far from civilization. His wife's granddaughter Kim Baikov, who had grown up with them after the failure of her own marriage moved to a place up by Williams Lake, about 500km. North of Vancouver. Ede helped her with the acquisition of a property with a house on the banks of the Tyee Lakes. Nearby he built a log cabin on his own from sound fallen trees, furnished with a stove and furniture he made with his own hands. It didn't have electricity or even a generator, and it had no water pump, so he had to get water from the lake. He did all this when he was nearly eighty, in an area where houses were few and far between. He often visited a friendly neighbour who lived in a

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<sup>9</sup> Joan Mc Cullough b. 1918 London – d. 1991 Nanaimo

comfortable house, and he kept his house in Nanaimo, although he visited it rarely. He sought isolation in an area with long snowy winters, and he still did winter sports. He had a sno-cat for getting about, but he also had six dogs that he trained to become a sled team. One time I went to visit him, and it took a whole day's drive from his original house to reach the cabin. Ede died in 1984.

I went to Canada four times in all; in 1962, 1972, 1978, and 1981. The first visit in 1962 was the first time I had seen my brothers for thirty-six years. I benefited from a special 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary extra holiday of two weeks. I had wonderful times with Ede on my visits, and we drove all over the place on the highways, for example down to the Mexican border and up to the Canadian Rocky Mountains. In addition my brothers came to visit Germany, and I flew to Moscow with Ede in 1975. The house we lived in before our escape no longer stands, and we weren't allowed to go to where the factories used to be, which had become a restricted military area. Hermann came with Joan in 1976 and then again at the end of 1980, together with his stepdaughter. While the brothers were with us we went on beautiful trips around Germany on the autobahns.

Before I get around to talking about myself I'd like to say something about the family of my father's brother, Uncle Ludwig Rabeneck, whom my father mentions so often in his memoir. I don't have much in the way of details, however Uncle Ludwig and aunt Sascha (Alexandrine) lived in



*Ludwig and Alexandrine Rabeneck in Paris after their escape from Russia*

Paris after their escape from Russia. Like my father, he no longer worked, but he died early in 1928 in Paris. Aunt Sascha died in 1951 in London.

Their eldest son Leo (Lev Lvovich) lived and died in London.<sup>10</sup> Their second son, Arthur, also lived in Paris and worked for a music publisher; he died in Paris. The third son Andrew lived at first in London, but he moved to Nice where he died young in the same year as his father, at the age of thirty-two. The youngest son, Nicholas started living in London, but later moved to New York where he died four years ago (1983). Except for Andrew all the sons were married, but childless, so there are no more descendants on this line.



*Helen in 1937*

As for me, I spent four years in the upper school of the Lyceum, and then five more years training in domestic science. In 1931 I then moved to France and spent six years as housekeeper to my sister Sophie. During this time, I perfected my French and Russian languages and in 1937 I returned to Germany. After a false start working in an NSV home (National Socialist Volunteers) I got a place with the charity Bergische Diakonie where I worked for thirty-five years in different residential homes. From 1937 to 1947 I was at a boys home in Bornen-bei-Kürten (Rhenisch-Bergischer Kreis); from 1947 to 1956 at the ‘Gut an der Linde’

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<sup>10</sup> See Lev Rabeneck’s memoir at [Lives Retold.co.uk](http://LivesRetold.co.uk)



(Charity at the Lime-trees) boys home at Bensberg near Cologne; finally from 1956 to 1972 I was at the Langensiepen Haus (a home for delinquent girls) at Wülfrath-Oberdüssel.

I still live in the area near the institute in a flat I was given when I retired in 1972.

Wülfrath, March 1987



*Helen Rabeneck at 100 in 2007*