

RUSSIAN DOLLS: THE POLIANOWSKI SISTERS' MEMOIRS ON ALBERT
EINSTEIN AND LUDWIG WITTGENSTEIN

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ABSTRACT

In the 1970's two Russian sisters wrote their memoirs of working with Albert Einstein and Ludwig Wittgenstein in long essays published in the trans Atlantic literary journal, *Encounter*. The intimacy of their experience with both men conflicts with the public image of misogynists given to callous expressions of their prejudice. The Polianowski sisters, Esther and Fania, had suffered the indignities of being born female at the *fin de siècle* despite the progressive attitude to the education of women in the Ukraine. They were cynical but tolerant of sexual discrimination perhaps because their lives had been torn apart by the greater terror of anti-Semitism that had driven them across Europe. It was their Jewish identity and suffering that inspired some significant intellectuals to befriend them including Dr. Redcliffe Salaman, Frances Cornford and Shlomo Bardin, and brought them into the circle of the scholars they married. That they had independently escaped and survived inspired awe even in a man like Einstein. The Polianowski women were included in academic circles at Cambridge University between the wars, and they found meaningful work teaching Russian, and married professors Myer Salaman and Roy Pascal. Using a comparative historical approach to the life and writing of Esther Salaman and Fania Pascal, this article demonstrates that Jewish identity moderated gender bias among significant intellectuals in the 20th century giving marginalised women a measure of opportunity. However, it was limited opportunity. The Polianowski women did not achieve the careers they respectively planned in physics and philosophy, and their contribution as writers is not well recognised.

Introduction

Matryoshka are Russian nesting dolls whose design is a metaphor for hidden treasure. When the Russian Polianowski sisters arrived in Cambridge, England in the 1920's they were young, elegant and exotic but their keen minds were hidden. Their last safe haven had been Berlin after they had been tossed across the world on waves of anti-Semitism that would culminate in the full catastrophe of the *Shoah*. At times they were deceptively clumsy in their lack of trivial knowledge about the world. Esther Polianowski surprised a dinner party at Cambridge when she asked where Morocco was, and Dr. R.N. Salaman later used the incident in a speech to illustrate the single-mindedness of a pupil of Einstein's (CUL). It was only in personal relationships that they revealed attitudes shaped by terror, tragedy and a remarkable education. Their networks of intellectual friendships included two of the greatest thinkers of the 20th century – and great misogynists – Albert Einstein and Ludwig Wittgenstein.

Chronicles of minutiae in the lives of Einstein and Wittgenstein were penned in the 1970's by these little known Jewish sisters when they wrote in the trans Atlantic literary journal *Encounter*, a publication that aimed to give a voice to Russian intelligentsia émigrés. Using married names Fania Pascal (1973) titled her work simply *Wittgenstein* (1973) and Esther Salaman (1979) followed six years later with her essay *Remembering Einstein*. Esther

Polianowski¹ was the pupil of Einstein in Berlin, and it was Einstein who enabled her to leave the city and pursue doctoral work in physics in the safety of the Cavendish Laboratories in Cambridge. Her sister Fania completed her PhD in philosophy in Berlin before she joined her sister in Cambridge, where she married the German literary scholar, Dr. Roy Pascal. Fania's plan had always been to teach Russian, and she was astonished to find Ludwig Wittgenstein and his assistant Francis Skinner, her pupils.

To have been female and intelligent did not open doors to women in 1920 but the raw violence the Polianowski women had suffered seemed to overwhelm the common misogyny of the age in both Einstein and Wittgenstein. The women embodied problems of Jewish identity that preoccupied Einstein and Wittgenstein in different ways. They were not interested in the moral dimensions of religious adherence that are so often regarded as a female domain. Einstein was alarmed by the persecution the Polianowski women had experienced in the Ukraine and recognised her accounts as confirmation of the catastrophic political dimensions of anti-Semitism and what it meant to be a Jew in Europe.

When Esther Polianowski applied to Einstein to study physics in Berlin the only thing that impressed him was that she had learned mathematics in Russia where teaching was exemplary. Her Jewish identity was not important but her gender was an obstacle. Einstein's Jewish identity and religious sensitivities were complex (Jammer 1999) and not open to discussion in the Weimar Republic era. The relationship between professor and pupil changed when Einstein read Esther's account of a 1918 Ukrainian pogrom in a prestigious national newspaper (Salaman 1979). After Einstein heard about her resistance fighting, escape from the Ukraine and flight to Palestine as a pioneer agricultural work, he opened his home and heart to her. He was even inspired, against all his instincts, to find her a problem in physics and recommended tutors.

