**Helen**

**A 20th Century Story**

**Philip J. Davis**

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**Providence, Rhode Island**

**I, a stranger and afraid**

**In a world I never made**

**-- A.E. Houseman** About the Author

Philip J. Davis is Emeritus Professor of Applied Mathematics at Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island. He has written extensively on scientific and mathematical topics, as well as biography, history, and fiction.

Note

The use of the words "I", "my" generally refer to the author. The use of the words "we", "us", "our" generally refer to the author's wife Hadassah F. Davis together with the author.

The material presented here is derived in part from conversations and direct experience with the subject, Helen A. Morawiecki. In part, it is inferential, based on a number of additional sources. The frequent incompleteness of the narrative reflects the scantiness of available information. All biography is an interpretation. The dates given and the duration of events are often only approximate. The dates of historic events are exact.

*All names have been changed, and identifying details have been either changed or deleted. – Ernest Davis, editor*

In Brief

The story that follows is of a woman who lived through the Allied bombing of Vienna ; who came to the USA, who later was abandoned by her mother, relatives, husband, friends and by psychiatrists. It is the story of a woman who was given short shrift by social workers and lawyers; a woman who, in my opinion, was misdiagnosed by physicians and subjected to inappropriate surgery. In many ways, she was self-abandoned; in other ways abandoned by History, becoming part of History's flotsam and jetsam: a woman of little importance but also a soul no less than the rest of us.

The Washington Years -- Part One

In the Summer of 1952, having obtained a PhD in mathematics in 1950, I accepted a government job at the National Bureau of Standards in Washington. I worked in the Numerical Analysis Section of the Bureau and a number of years later became its head. These years were during the first generation of the Electronic Digital Computers, the Bureau having pioneered with its SEAC and SWAC computers.

Arrived at the Bureau, one of my colleagues and occasional working partner was Jan A. Morawiecki, an Austrian mathematician. With the cessation of WWII hostilities, many talented scientists, technologists, mathematicians from the enemy Axis Countries, came or were even imported to the USA.

Jan was a tall, slender man, always impeccably dressed. He and his wife Helen lived in an apartment at 3701 Connecticut Avenue, conveniently located pretty much across the street from the Bureau of Standards. Their apartment was just adjacent to that of Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas, whom they spoke about, but whom I suspect they met only in the hallways.

We soon got to know Helen. She was a short, petite, and very pretty young woman; a careful dresser with an excellent sense of style, color and quality. We soon found out that she was a fine cook and also a fine seamstress, using both her needle and her sewing machine. Her English which she spoke with a slight accent was competent. In the following years she achieved an excellent vocabulary. As her abilities in English grew, her German slowly eroded and whenever I would speak to her in my rudimentary German, she would invariably respond in English.

Sometime after we met her, in treating a gynecological complaint after a medical examination , she was subjected to a hysterectomy. This shocked Jan and was traumatic for Helen in that it induced a mental condition which sent her to St. Catherine's Hospital for the mentally ill in Washington. We visited Helen several times in St. Catherine's and after work I used to discuss her case and progress with Jan. Jan never told me what medical justification was given for this operation, and I always felt that it might have been a case of medical malpractice.

Helen was a young Austrian woman who was raised not to a profession or to a job, but to the expectation of *KKK : Kinder, Küche, und Kirche* -- children, kitchen and church -- to be a loving wife supported by a loving husband. This emphasis fit in very well with the general tenor of the times and was also the official Nazi views on the position of women. To be cut off from this possibility was indeed a psychological jolt.

After some months in St. Catherine's, where I believed she received psychological treatment including electric shock treatment, Slowly, Helen appeared to be improving and she was released but with no psychological follow-up of any kind. And there was one debilitating sequel: she developed a deep and abiding distrust of doctors: with some very few exceptions (eyeglasses) she would not seek any medical, dental or mental help.

We saw Helen and Jan frequently. We and our children had picnics, went to the beach with them, etc. She went with Jan to Mexico City, where he had professional interests. All of a sudden, so it seemed, in 1958 Jan announced that he was obtaining a divorce. Helen made no attempt to deal with this additional shock in any way; it was beyond her abilities.

The Vienna Years

The Vienna of the 1920's was a rich and contradictory brew. The Hapsburg Dynasty, dating from the 10th Century was over. The government was socialist, but there was still nostalgia for the late Hapsburg Emperor Franz Josef (1830 - 1916), a relatively liberal monarch. The country had been pulled by Germany into WWI, probably against the will of Franz Josef , and the war was lost. With this loss also came the loss of the sense of grandeur of the great Austro-Hungarian Empire,now split up, but still visible in the architecture of many public buildings.

