

ODETTE KEUN
(1888 -1978)

MONIQUE REINTJES

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INTRODUCTION

Several years ago, working on my thesis in Russian studies, I came across *Au Pays de la Toison d'or*, a travel book on Georgia. Among all the other travel stories on the Caucasus it was a unique book, written by Odette Keun, a woman of flesh and blood. Where the other, mostly British, writers describe how they suffered without wincing once, Odette was impatient, shouted, cried and had a love affair with a real Georgian prince.

In 1920, when virtually every valley in the Caucasus declared its independence, the Red Army was approaching, and bandits infested the area, Odette, in her early thirties, travelled on horseback with a group of soldiers and a consort into the forests and mountains of Georgia. The Menshevik government had declared Georgia independent on May 26, 1918 and endeavoured to convince European countries to recognise her.

I had spent a year in Georgia myself, and had experienced the civil war of 1991 there after yet another declaration of independence, this time from the disintegrating Soviet Union, and its government was once more hoping for international recognition. I had fallen for Georgia and the Georgians at least as much as Odette - only my prince never materialized.

I was thrilled and amused by this book and tried to find out more about its author, but no encyclopaedia had dedicated a lemma to her. By coincidence I discovered that Odette had been the mistress of H.G. Wells. After that it was easy: of Wells several biographies have appeared, and even though most of the biographers ignore Odette almost completely, a few of them provided me with enough material to make a real start for the research of what turned out to be the fascinating life of Odette Keun.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Without Mr. Norman Mackenzie this book would probably not even exist. He and his first wife not only wrote the best source for me: their biography of H.G. Wells, but he also provided me with tapes, containing interviews with Odette, which are invaluable and I am moreover extremely grateful for his encouragement. Mr. Michael Bott, the Librarian of Reading University has been very helpful too. The Wells biography of Mr. D.C. Smith provided me with many sources.

The quick and friendly replies of dozens of employees of libraries, institutes, embassies, archives, and even the Worthing crematorium never failed to cheer me up.

Very important have been all the people in Worthing, London, Grasse, Paris, Istanbul, and other places, who showed interest and helped me find seemingly impossible pieces of information.

It was a delight to meet and talk with people who have known Odette: her niece Madame Elen Dosia; Monsieur Honoré Goletto, the son of her housekeeper in Grasse who presented me with three of Odette's books and postcards of Lou Pidou; Mr. Viner, her solicitor, and, of course, Norman MacKenzie.

Finally I am greatly indebted to Karen Christie and Malcolm Plaister who helped me with correcting the typescript.

All errors remain my responsibility.

THE NUN FROM CONSTANTINOPLE

The first Dutch families arrived in Smyrna around 1600. Smyrna was then an important port in the Middle East and the Levantines were mostly merchants. In 1755 the Dutch reform church in Smyrna lost its clergyman. He disappeared, leaving enormous debts to the poor-relief fund. Nobody in Holland at that time appeared to be willing to leave home and take his place for Smyrna had a bad reputation. But one impatient young man, who was too young to be appointed in Holland, was eager to travel, and that was how Bernardus Keun arrived in Smyrna in the beginning of 1756. A few years later his brother joined him there and became the chancellor.

When Bernardus died in 1801, after an industrious life in the reform community, an Anglican priest was appointed and the service accordingly changed from purely reform to protestant. Gradually the language of the service became exclusively French, especially after the arrival in Smyrna of a group of French protestant refugees who had no other church to go to. The church had been the last stronghold of the Dutch language since French had become the lingua franca of the Levantines a long time before. Many Dutch had married other Levantines and they did not bother to teach their children the Dutch language.ⁱ

Bernardus Keun was the first Keun to settle in the Ottoman Empire. His brother Abraham married an English girl Sarah and they called their son Isaac. Isaac married an Italian girl in a Catholic church and they had nine sonsⁱⁱ. Some of the Keun sons established themselves in Constantinople and found employment in the banks, insurance and the Dutch consulate. A grandson of Isaac, Gustav Henri, was appointed first dragomanⁱⁱⁱ in 1886 and took quarters in the dragoman's house on the premises of the Dutch consulate. It was on a temporary contract only, but that didn't bother him, as he wanted the job. The reason he was offered only a temporary contract was that he knew no Dutch and could not read Turkish, which was still written in the Arabic alphabet.