Fania Pascal was one of the six close friends of Wittgenstein who received his famed confession of his long denied Jewish identity. Wittgenstein was neither an observant nor a culturally connected Jew and his family had been practising Christians for generations (Waugh 2010). Although not religious, Fania had paid such a high price for being part of a religious family in a Jewish cultural community that when she heard Wittgenstein's confession that he had three Jewish grandmothers, she could only think: "Some Jew!" (Pascal 1973).

In Cambridge Esther and Fania joined a growing community of uprooted Jewish academics that found work in research and teaching in the chaotic years prior to the Second World War. Many had arrived at the behest of a distinguished Anglo-Jewish community leader and philanthropist Dr Redcliffe Nathan Salaman (Smith 1955, Salaman 1910, CUL). Einstein had asked Esther Polianowski whether she would accept a scholarship to Cambridge on the basis that she would later go to Israel and teach in a scheme devised by Salaman. Salaman, a Zionist with connections to education in Palestine, knew Einstein as a colleague and co religionist, but in correspondence he used the formal address of Professor. Although Esther initially refused the condition of the scholarship, Salaman did assist the Polianowski family. Within a short time of her arrival in Cambridge Esther was included at dinner parties in the Salaman's 300 year old 30-room house at Barley where his own large family was frequently joined by a loud rabble of young students. Not surprisingly, two Salaman sons married Polianowski women. A physician and scientist Salaman was the son of an ostrich feather merchant whose wealth ensured that none of his 14 children would ever need to work although most of them developed artistic and intellectual pursuits of significance (Endelman 2002, 2004, Stein 2008). When tuberculosis ended Salaman's medical work in the East End slums and at the London Hospital, he moved to rural Cambridge and began to conduct research on potatoes. His life's work was a massive definitive study of the social significance of the potato, a book that became so important that it was still being reprinted fifty years later and it was widely translated (Salaman 1949). The Salaman sons shared their father's commitment to literary work that went beyond the demands of an academic career, and they also shared the family's unquestioning support for women who worked. During her time at the Cavendish Laboratories Esther married Dr. Myer Head Salaman a cancer researcher and author (Salaman 1995).

The youngest Polianowski sister, Miriam, was in her teens when she arrived in England with her widowed mother. Her entire education had been disrupted by civil war, pogroms and persecution and she did not have the benefit of the stable and progressive Russian education that had made her sisters academics. At 19 she married the fourth Salaman son, Raphael, a more pedestrian member of the family who spent his working life with Marks and Spencers before devoting his retirement to producing a unique lexicography of craftsmen's tools and the curacy of a remarkable collection of artisan tools (Wordsworth 2014, Salaman 1986)

As wives of English scholars Esther and Fania did not hide their identity as Jews from the contested Ukraine. Although self-effacing and quietly tolerant of bigotry in a way required of women in public, privately they were sharply critical of discrimination and intellectually active. Esther's literary output was a triumph for someone who as a young girl had to bear witness to the murder of friends and neighbours. Her early fiction *Two Silver Roubles*, and *The Fertile Plain* (Salaman 1932, 1956) is saturated with poignant memories of a besieged childhood home, senseless revolution and persecution that ripped apart an idyllic life. It was an inescapable history. Although she translated Russian poetry during the Second World War when she shared a house with the English poet Frances Cornford and her husband the classical scholar Francis Cornford (Cornford and Salaman 1943) in her later writing it is clear she has not purged herself of the trauma of youth. In *A Collection Moments* (Salaman 1970) and *The Great Confession* (Salaman 1973) she returns to the question of why some memories imprint themselves indelibly on the human consciousness, to be replayed uninvited, and memory became her recognised field of academic interest (Wood & Byatt 2008). Esther Polianowski remains an unknown author. Only her memoir of Einstein (Salaman 1979) precisely circumscribed by a desire to never embellish and only call on those events she deliberately recorded or inscribed in memory, was well read, borrowed even unwittingly and written into the popular characterisation of his genius. Certainly some of Einstein's words that Esther Polianowski penned are found in popular media today, particularly the poster and bookmark slogan so often used with Einstein's photograph "I want to know God's thoughts, the rest is detail." While Einstein may have spoken these words on other occasions, it is difficult to find any primary source other than Esther Polianowski. Fania Pascal wrote little other than her *Wittgenstein*, but it became a credible source used with attribution by significant biographers such as Ray Monk (1990) and Joachim Schulte (1992) and it was described by Nicholas Griffin (1992) as the best memoir of Wittgenstein he had read although he regarded Fania's relationship with Wittgenstein as mere acquaintance. The success of Fania's memoir may be attributed to its sensitive insights into Wittgenstein's emotional and spiritual life, which later became controversial.