In 1921 Robert Musil began to write his famous massive, questioning novel *The Man Without Qualities, (Der Mann Ohne Eigenschaften).* Freud's *Ego and the Id* was published in 1923. Arthur Schnitzler's plays, based on the prevailing lax morals, shocked many. Years later, one of them became Stanley Kubrik's 1999 movie *Eyes Wide Shut* with Tom Cruise and Nicole Kidman. In the 1920's Austria moved from absolute monarchy to socialism and suffered serious inflation.

In 1925, Adolf Hitler, an Austrian by birth, became leader of anti-semitic mobs in Germany.

Helen was born at home on December 16, 1922 as Helene Marta Mueller to Tomas and Ilsa Mueller, a middle class Catholic couple. (I have referred to her as Helen, for that was her preferred spelling in the USA.) The attending physician was Jewish. The Muellers lived in the 2nd *Bezirk* (District) known as Leopoldstadt, an area that had a mixed Catholic and Jewish population. Their flat was very close to the entrance to the Prater, an extensive public park that sported the famous *Riesenrad* (Ferris wheel; lit. giant wheel) as well as numerous amusements, cafes, etc. This area is quite close to the City Center as defined by the Gothic St. Stephen's Cathedral (*Stefansdom*) with its high tower that is visible from all over the city.

Her father, Tomas Mueller, died when Helen was about two. Helen was his only child. She has no memory of him. Her mother remarried and her stepfather took little notice of Helen, In fact, she says her mother hated her. It is easy to conjecture that her mother regarded the child as a nuisance limiting her freedom and complicating her life. Ilsa bore no other children.

Helen was baptized and had First Communion in St. Stephen's when she was seven or eight years old. Presumably this was accompanied by a family celebration. She speaks fondly of a grandmother who had a villa somewhere in the *Wienerwald* and of an aunt married to a man who had a white collar job in Cairo, Egypt.

Of average intelligence, Helen went to public schools for girls. During her school years she learned some English and was good at it. The students were of mixed religious backgrounds. Although the Austrian Roman Catholic Church had been disestablished in 1918, there were religious education and exercises for the school children officiated by a visiting priest or rabbi as the case may be. For reasons of which I am not aware, Helen's experience with the priests appears to have been disturbing. In later years, particularly in restaurants in Providence, whenever she would encounter a priest wearing a collar or a nun in a habit, she would ask to be seated far away from them. As far as I am aware, she never went to Mass in Providence; never expressed any personal interest in religion.

In 1933, Adolf Hitler, an Austrian, came to political power in Berlin, Germany, as the head of the Nazi party. Hitler had the fantasy of creating a pan - German Reich that would last a thousand years. The anti-Semitic demonstrations ,abasements, persecutions and murders began almost immediately. On March 12, 1938, the German Army marched into Austria and were welcomed with flowers into the land of *Strudel , Schnitzel und Schlag* ( coiled pastries, cutlets, and whipped cream) , of Strauss waltzes and sentimental operettas.

Perhaps Helen, at the age of fifteen, viewed matters prophetically but incompletely when, as she frequently told me, all the enormities of 1938 and later were due to *die Deutsche* (the Germans.)

Hitler paraded down the main streets of the city. Austria was Helenxed to the German Third Reich (*der Anschluss* ). Jews, who were fortunate enough to sense the seriousness of coming events and who were able to manage, emigrated. It was not an easy matter to obtain an entrance visa to a welcoming country or to take money out.

World War II began on September 1, 1939 when German troops marched into Poland. The transportation of Jews in Germany and Austria to concentration and death camps began almost immediately. Only a few survived.

Helen noticed that suddenly and inexplicably her Jewish friends were disappearing from school. When she inquired what was happening , she was met with a stone wall of silence -- silence, ambiguity, denial, dishonesty and self-indulgence that has been said to have been characteristic of Austrians. Call it the Austrians’ code of the Mafia's *Omertà,* a code which after seventy years cannot be said to have weakened. Perhaps, to put it sharper by drawing on Robert Musil's *The Man without Qualities* -- Helen lived within a pervasive national character of ambivalence towards morals and indifference towards life ; an ambivalence that was overlaid with Austrian silence that has been absolutely deafening. The phrase *Eyes Wide Shut* sums it up.

All parts of the Austrian community were drawn into the military mobilization, and at the age of seventeen or eighteen, Helen was sent for a while to a nearby area in Germany as part of a teen-age work group. She recalls that her duties were light.