In December 1887 Gustave married a nineteen year old widow, Helene Lauro, also of mixed parentage: Italian/Greek. They set up house together with her two children Olga and Theodosia from her first marriage and Yvonne, Gustave's daughter from his first marriage with Irene Midhrino. Soon after his second marriage Gustave received a permanent contract and an increase in salary.^{iv}

In these days Sultan Abdulhamid II reigned with absolute power over the enormous Ottoman Empire. He hardly ever left his new palace in Yildiz, because he was obsessed with fear of assassination. A complete break with tradition was that he entertained foreign guests at formal dinners and receptions. The Monarch allowed western architecture even in his own palaces and European dress was common in Constantinople, but on the other hand he was strongly opposed to the development of any industries and electricity was restricted to his palace and the embassies only.^v

All the consulates and most of the Levantines' quarters were situated in Pera, now called Beyoglu. The Dutch consulate, the 'Palais de Hollande' had recently been rebuilt in stone after a fire had destroyed the wooden upper half of the building for the second time. The Swiss-Italian brothers Fossati, who had reconstructed the Haya Sophia, were the architects.^{vi}

Gustave was always short of money. He had to accompany the Dutch Minister to the official receptions of the Sultan where the protocol required him to appear in the expensive official dragoman's gala costume, which he could not afford. Instead of giving him an extra allowance for representation costs The Hague solved this problem by appointing him officially as secretary of the consulate, for which post no special costume was required -

anything to please the Supreme Porte.^{vii}

On 10 September 1888 Odette Zoé was born, a mixture of Dutch, French, Italian and Greek blood. Gustave was in high spirits, not only because of the birth of his daughter; there was a reasonable chance he would be appointed consul-general in Teheran, which would mean a promotion and a dream come true. A successor for his own position was found already and he thought the affair was settled. The consul was however not happy with the proposed successor, a cousin of Gustave, who had an unpleasant character and was not good at getting around on foot. The consul warned The Hague that they would have to pay high carriage costs to bring the cousin to work, knowing only too well that The Hague was extremely avaricious. And so Gustave did not achieve his dream because he had made himself indispensable to the consul. He was devastated and never really got over this disappointment. The situation soon became worse: the same consul who had destroyed all his hopes for the future left after only two years and no new consul was appointed for a year. When Gustave, who had been performing the consul's duties, asked for compensation in his salary, this was refused. In addition to the slight, he badly needed the money, for by this time two more daughters had been born, Francijn Wilhelmina and Louise Marguerite, which meant he now had six children for which to provide.^{viii}

In August 1896, when another of the massacres of the Armenians took place, the family resided in Kinali, on the smallest Princess Island Proti, because the consulate building was under reconstruction. The consul was on leave and Gustave as acting consul hurried back to town, 'risking his life, crisscrossed the whole city in order to inform himself of the situation'. Thousands of Armenians had been killed in one night after an Armenian terrorist group had launched a series of bomb attacks throughout the city and had seized the head office of the Ottoman Bank. Most of the workers involved in the reconstruction of the Dutch consulate were Armenians, Greeks and Kurds, sixty in total and Gustave gave them permission to stay with their families on the premises as long as their lives were in danger. This was a brave but very risky decision. Their presence might have caused problems when Gustave accepted the offer of the Sublime Porte to give him soldiers for protection, and Gustave was criticized by the Dutch press for not concentrating on the interests of the Dutch community. Everything went well however and in fact Gustave afterwards received a bonus from The Hague for his courageous behaviour.^{ix}

The children of the employees played in the big garden of the consulate and were educated by an English nanny. The dragoman's house was not very peaceful. Several members of the family had violent temperaments, in particular Odette and her father. She remembered later that he was 'extraordinarily independent in his ideas - my instinctive rebelliousness comes straight from him'. 'I can't say however, that he always mastered his passion for irresponsible freedom, his persistent indignation of an autocrat, forced by circumstances to submit. They must have devoured him alive. He would have been in his place on a lawless island in the wilds of the Pacific, fighting against Chance and against Fate, satanically determined to go out in a supreme explosion against order and authority, spitting on the world he left behind him in his ultimate defeat. He died when I was thirteen, and he influenced me profoundly, though I could not love him. I was too much like him, and his despotism, avid of uncontrolled authority for himself, could brook no opposition in others. I hardly remember a day, during the last year of his life, when our two wills did not rise furiously up against each other, the struggle ending, of course, in brutal punishment for me. But even when he used his whip, I could not be brought to obey.' Her mother however was a 'poor, beautiful, mild-tempered woman, respectful of all established power, her life was one long agony with him.'^x