The Virtue of an Ignorant Woman

The Polianowski sisters were left in no doubt that great men diminished women. Fania, describing her limited knowledge of Wittgenstein's work, wrote: "My ignorance was a feather in my cap as far as Wittgenstein was concerned," (Pascal 1973, 23). Einstein,

discussing with Esther her problem with alpha particles research said: “I should not have sent a daughter of mine to study physics,” (Salaman 1979, 22). The depth of Einstein’s cynicism towards women in science was evident when he insisted to Esther that it was a pursuit that rarely suited women. The Einsteins had holidays with the Curies, and: “Madame Curie never heard the birds sing,” he told her. It seems curious that Einstein should expect some evidence of benign femininity even from Madame Marie Curie who was a deeply respected long-time friend (Pycior 1999) but Einstein was also a man who divorced an intelligent wife who lacked domesticity. He told Esther: “I’m glad my wife doesn’t know any science, although my first wife did.” (Salaman, 1979, 22).

Esther Polianowski had resisted female stereotypes in her high school years in the Ukraine where her ambitions were constantly dampened by the oppressive horrors experienced by the adults around her (Salaman 1979, 1932). Her teachers included an inspiring Russian literature professor ejected from the University for his political alliances, and a woman who had exchanged aristocratic privilege for love. Sensing Esther’s independent spirit, both teachers warned her to remain in the safety of kitchen and kin, away from ideas, alliances and actions that were dangerous. As the school dux she was offered the silver rather than gold medal because they claimed she had not worked hard enough, although friends saw it as an act of anti-Semitism. She tolerated the diminution of her achievements knowing the curriculum had stopped challenging her two years earlier.

Esther Polianowski ultimately fulfilled Einstein’s expectations and never completed her PhD and left the Cavendish to devote her life to her family, but she did pursue her literary interests. It was Wittgenstein who suggested that Esther write her life as fiction after Fania discussed her sister’s writing plans with him. However, Esther did not hear the birds sing, either, because her mind was often assailed by both frightening and joyful spontaneous memories of her lost world. When memory itself became her field of academic enquiry Esther used an analysis of the autobiographical fiction of others (Salaman 1970). Writing about traumatic and distressing spontaneous recall in her own life she said:

If I had not been the kind of person who is drawn to his (sic) memories like a musical person to sounds, and had not recreated many of them in words, nothing more than fragments would have been left of my experiences of involuntary memories of youth. One thing I remember clearly: saying to myself that they helped me to live; yes, they sustained me and gave me courage which I needed in the utter insecurity in which I, like so many émigrés and refugees, found myself...We are refugees from our past. (Wood and Byatt 2008, p337)

Although the Polianowski family escaped Russian anti-Semitism twenty years before the final annihilation of the Jews of Ukraine was ordered in 1942 by Himmler (Dean 1996) they had lived in the city of Zhytomyrⁱⁱ on the transport route between Warsaw and Kiev when it was the centre of the Ukrainian War of Independence between 1918 and 1921. As school girls they saw revolutionary militia – Bolsheviks, Germans, White Russians, Makhnov’s anarchists, Red Army and Ukrainian freedom fighters– besieging the city in waves of arrests and summary executions either to support or scuttle escalating demands for autonomy. Murder born of terror and suspicion, was common. Jews had lived in Zytomyr since the 17th century but once it was mandated as part of the Pale of Settlement Jewish numbers burgeoned until they made up one third of the city’s population. There was a large Hasidic community with many Jewish schools and Torah training institutes. At one point under the influence of the Jewish renaissance, Jewish education was regarded as inferior in Zytomyr due to its lack of secular content (Khiterer 1993) and this may explain why Esther and Fania were sent to a Catholic school. Russian education was inclusive for females and exemplary.

Esther Polianowski’s fiction depicts her family as making a comfortable living from lumber milling until sometime around the October Revolution they lost either the right, or access, to their forest wood lots. As daughters of observant Jews, Esther and Fania grew up hearing their grandfather’s prayers as he wept through the night for the restoration of Israel. In their home candles were lit, words of faith uttered constantly, and hope kept them alive with slightly more optimism than neighbours who saw oppression as their lot and did not resist. Esther’s parents vetoed her plans to go to Moscow to university and instead she was accepted into Kiev University to study mathematics. She studied briefly but university life was brought to a halt by the murder of Jews. In the end her father was afraid to let her leave home, but it proved the more dangerous choice (Salaman 1932).