The United States entered WWII on December 11th, 1941 four days after Pearl Harbor. The bombing of Vienna began on March 17,1944 by B-17's ,B-24's and British aircraft and there were 52 such raids. It is estimated that 20% of the houses in Vienna were destroyed , that 30,000 inhabitants lost their lives and a quarter of a million people were left homeless. Helen, her mother and relatives survived this period by remaining frequently in bomb shelters (*Luftschutzbunker*). One residue of the bombing , PTSD, (post traumatic stress disorder) persisted well into Helen's life in America. Whenever she heard a loud noise such as an auto backfiring, or a door slamming, she would flinch.

The end of World War II in Europe came in May, 1945. British, American, and Russian troops moved into Vienna. The city was divided into America, British, French, and Soviet zones. Residents in the Soviet Zone were considered unfortunate because of the atrocities perpetrated by the triumphant Russian soldiers. The country itself, was divided into zones, the American Zone being to the west of Vienna, all the way to Salzburg and beyond.

During the war period, perhaps earlier, Helen formed an attachment with Jan Morawiecki (1925 - 1999). Jan did not see army service, perhaps because of his age and because also he had to wear very thick and powerful eyeglasses. During this period, Jan was able to pursue his mathematical studies at the Technische University of Vienna.

In June of 1945, the two of them, Helen and Jan, made their way slowly out of Vienna to safety in the American Zone in Salzburg. Helen sometimes speaks romantically of having made this trip barefoot and sleeping wherever they could find shelter: in abandoned boxcars, etc. At other times , she says that Jan found a car and they drove to Salzburg. Somehow, appropriate wedding clothes were found and Helen and Jan were married in June 1945 in a church in the outskirts of Salzburg.

The Washington Years-- Part Two

In the late 1940's academic jobs in Austria were very hard to obtain. It was somewhat easier in the Unites States, and the intensification of the Cold War with the Soviet Union made it still easier. A period of about thirty years began in which scientists and mathematicians were in great demand and could "write their own ticket." Jan and Helen emigrated to the United States for he had found a job teaching mathematics at the University of Wyoming in Laramie. Boarding ship in France, they arrived in Canada, and made their way across the continent to Laramie. They found a relatively new one-level home and Helen began housekeeping. For a while, Jan was happy, but ultimately he found that Laramie was not a place that had opportunities for research and looked around and found such a place at the National Bureau of Standards in Washington.

By August, 1958, Jan's uncontested divorce was finalized. Helen had been advised by Jan's professional friends and others to contest, but this was beyond her wish and her capability. The divorce settlement granted Helen alimony only for a certain number of years after which she would be cut off completely. At first , she was able to remain in her apartment at 5608 Massachusetts Ave., but later moved to a single room on Columbia Road, where, she used to tell us, she could hear the lions in the great Washington Zoo roar at night. In those years, as a divorcée, she would frequently take the bus up Connecticut Avenue and visit us at home in Chevy Chase, just across the District Line. She applied for and received a social security card and took a job at a downtown Washington department store. It didn't last very long.

In those years also, Helen studied up the requirements for U.S. Citizenship. When she was ready for the final examination and swearing in, I took her to the Courthouse in downtown Washington and acted as her witness to testify to her moral character, etc. She answered all the questions adequately and obtained the certificate of American citizenship. With dwindling alimony funds, she lived on welfare. I don't believe that she was in touch with her mother or other relatives and she never once mentioned the possibility of returning to Vienna.

The years marched on. After divorcing Helen, Jan left Washington. This was almost the last time I saw him. He took a job as an editor of the *Mathematical Newsletter* which, in those years, was located in Richmond. His stay in Richmond did not last long, about a year, but it was sufficiently long for him to find and later marry a Richmond young woman with whom later he had a son. He then found a position in the Mathematics Department of The University of Texas at Austin which he held for the remainder of his professional career. At Christmas time Helen would receive a card from him.

I enjoyed my work at the National Bureau of Standards, eventually becoming head of the Numerical Analysis Section. But there was one professional ingredient that was missing. I wanted to write and I found that personal but professional writing was impossible within the US Government. I heard a story that when Dwight D. Eisenhower wanted to write a personal book while he was receiving a Government paycheck, and to enjoy full royalties, Congress enacted an exception in his case. On the other hand, universities were fine and encouraging places for authors.

In 1962, a university job opportunity opened up for me in Brown's Division of Applied Mathematics in Providence. I accepted and the Summer of 1963 we moved to Providence from Chevy Chase, Maryland.

Just prior to moving to Providence, we received a letter from Helen's mother in Vienna.

Vienna Apr 4, 1963

Dear Mrs. Davis:

First of all I will thank you very much that you come to the Austrian Embassy and made known your address. So it is possible for me to apply to you in person.