Odette was an intelligent little girl and interested in everything around her and her father provided her with interesting information. Discussing the Balance of Power in later years she writes: 'I cannot throw it overboard so blithely. It was an old friend, to which my father, a singularly intelligent diplomatist who knew south-eastern Europe inside out, introduced me in brilliant analyses of the permanent underlying issues in Danubian and Balkan affairs.'^{xi}

She must have realised at an early age that a man's life would be much more interesting, but her father denied this: 'I remember, too, the irony and passion in my father's eyes when, during the walks we used to take in the country, before I grew too disobedient and he too tyrannical, he would say: "Sorry you're a girl? But just think for a minute... If you had been a boy, you might have been obliged to become one of us - a diplomatist - a thing all ignorance or all lies."

Odette admired her father, and later recalled that during the Dreyfus affair, he had challenged everybody about it with a bitter passion that corroded his and his family's life. He adhered to his strict principles, one of which was 'noblesse oblige'.^{xii}

It once happened that the Dutch consul called for his dragoman on a Sunday morning. Gustave refused to obey and so the consul had to visit him in his bath to ask for his advice. But 'in spite of the anarchist tendencies of his nature, his social setting was very decorous indeed, and my mother, devout, kind, honourable, a convinced traditionalist, set, from the very beginning, our feet on the straightest, narrowest, and dullest of righteous paths.'^{xiii}

In June 1901 Gustave was granted sick leave and spent some time in European hospitals. For the winter he returned to Constantinople. His moods varied enormously and everyone feared that he had gone mad. In fact he was suffering from tertiary syphilis, which in combination with alcohol can have disastrous effects. In the beginning of January 1902 H el ene left the dragoman's house, she could not put up with her sick and unreasonable husband any longer. A week later he was taken to the H opital de la Paix where he died a month later on February 17, three days before his forty-ninth birthday.^{xiv}

Apart from missing her father she now had to contend with other changes in her life. Gustave had not very well provided for the family, and suddenly they found themselves outcasts from the snobbish diplomatic community. Several so-called friends did not want to know them anymore. Odette and her sisters went to the British high school for girls, where she was an outstanding pupil. She was encouraged in her writing by an enthusiastic teacher, Miss Green, with whom she would stay in contact for a very long time. After the death of their father, the girls were still allowed to go to school, but paid lower fees in exchange for which they had to perform some duties. Odette could not cope with this humiliation and insecurity and she became a rebellious adolescent. She escaped from the house, crossed the Bosphorus, and explored the woods in Asia Minor on horseback, in the company of some small peasant boys who were supposed to guide her but invariably lost their way. For some time she was lucky and went undetected, but then one day they ran into a military detachment, and Odette was sent back to town, under guard. When she admitted it was not the first time she had done such an outrageously dangerous thing, the situation became serious. A reformatory seemed to her guardians to be the only solution, but then a Roman Catholic priest visited the family and when, instead of finding a girl possessed by the devil, he saw a desperate girl, he advised her guardians to send Odette to a Dutch Ecole Normale to learn discipline. The guardians were quite happy to have a practical solution offered to them and Odette was packed off to the pensionate of the Ursuline sisters in Grubbenvorst, a tiny village on the Meuse.

What everybody had hoped, and nobody had expected, happened: Odette calmed down

almost immediately. The school had an interesting curriculum to offer her intelligent and studious mind, and she felt free and stimulated. The girls did not need to be of the Roman Catholic faith though of course the teachers were all nuns. Odette had been brought up a Presbyterian, and had learned to fear God, but she never liked him very much. It had always been Jesus she prayed to, and with him she had an understanding. When she was taught that animals have no soul and can't go to heaven, she couldn't accept that, it seemed too unfair to her to be true. Surely after all the suffering many animals had to endure in life there had to be some place in heaven for them too? Only the insects were not included in her solicitude. After all, she lived in a dirty oriental country with so many flies, ticks, bugs, fleas and lice that even she happily squashed them herself. But knowing the kindness of Jesus, she was sure that he had found a way to provide a special and separate paradise for all the other animals.^{xv}

Now Odette came into contact with a group of very religious nuns. Their gentleness, tolerance and graciousness had an enormous attraction for Odette and she felt an intense desire to become like them. What appealed to her a great deal was the fact that they never tried to proselytize or impose their view upon others. Under their influence she studied with new enthusiasm the Gospels and found everything Christ said and did was beautiful, good, and true.^{xvi}