The female protagonist in Esther’s fiction had a false sense of security in her atypical appearance, blue-eyed and brown haired, as was Esther, slight and pretty, and never taken for a Jew. Hundreds of pogroms across the Ukraine had left thousands of Jews dead. The insistent theme of Esther’s *Two Silver Roubles* (Salaman 1932) is that the only choices young people had were political. Without an academic future, a career or even an inclination to marry, Esther’s protagonist drifted towards various causes, teaching arithmetic to girls in a Zionist youth club where she discovered the depth of her ignorance about her own heritage. Her friends at the club collected a thousand books in order to teach Hebrew, and she was

surprised to find it was a codified language and not something like the once illegal Ukrainian language that was being revived largely by invention. Among the Zionists she experienced the convergence of the disparate experiences of young Ukrainian Jews: the orthodox who lived behind social barriers, those like Esther's own family whose orthodoxy was compromised by assimilation despite a determination to maintain Jewish racial purity, and those who regarded themselves as Russians but cherished a memory of inherited faith and a warm Jewish cultural life. Her Jewish consciousness was awakened in late night discussions of the erosion of the national psyche, lost faith in miracles and the cruelty of history. When she was told that her own generation was responsible for achieving the dream of a Jewish homeland, theory and action coalesced.

During Orthodox Christmas in 1918 Symon Petliura's Cossacks rampaged out of control on vodka, murdering Jews in Zytomyr, both in Esther's fiction and in history (Salaman 1979, 1932). It was this event that radicalised Esther and provided the stories that became more important to her than mathematics and physics. Petliura had been publicised as a friend of the Ukrainian people, claiming he was able to protect the Jews as he evicted both Germans and Russians. Petliura was later murdered by a Jewish anarchist. According to Esther's stories, at some point she was emotionally seduced by a deceptive leader, and later she joined a group of male school friends and obtained a rifle. Her assignments included walking the deserted late night streets to observe the Cossack barracks, to find out whether they were drinking which could signal a fresh pogrom. She refused to disguise herself as a male, which would mean certain death if discovered, despite the vulnerability of a lone woman close to the barracks. She was uncomfortable with the fact that while she struggled to make sense of political conflict, young men were focused on her face and figure.

In the fictitious account the heroine had been given her up for dead by her family. She was the only female soldier known in the area, and the body of a girl in uniform had been reported on a distant roadside. She was also surprised to find them alive, but starving. On the basis of a mystical dream her mother had taken the family deep into the cold forest on a Friday night, instead of lighting the Shabbat candles and saying their prayers. Their neighbours had been murdered, and all the fresh hopes of the October Revolution had been washed away in the floodtide of hatred that held Jews responsible for every economic and political evil. It was on the night of her return home that Esther first felt fully convinced there was no hope of a life in the Ukraine.

One of Esther's compatriots was a soldier she fictionalises as David Goldenstein, most probably her school friend Shlomo Bardenstein, later Bardin, a charismatic leader who at just 20 was ready to invest his life in helping establish a home for the Jews in Palestine. His passion for a Ukrainian national political solutions was eroded by pogroms and he saw no hope for the Jews of Russia (Bardin 1976). An awakening to the Jewish heritage was shared by Esther's heroine: "I saw something in his eyes which burnt up my old self, and started in me a new, painful though welcomed, restlessness," (Salaman 1932, 113). When Shlomo asked her to trek overland to Odessa with him to make their way to Palestine, she agreed immediately. Shlomo wanted to take only his sister, Shoshana and her fiancé. Friends clamoured to join them and they needed to leave quickly before it became an unwieldy group. Esther loved Shlomo, but to the disgust of Shoshana, not enough to darn his socks (Salaman 1979).

The account of anti-Semitic persecution Einstein read under Esther Polianowski's by-line in *Frankfurter Zeitung* was, Esther told him, only one week of the years of horror she endured. The full story was fictionalised in her 1932 novel *Two Silver Roubles* to protect the identity of Shlomo Bardenstein and the other young people involved. The group left Zhytomyr with the prayers and blessings of their parents, their mothers' oat cakes made from rationed butter, hidden deep in their sparse rucksacks. One father had given a bolt of cloth to make up plain heavy duty clothes that would withstand the journey, and make no statement about their status. Esther's mother had also sewn the eponymous two silver roubles into her rucksack where they would remain through months of hardship until Shlomo carried Esther, barely alive, aboard the boat for Palestine. The young people pooled a small collection of coins that was almost useless because there was little food available anywhere. Trains were unreliable, crowded with militia and refugees, and petty officials were responsive only to bribes and flattery. It took weeks to reach Odessa where they contacted other Zionists who warned them it was an impossibly long wait for permits and boat passages, and they had to work harvesting grain, training for the hard agricultural work that waited for them as pioneers in Palestine.