I was told that you care so much for my daughter Helen Morawiecki; therefore I believe that my petition to you will not be in vain. Surely you can imagine how important it is for a mother to get a sign of existence from her daughter after long time. I have not the slightest notion of the name of the illness which my daughter had or still has. I also don't know what has been settled at the divorce , and why Helen gets support from Jan only until August. It is impossible for me to think that my "dear" son-in-law doesn't give to his ill wife all what is necessary for existence. Now I hope that Helen will finish the instruction very well and then she will be able to support herself. I want to help here, but I don't know how I can do it.

Now I beg you, dear Mrs. Davis, to inform me about the illness and the habits of my daughter. I want to know the truth finally, though perhaps it will be for me not very delightful.

I thank you very much for your kindness and I hope it is not unpleasant to you writing me a letter.

Yours sincerely,

Ilsa Weber

Vienna

Austria

What can we read into this letter ? Had her mother softened in her attitude towards her daughter? Had Helen been in touch with her ? Had Jan? I don't know. Someone obviously had been in touch, for her mother clearly knew about the divorce. I don't believe that we ever told Helen about the letter or that we answered it. What could we tell her Mother that would be of any comfort? As regards Helen's mental illness, we had never even heard how the professionals had diagnosed it.

What was the political/economic situation back in Vienna in 1963 at the time of this letter? The city, divided in post WWII into fourzones, was reunited in 1955 and Austria regained its sovereignty. It was the occasion of a great show in Schloss Belvedere with politicos from all over the world attending I recall seeing a commemorative tablet there marking the occasion. By that year also the great State Opera House (*Staatsoper Haus*) that had been severely damaged during the bombing had been totally reconstructed. And by the same token, by 1963 there was hardly a trace of the great destruction that the war had wreaked. The economic situation was not bad; the city housed a branch of the UN and had become (and remains) a considerable center for OPEC and for international conferences of all sorts. Politically neutral in the Cold War between the USA and the USSR, it served as a transfer point for Eastern Bloc people who were able to leave their countries and find a better life.

Could Helen's mother afford to come to the United States and be with her daughter? Could she have reclaimed her daughter and have taken her back to Vienna? In those years, transatlantic flights were becoming common and not tremendously expensive. But Helen told me that her mother and her stepfather had a modest income. She says they ran or owned a kiosk near the bus station) selling items that travelers might want. Yes, it might have been possible for her to come, but she did not.

The Providence Years

As one by one Jan's professional friends departed from Washington, we remained Helen's only friends. After we, too, left, bereft of our friendship and psychological support, it required several years before Helen took a bus from Washington and knocked on our door with her suitcase and her sewing machine. We found her a room. This did not work out: wrong kind of people were her neighbors. We found her another room. This also did not work out: noisy, inconsiderate roomers. Finally -- it must have been several years later -- with the help of Linda Kushner who was then a State Senator, we found her a small one room with kitchenette in the newly established Chestnut North, a subsidized housing facility on Main Street.

Helen lived quietly in her apartment in Chestnut North for many years. Her furniture was Spartan : a bed, a small dining table, four chairs, an end-table, a lamp, a radio, some kitchen things. She did not want a phone or a TV. We provided several large pictures for the bare walls. She frequently walked several miles a day. She shopped for her food. Once a week, more or less, I would drive her to the Supermarket for groceries or for a cup of coffee. She listened to the Good Music station. She made no friends and could or would not join in any of the group activities that were arranged for apartment residents. She visited no doctors or dentists although they were nearby across the street. One by one her teeth fell out. Yet, apart from an occasional cold, her general physical health was reasonable, but her mental health gradually slipped away and she was aware of it. She frequently told me that she was "a lost soul" but she could not find the strength to save herself. She frequently said she hoped that God would take her soon.

Chestnut North is located at a very busy and complicated intersection. One day the apartment staff were told that she had been found in the street trying to stop cars so she could cross. She was apprehended; a variety of relevant organizations were contacted, and ultimately she was placed on the sixth floor of the adjacent Chestnut Nursing Facility with no opportunity to leave except when escorted on short trips. It is pretty clear to me that by "overprotecting" their patients, the attendants are also protecting themselves from charges of negligence.

The Chestnut Nursing Years

After several months, we abandoned Helen to the tender mercies of a Court-appointed guardian, a lawyer who, as far as we know, has never visited her and who very likely regards her only as a small database and the source of a professional fee.

Though there is much more to tell, the story is ongoing and I shall stop here. All lives are threaded through the turbulence of History.