Holland had some attractions for her as well. She liked this country of sky and water, flowers and order, but she found the people rude and heavy. 'Holland is a pretty land: the light there is so suffused with water, or the water, if you prefer, so suffused with light, that the exquisitely coloured atmosphere gives me the impression that I've entered a newly created world, far more complex, changing, sumptuous and intense than ours, and I'm almost ready to feel peaceful in those fluid and delicate harmonies of water and sky. But the people - well, the Dutch people resemble an oyster: rich, fat, immobile, closed, insentient, fit for the belly, not for the brain - and the weird blend they have, of a jealous individualism that borders on anarchy with a religious hypocrisy and a slavish subservience to public opinion, gives the fullest delight to an ironical mind.'^{xvii}

Three happy years she spent in that school, but then there were the final exams and Odette received her diploma. What was she to do now? She wanted to stay forever in such a wonderfully sheltered place as this was and she was by this time convinced she had a vocation. Back in Constantinople she disclosed her plan to enter a convent. Nobody took her seriously; her sisters tried to talk her out of it and her guardians forbade her to do such a thing. They could however only decide for her until her 21st birthday, which was only a couple of months away, and in September 1909 Odette entered the convent of the Sisters Dominicans in Tours. Twenty-two girls in total started their probation time. After a year she was admitted to the Novitiate and she took the habit under the chosen name of Soeur Hélène-Marie. This was an impressive ceremony, with the Bishop and a dozen priests leading the service. It was an active order and Soeur Hélène-Marie worked as a teacher of modern history in Maison Mère, a pensionate with a very good reputation. The days of religious schools in France were numbered however and in 1911 the school had to close, to be reopened only a few years later during the First World War. Soeur Hélène-Marie was then sent to Northern Italy to another school for rich children in Borgarotto-Alessandrino, where she stayed for only ten weeks.^{xviii}

'I was too young and too wilful, too eager for the battle and the arena to yield myself up; it was all contention and fever, a crying-out that God asked too much, too much! Sometimes however, at the end of one of those long unhappy convent days, I was allowed to go to the chapel in the evening, and pray and think for half-an-hour alone. It was a very special grace, for the Rule was so strict, one could hardly ever escape from its yoke. In the dusk, the utter

silence, the poor body, tired out by heavy manual work, and the miserable mind, fretted to the verge of despair by the intolerable problems of dogma - above all, the lonely, lonely heart, that longed so to be touched and comforted, to feel a little, instead of only believing! - came to a halt, and their burdens fell off slowly, slowly, till I reached a moment's unity of will with Christ.

Were it only because of those perfect minutes, the spiritual insight they gave me into love, the glimpse they afforded me of what is absolute, I shall always refrain from cursing the dreadful discipline of my monastic training.^{xix} She remained true to this promise, even though later in her life she announced several times that she was going to write a devastating novel on the Catholic Church.

She also realized in later years that she had never overcome that deep distrust all protestants have of Roman Catholicism. The discovery of what historians wrote about the role of the Dominicans in the extirpation of the Albigensian heresy was another step. Moreover her mother had died in July of that year and she decided that she could be more useful in Constantinople looking after her two younger sisters. So she left the order in November 1911. Since the taking of her vows was scheduled to take place only in the summer of the next year, she was free to leave at any time she wanted and without owing anybody an explanation.^{xx}

REFERENCES

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ⁱ Samberg: 161, 173, 175, 220-221;

ⁱⁱ The granddaughter of the youngest son married Prince Livio Borghese, who wrote the genealogy of the Keun family;

ⁱⁱⁱ dragoman;

^{iv} ARA, *Inventory*, file no 592; ARA 102A 33 22;

^v Mansel;

^{vi} Information received from the Dutch Embassy in Istanbul;

^{vii} ARA, *Inventory*;

^{viii} ARA, *Inventory*; ARA 102A 33 32;

^{ix} Schmidt, 184-186; ARA: *Inventory*;

^x Keun, *The Man Who Never Understood*, 149-150;

^{xi} Keun, *Continental Stakes*, 102n;

^{xii} Keun, *I Discover the English*, 96;

^{xiii} Keun, *The Man Who Never Understood*, 151;

^{xiv} ARA: *Inventory*;

^{xv} Keun, *Soliloquy*, 57-59;

^{xvi} Keun, *Soliloquy*, 59;

^{xvii} Keun, *The Man Who Never Understood*, 11;

^{xviii} Information from Soeur Madeleine St. Jean, Archivarian Tours;

^{xix} Keun, *The Man Who Never Understood*, 66;

^{xx} West, *H.G. Wells, Aspects of a Life*, 108; Tapes.