Additional travelling companions brought the chaos and deaths Shlomo had imagined. Esther, Shlomo, Shoshana and her fiancé lived rough and laboured together on various Zionist farms. They buried a sack of potatoes, bartered for flour and begged for honey, conserving their small resources. Once they had some money they found a room to rent in

Odessa with a solicitor who wanted to keep the Bolsheviks out of his house, and they joined ration queues for bread. The men worked on the docks. It was a crushing time for Esther because she was constantly bickering with Shoshana. Esther's depression plunged into despair when she met an old neighbour who said that her father had died in a typhus epidemic. She considered turning back for home, but received word from her mother to keep going to Palestine. Street battles escalated daily, the Bolsheviks fled, and then French and English battleships began to fire on the port city. Esther's grief and melancholy was fuelled by Shoshana's jealous claims that Esther would not make a loving wife. In a peculiar *volte face* when Esther collapsed with typhoid, it was Shoshana who gave money to Shlomo to get Esther to a fever hospital and ensure she received sufficient food. While Esther was sick, they finally bartered passages in the hold of a ship for the four of them. Bolshevik activity delayed the ship's departure long enough for Shlomo to drag Esther from the hospital and catch what was thought to be the last ship to Palestine (Salaman 1979).

Decades of persecution and war still lay ahead of them. During their time in Palestine Shlomo worked in a Hebrew school in Haifa, while Esther secured travel documents for the family she had left behind. At the height of the Bolshevik onslaught against Poland, Esther returned and paid a team of Polish foresters to make a perilous journey to Zhitomir by night and lead her mother and siblings back through the mountains to safety (Wordsworth 2009).

In 1922, having settled her family in Palestine, Esther, her sister Fania and Shlomo, decided to resume their education in Berlin. Shlomo put aside his pioneering agricultural work in Palestine to pursue his undergraduate degree. But there was no happily ever after for Shlomo and Esther, and at some moment in Berlin, as Shoshana had predicted, they separated. The intellectual and spiritual legacy of their life together was not lost. Like many Russian Jews of that era, having escaped with their lives, they were driven to fully live out their passions. Esther's fictional David Goldenstein is the celebrated American educator Shlomo Bardin (Powell and Aaron 2007, Powell 1980) pivotal in the creation of educational projects that led to the establishment of Brandeis University. He went from Berlin to Columbia University teaching college, where he gained an MA and a PhD in 1932. He returned to Haifa where he established the Haifa Technical Institute, and then taught in the Haifa Nautical School until 1939. He was in the United States when war broke out. He was recruited as the first director of American Zionist Youth Commission where his charisma and leadership were evident. He then established Brandeis Camp, his life's work. He wanted to develop a strong sense of

Jewish identity among youth. In time he was naturalised and he led the spiritual and cultural renewal among young American Jews, and found ways to tap the American purse to create the largest Jewish institutional landholding outside of Palestine (Moore 1999, Schanin 1950).

A Young Jewish Girl's First Encounter with Einstein

All of this was raw and traumatic when Esther Polianowski met Einstein to ask for a reference to get into the undergraduate program. She told him she could not complete an entrance examination because of the trauma she had endured, and he admitted her on the basis that he knew mathematics was taught thoroughly in Russia. From her own description in *Encounter* he found her opinionated and intolerant because she refused to work with his assistant Dr Gromer who had a physical deformity: "I can understand someone thinking that....but you don't mind saying it," Einstein chided her (Salaman 1979). In her third year Esther saw Einstein frequently and when she presented a paper on alpha particles and came under attack from other professors, he justified her arguments. Shortly after that Einstein saw Esther's name above an article in *Frankfurter Zeitung*, a German language newspaper that published many of the great minds of the Weimar Republic before Hitler came to power. He wrote to her: "Your articles have made a deep impression on me." Einstein was regarded as an uninspiring lecturer. Bored with the work of teaching he was intellectually isolated from colleagues who were daunted by his reputation. Einstein had done his best work as a very young man, but now he enjoyed the simpler pleasures of sailing and walking. Esther was only 25 but from that moment their friendship deepened and she often dined with the Einsteins and walked with him despite his wife's protests about the rain and his health. It was Esther's emotive writing that inspired Einstein to give her a physics problem to work on, although it was clear to both of them that her vocational path was shifting. In her memoir she poignantly describes Einstein's dignity and the absence of fear during the decline of the Weimar Republic and the escalation of anti-Semitic atrocities including the assassination of his friend Walter Rathenau. Esther was so sensitive to the prejudices of others that she made a point of letting her colleagues know she was Jewish before they embarrassed themselves with a vile comment. On the one occasion she forgot to do this she heard some of his students vindictively triumphing over Rathenau's death with a hope that Einstein would also soon be dead.

