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ANNEMARIE SCHWARZENBACH: A TRAVEL WRITER INSPIRED BY PLACE NAMES

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Abstract: *The unconventional Swiss travel writer Annemarie Schwarzenbach made several ground-breaking journeys in the 1920s and 1930s, and she wrote about them informatively and with great feeling. This paper focuses on her best-known journey, to Afghanistan just as European war was looming in 1939, the account of which has finally been published in English some eight decades after the event. It reveals to an English-language readership that she deservedly merits a place in the pantheon of female travel writers alongside those authors already better known, such as Gertrude Bell and Freya Stark. What sets Schwarzenbach apart is her evident love for place names, both in an evocative sense and as words in their own right, and it is on this toponymic facet to her life that this paper concentrates.*

Key words: *toponymy and toponyms, unconventional lifestyles, literary circles, travel writing, Afghanistan*

1. INTRODUCTION

What does it take to be a toponymist? Has a toponymist always required certain specific professional qualifications? The instinctive response today might be “yes”, but such a response would not take into account those figures of the past – Johann Jacob Egli, Isaac Taylor and others – who without direct qualifications devoted much of their intellectual powers towards the study of place names in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In large measure their work was undertaken before the term ‘toponymy’ had come into use, so they were they not spoken of as toponymists, yet toponymists they certainly were; toponymists *avant l’heure*. And besides those individuals, we might also take into consideration others through the years who, without being in any sense toponymic specialists, have nonetheless understood the intrinsic beauty that place names are capable of possessing, and have managed to

convey the sense of this beauty in their writings. In fact, just as the eminent mid-twentieth-century interpreter of the English landscape, W. G. Hoskins, averred that "poets make the best topographers" (HOSKINS 1955: 17), so one could justifiably make the claim that those of a literary disposition often make the best observers of place names. And, undoubtedly, one such literary observer was a young Swiss woman named Annemarie Schwarzenbach – a woman with a fascinating, though tragically short, life.

2. EARLY UNCONVENTIONALITY

Swiss society in the early twentieth century was, for the well-off, a prim and proper affair, and this was certainly so for the Schwarzenbach family in their substantial manor on the shores of Lake Zürich, where Annemarie was born on May 23rd 1908. Her father was a wealthy business magnate, and her mother was from a military family distantly related to the Bismarcks. From an early age, the unconventional Annemarie felt uncomfortable with the stiff and formal conformities and restrictions imposed upon her. Growing up into a disaffected young woman, she rebelled against her parents' sympathies for the burgeoning National Socialist movement in neighbouring Germany, and decided to move away from home.

Notwithstanding her own distaste for the National Socialists, Schwarzenbach moved to Berlin, where the cultural atmosphere, still reflecting the bohemian style of the 1920s, was to her taste, and where her fluid gender style and glamour were admired rather than frowned upon. She had by this time (1931) published her first novel, and she became a familiar figure in Berlin's literary circles, where she formed a friendship in particular with Erika and Klaus, the children of the novelist Thomas Mann. Her friend of long standing, Ella Maillart, would later write that Schwarzenbach possessed "a charm that acted powerfully on those who are attracted by the tragic greatness of androgyny" (MAILLART 2021: 4). But it was also in Berlin that Schwarzenbach, in 1932, acquired the morphine addiction which, when added to her writing and travelling, became the third compulsion of her life, a constant handicap which led Thomas Mann to dub her a "ravaged angel" (WITTMEYER 2018).

As the cultural atmosphere in Berlin soured during the early 1930s, and German societal tolerance for her lifestyle waned, Schwarzenbach embarked on an intercontinental whirl of travel and journalism, and also found time to acquire a new home – Haus Jäger – in the Swiss Engadin hamlet of Sils-Baselgia, part of the larger village of Sils, near the famous resort of St.-Moritz. This otherwise unremarkable hamlet had, over the years, proved to be an extraordinary draw for some of the mightiest figures of the cultural world. Marcel Proust, Hermann Hesse, Rainer Maria Rilke, Thomas Mann and especially Friedrich Nietzsche were among those who had spent varying lengths of time there. Given that Schwarzenbach had no prior connection with the Engadin, it may be that, as a writer, she chose Sils as her home in the hope of inspiration from the surroundings that had attracted those earlier cultural heavyweights. And as an added consideration, she no doubt gauged that Sils was sufficiently removed geographically from her family home near Zürich.