At the end of her undergraduate work Esther was invited to Einstein's home to discuss her plans. He encouraged her to go to the safety of the Cavendish Laboratories in Cambridge, where Sir Ernest Rutherford was leading ground-breaking work on the structure of the atom. He called her a Bolshevik and she called him Bourgeoisie when she could not promise to go and teach in Israel if she was given a scholarship. Einstein's words that day impressed Esther so deeply that she recorded them immediately: "I don't like new food or new clothes. I'm not with people much, and I'm not a family man. I want my peace." (Salaman 1979, 22). There was no peace in their futures.

Half a century went by before the Polianowski sisters published their memoirs of Einstein and Wittgenstein in *Encounter*. Esther was a more practised writer than her sister. Fania struggled for three years to put together her piece but she published first. Esther had produced a prestigious scientific paper while working under Rutherford (Harper and Salaman 1930) while Fania's only work was the Wittgenstein paper and some later translations. Yet when Esther writes about Einstein it is in a sparse and staccato style, lacking mature reflection. It may have been that Esther's voice could only be unleashed in fiction, or that Esther was only 25 when she knew Einstein and she was writing as an old lady from happy memories, not the traumatically inscribed events that characterised her fiction.

Encounter was founded by Stephen Spender and in the 1970's Melvin J. Lasky, a German-speaking Jewish leftist, had begun his 32 year stretch as editor. The Polianowski sisters fit neatly into that world of *Encounter* writers struggling to make sense of the new political borders, the complexity and terror they both endured and escaped. Their sense of historic moment had been sharpened by pogroms, the 1917 October Revolution, the chaos of Palestine after Allenby's campaign (Hughes 1996, Reichman and Hasson 1984) and the premature deaths of too many friends. It was hard for all victims to find their voices after the Holocaust, the two World Wars and a long Cold War, and many who like Esther who had seen the blood shed, did not speak. For the Polianowski women, friendship with Einstein and Wittgenstein was more of an interesting interlude than a stellar event in their fractured lives.

The Relationship Between Wittgenstein and his Assistant, Skinner

In her article Fania (Pascal 1973) describes her moral dilemma in writing about the long dead Wittgenstein because he was a man whose presence was intimidating simply because of the magnitude of his reputation and the ferocity of his opinions. She demonstrates her critical

independence in her scepticism towards the academic obsession with publishing, something she no doubt observed in her highly productive husband (Pascal 1953, 1956, 1977, 1985) and she said she only wrote about Wittgenstein to redress the imbalance for Skinner, Wittgenstein's little lauded assistant.

She was married and teaching casually in Cambridge in the 1930's when she was approached by Francis Skinner, a shy post graduate student who wanted to learn Russian from her. When she agreed he asked if he could bring along a friend: Wittgenstein. At that stage Wittgenstein was an eccentric Cambridge lecturer who had written little. She knew Wittgenstein already as a disruptive, rarely challenged and attention demanding member of the Moral Science Club of Cambridge that she had attended. She was contemptuous at the "attitude of educated Cambridge towards Wittgenstein," (Pascal 1973, 25). Fania's respect for Wittgenstein's peculiar moral imperatives and sensitivities would have prevented her from writing about him if she had not been convinced that Skinner had been unjustly ignored by history. She was interested in Skinner's influence and contribution to Wittgenstein's work. Skinner sacrificed his post graduate scholarship and ultimately an academic career firstly to work as Wittgenstein's scribe of the *Brown Book* in 1934-5, and later when he took up unskilled manual labour at Wittgenstein's behest to prepare for a life in the USSR (Monk 1990). Skinner was in poor health and elective poverty and hard labour probably contributed to his early death. Fania gives no hint of sexual power in the manipulative relationship between the men.

Although homosexuality was a crime in the 1930's it seems improbable that the subject was taboo among intellectuals or unknown to Fania. Indeed, there may not have been a sexual relationship at that stage, simply because of Wittgenstein's ascetic and philosophical constraints. Intense male friendships and intellectual disciples were common at Cambridge where so many undergraduates had come straight from the male enclaves of great public schools. Others have described guilt ridden and brief sexual encounters between Wittgenstein and Skinner occurring beyond Cambridge, describing Fania's perceptions as contrary to Wittgenstein's own notebooks (Bartley, 1982). Monk refers to Fania Pascal's work extensively and he regards stories of Wittgenstein's homosexual torment as unverifiable (Monk 1990). The friendship between Wittgenstein and Skinner was important but not titillating to Fania: "In my recollection the two men were inseparable," (Pascal 1973, 23). "They walked, talked and worked together, at times sharing rooms over a general grocer's

shop. Together they came to have Russian lessons with me." Wittgenstein had other intimate male friends including the Russian exile and communist Dr. Nicholas Bachtin, a lecturer in classics at Southampton. Bachtin had an odd nature: driven by emotional turmoil, anxiety, and what Fania called "...uncontrolled exuberance of feeling and expression." (Pascal 1973, 24) Wittgenstein and Skinner were often together when they visited Bachtin, and after his death Bachtin's widow told Fania: "Wittgenstein loved Bachtin." The words had no sexual load. Wittgenstein and Skinners' rapid mastery of Russian could also be attributed to their friendship with Bachtin, and his passion for Fyodor Dostoevsky.

Wittgenstein's Rudeness and Rejection of Intellectual Women

When Skinner and Wittgenstein entered her life, Fania was fully immersed in domestica. She had small children and her husband, Dr. Roy Pascal, was a research fellow at Pembroke College, Cambridge, where he was immersed writing about Luther and the German reformation. He later became an esteemed professor of German at the University of Birmingham. The Pascals were Marxists and she was a representative on the Cambridge Committee of the Friends of the Soviet Union. Wittgenstein discouraged her political interests, saying she should restrict herself to good works. Wittgenstein, however, had a philosophical reason for his objections because he claimed to be apolitical despite his plan to live in Russia for the sake of embracing an ascetic life. He rejected so many social and cultural practices that ultimately he had to reject his own academic life. Although he formed a deep friendship with Fania, "He disliked intellectual women and in company literally turned his back on them: a friend of mine, whom he had treated in this rude way, thought it a huge joke. His opinions on most matters were absolute, allowing of no argument," (Pascal, 1973, p25) True to the Matryoshka principle Fania hid her own philosophical knowledge when Wittgenstein tried to make some aspect of his work clearer to her: "Oh, I could never grasp it," she said (p23).

Wittgenstein's commentators have tended to diminish the importance of Fania's insights into the life of Wittgenstein. Griffin (1992) felt her memoirs had substance because she was not a disciple of Wittgenstein, but he also suggested she was a mere acquaintance, an idea taken up by others who dismissed her work as "craftless bullshit" (Hardcastle and Rush 2013). She did not claim special knowledge of Wittgenstein because she found him elusive and secretive with everyone, but she was close enough to discuss her sister Esther's proposed

autobiography with himⁱⁱⁱ and he regarded her with enough warmth to offer to help her personal advice, and even help in choosing drapes, and to bring gifts of flowers and send Christmas pudding.

Wittgenstein's confession of Jewish ethnic heritage marked his moral renewal not surprising in the light of the escalating persecution of Jews in Europe, and the tragic guilt of survivors. His own family sacrificed their fortune and ripped itself apart with conflict and deceit in systematic negotiations with Nazi administrators to escape the reach of Hitler's anti-Semitic laws (Waugh 2010). Although Wittgenstein made his confession to six friends most did not reveal the content which included cruel corporal punishment of a female pupil in his early teaching career in Vienna, Fania's frank account was discussed at length by Wittgenstein's biographer Monk (1990) and there was little doubt about its veracity and value because Fania later collaborated with Wittgenstein's sister Hermine and his literary executor and friend Rush Rhees in a compilation of memories (Rhees 1984), the works most commonly cited in commentaries that explore Wittgenstein's Jewish identity crisis.

The Influence of Female Intellectuals in the Salaman Circle

Probably no diminution of Esther's work was intended in the obituary written by her son-in-law (Polak 1995) when he observed: "That she actually succeeded in writing and publishing her first novel, *Two Silver Roubles* (1932) in English within six years [of arriving in England] might seem incredible to anyone who did not know her husband. Myer Salaman was a scientist, but also a cultured man with great literary skill and with an uncanny insight into his wife's thoughts and feelings," It is true that Esther's husband Dr Myer Head Salaman was the product of a diversely gifted family whose members excelled in science, music, literature, theology, commerce, languages, and fine arts. Without doubt Esther's literary life was empowered by belonging to an Anglo-Jewish family where there was no poverty or persecution and a tradition of women doing meaningful work in collaboration with men, not necessarily their marriage partners. However, this ignores the towering female influences in that family such as anthropologist Brenda Seligman and Esther's mother-in-law Nina Salaman (Salaman). Although Nina Salaman's long illness came to its tragic end in the mid 1920's. Nina's influence lived on around the dining table at Barley. Koren (2012) describes Nina Salaman as an almost forgotten poet who brought old Judaism into Western modernity

through her Zionism. However, the Salaman family preserved and promoted the literary work of its female intellectuals.

Dr. Redcliffe Salaman took pride in his wife's achievements, placing her books in libraries and funding the publication of work. His openness to clever women was evident in his long warm correspondence with his sister Brenda Seligman, who supported him through the endless writing of his potato research, and critiqued his work. Another correspondent was the feminist Edith Ayrton who was the widow of social commentator Israel Zangwill who died not long before Nina Salaman (Rochelson 2007; CUL). The Polianowski women also became his correspondents, and he took equal pride in promoting Esther's publications although fiction was far from the work his wife had published.