3. THE ROAD TO AFGHANISTAN

It was while in Sils-Baselgia that Schwarzenbach and her friend Ella Maillart made plans for what would prove to be their defining journey, a 6500-kilometre voyage to Afghanistan, and on June 6th 1939 they departed on that enterprise, embarking from Geneva in a state-of-the-art Ford Roadster DeLuxe cabriolet. Like Schwarzenbach, Maillart was an author and journalist, and she was also interested in ethnography. Both women's travel had been funded by various newspapers and magazines, all of which would expect to receive regular submissions from them throughout their trip (Schwarzenbach was to be responsible for the photography). Neither woman was unfamiliar with Asia – indeed, Schwarzenbach had already on several occasions in the 1930s been a visitor to Persia (modern-day Iran). The ostensible reason for their trip was to partake in archaeological fieldwork that was already under way in Afghanistan, but their real reasons for travel lay within themselves: firstly, to visit a country that still remained almost entirely untouched by Western civilization; and secondly, to place themselves in a location where the brooding darkness of Europe in 1939, with its portents of catastrophe, might be viewed and written about from the outside, from afar. In addition, Maillart had a third reason for making the trip – to help her friend overcome the morphine addiction that had been afflicting Schwarzenbach since her years in Berlin.

Their journey took them over the Simplon Pass into Italy, through the Balkans, along the northern Turkish coast (this part by ferry, with the cabriolet on board), and across Persia into Afghanistan. It is almost certain that some of their route had not previously seen a woman driver, or even any unaccompanied women travellers, and in the intensely conservative areas they encountered it proved advantageous that Schwarzenbach (who did most of the driving) displayed a masculine guise and was sometimes taken to be Maillart's chauffeur. Being in possession of Swiss diplomatic passports and being able to display (neutral) Swiss registration plates on their car was also helpful. Unfortunately, however, by the time they reached Afghanistan it had become clear that Maillart – despite valiant attempts over the course of their journey – had been unable to fulfil her mission of weaning her friend away from her drug addiction, and on reaching Kabul the two friends rather sadly separated in October 1939, in some degree of mutual frustration. According to an exasperated Maillart, Schwarzenbach was "always running away from an emotional crisis (not seeing that she was already wishing for the next)" (MAILLART 2021: 98). Schwarzenbach briefly joined up with archaeological fieldwork, as planned, but soon thereafter made her way to Bombay where, still with the cabriolet, she boarded an Italian vessel bound for Genoa via the Red Sea and Suez Canal. Driving north from Genoa, then travelling by motorail through the St.-Gotthard tunnel, she finally arrived at the Swiss border town of Airolo on January 25th 1940, after a journey of seven-and-a-half months.

4. A FASCINATION WITH PLACE NAMES

On her return from Afghanistan, and alongside further travels elsewhere, Annemarie Schwarzenbach found time to author an account of her journey, titled *Alle Wege sind offen: Die Reisen nach Afghanistan 1939/1940* (SCHWARZENBACH 1941-42), the current edition of which was published in 2021. It is in this work that

Schwarzenbach reveals her love of place names. The book became available in English translation in the same year as the current German edition, when a somewhat abridged version was published under the title *All the roads are open: An Afghan journey, 1939-1940* (SCHWARZENBACH 2021). The discrepancy in length between the German original and the English translation results from the latter having omitted six of the chapters, all of the photographs and all of the annexes which are to be found in the German edition.