Nina Salaman was a Hebrew scholar, essayist and historian who took a spiritual leadership role that was recognised in the Anglo Jewish community (Koren, 2012). She had become a competent linguist under the tuition of her father, Arthur Davis, an assimilated Jewish instrument maker who lived in Derby and came late to an appreciation of Hebrew language and Talmudic scholarship. Nina worked alongside her father in the translation of sacred texts for use in the synagogue, but her personal work included the translation of medieval poetry, including the work of Rachel Morpurgo (1790) of Trieste, a charismatic and mystical Jew who wrote and sang her own sacred poetry (Salaman and Loewe 1924). Rachel was another woman whose genius was attributed to her membership of a distinguished Italian family, the Luzzatos. Nina Salaman was privileged in her financial and domestic arrangements that allowed her to continue in collegial relationships with men she had known when single, such as the novelist Zangwill (1864–1926) who shared her every interest in Jewish affairs (Rochelson 2010, Zangwill and Rochelson 1895). Nina's letters range across the English domestic Jewish affairs such as the death of a beloved chief rabbi and the troubles at the synagogue, until London began to feel the impact of persecution in Russia that triggered waves of refugees, some of whom reached her home shortly after her death. Nina was given two moments of rare recognition from Orthodox Jewry, firstly, in 1919 when she spoke from the pulpit of the synagogue at Cambridge, and secondly, at her funeral in 1925 when the Chief Rabbi broke with custom to eulogise her scholarship. Zangwill had romanticised her as "the spiritual queen of Anglo-Jewry, the finest in senses...the rarest" (Litman 1925). Rachel Litman whose relationship with Nina preceded both Dr. Salaman and Zangwill was an American journalist, lecturer and religious activist, who met Nina in 1899 and continued a

correspondence and shared causes until Nina's death (CUL). Feminists, suffragists, writers and Zionists together it was Litman who defined how Nina Salaman's work transcended the political and the scholarly: "It is the talent of the artist-interpreter, the power to envisage and revivify the ideas, feelings and aspirations of others, to rekindle from historical embers the fires which burned in their souls," (Litman 1925, Litman 1957). The rekindling of fires was the work Esther Polianowski wanted and Fania Pascal accepted. Regardless of the influence of many men, Esther Polianowski Salaman was shaped by personal memories, and she made it her oeuvre to preserve them (Wood and Byatt 2008).

Einstein's Spiritual Quest

The last little Russian doll in this web of intellectual friendship and influence popped up on e-Bay in 2006 when an April 1979 copy of *Encounter* appeared with the seller's note that the name *Pais* was handwritten on the front cover, along with the name and address of someone called Mrs Esther Salaman, 28 Bisham Gardens, N6. The Dutch physicist Bram Pais was a colleague of both Einstein and Niels Bohr, and he was also Einstein's definitive scientific biographer (1982). The hand written notes on the cover of *Encounter* suggests Esther Salaman and Bram Pais met over that published memoir. They had common ground. Pais was a Zionist, a Sephardic Jew who narrowly escaped a Nazis concentration camp by going into hiding. Salaman's impression of Einstein's spiritual quest to see the symmetry of the universe is echoed in Pais's title for his biography, *Subtle is the Lord*, words spoken by Einstein to another colleague at a significant moment in research. Bram Pais also found a quest for God at the heart of Einstein's thirst for knowledge. In her memoir Esther describes a walk in the rain where her conversation with Einstein ranged from Goethe to relativity and Faust, to Dostoevsky, and to Paris and God. Einstein said to her: "Wie sich Gott die Welt beschaffen."

I want to know how God created this world...I'm not interested in this or that phenomenon, in the spectrum of this or that element. I want to know His thoughts, the rest are details. (Salaman 1979, 22)

The echoes of Esther's memoir are found in later writings about Einstein, particularly in relation to his generosity, accessibility, spirituality and Jewish identity, but her name does not appear. Despite the scant academic recognition of the Polianowski sisters, the work of two obscure Jewish female intellectuals and the suffering that gave them access to great men has contributed to our knowledge of two of the greatest minds of the 20th Century.

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Endnotes

ⁱ This surname is sometimes translated with substitutions of v / w, and i / y. Both women wrote in *Encounter* under their married names, Esther Salaman and Fania Pascal, although Esther's author biography always included her maiden name.

ⁱⁱ Various spelled

ⁱⁱⁱ Probably *Two silver roubles*, published as fiction in 1932.