Schwarzenbach's writing style proves to be spare and sometimes staccato, reflective of her unconventional nature. She is frequently questioning, both of her surroundings and of herself, and her thoughts are constantly wandering. Her interest in the varied landscapes she visits is understandable, but perhaps more surprising is her evident fascination for the place names she encounters. The twenty short chapters in the English-language translation contain more than 550 mentions of place names (including duplicate instances) as opposed to about 40 instances of personal names (again, including duplicates). For an author clearly invested heavily in personal relationships of all kinds, this is an astonishing ratio of about 14:1 in favour of toponyms. In fact, only her travelling companion Ella Maillart and nine other people are furnished with names at all, this despite the inclusion in the book of several conversations, some of which are even in the form of direct speech. Even Maillart is mentioned by name on only four occasions in the entire work, despite having accompanied Schwarzenbach as her sole companion for four solid months. The concentration on toponyms is quite extraordinary, and cannot simply be dismissed as an attempt to protect individuals from possible repercussions by providing them with anonymity. But this concentration is not merely represented by a string of names, provided incidentally within the text. On encountering each place name, the reader senses Schwarzenbach's heartfelt association with it and her eagerness to convey her delight; often not just about the place that the name represents, but sometimes in relation to the very name itself. It is the names that fascinate her – she finds joy in the very words that constitute place names: "sonorous names on signposts and maps", as she puts it (SCHWARZENBACH 2021: 10). Early on in *All the roads are open*, Schwarzenbach reminisces about her travel through European Turkey towards Istanbul (SCHWARZENBACH 2021: 8):

> *Of all the names that linger in my memory after a long journey, this one [Therapia: modern-day Tarabya, in Turkey] is dearest to me. Perhaps because it sounds so Greek, blithe as a swelling paean to carefree days spent on lovely shores? Perhaps because it came at the beginning and now belongs to a long-ago, glorified time…*

Here the reference is simply to the association of a name with the memory of a place visited. So far, so conventional. But later on in her journey, as she reaches places further afield, she muses on the resolution of place names into features of visual reality. Of reaching first Mount Ararat and later the Hindu Kush, she writes "Since then, names have become mountains" (SCHWARZENBACH 2021: 11). Yet, at the same time, she expresses something akin to disbelief that this unfolding of words into features can really be true (SCHWARZENBACH 2021: 44):

> *Pamir, Hindu Kush, Karakorum … I stubbornly refused to believe that the names I learnt and read on the map could take form before I'd seen them with my eyes, touched them with my breath, held them as it were in my hands.*

Most of all, though – and it is this that makes her so unusual – Schwarzenbach is clearly moved by place names themselves. This is evident when she talks of visiting

the Afghan village of Istalif ("A pretty name, I think…": SCHWARZENBACH 2021: 78) and, on her voyage home, of passing by the coast of Hadhramaut (a "lovely name": SCHWARZENBACH 2021: 112) in southern Yemen. After leaving the Hindu Kush, she describes being "left with the magic, the name, the heart miraculously touched" (SCHWARZENBACH 2021: 50), in doing so elevating place names to a level of equivalence with magic and matters of the heart. And at times she seems transported by what is – to her mind – the intrinsic beauty of place names (SCHWARZENBACH 2021: 37):

> *From Balkh, ancient Bactria, the roads lead to the Oxus and onwards over to Turkistan, onward down to Kandahar, Kabul and India – O magic of names!*

Schwarzenbach's overt joy then culminates in the following passage, which may possibly be the finest succinct celebration of place names ever written (SCHWARZENBACH 2021: 44):

> *…when I reached the Hindu Kush and crossed its grandiose, historic passes, I was sorely tempted to write a hymn and nothing else. A hymn to its name, for names are more than geographic labels – they're sound and colour, dream and memory, they're mystery, magic…*

Sound; colour; dream; memory; mystery; magic. To relate such phenomena to place names can only reflect a deep toponymic love. It seems doubtful whether any professional toponymist today would think to write such a passage, forming such connections, however attracted to names they might consider themselves to be. In this regard, Schwarzenbach's analogies reinforce the suggestion made earlier in this paper that sometimes it takes those of a literary disposition to make the best observers of place names.

5. AN UNTIMELY DEPARTURE

The circumstances of Annemarie Schwarzenbach's tragic and untimely death, two years after her return from Afghanistan, have been well captured by the journalist Laura Smith in the following paragraph (SMITH 2017):

> *One summer day [September 7th] in 1942, Schwarzenbach was riding her bike in the Swiss Engadin mountains. In a final act of bravado, she thrust her arms out to either side to show that she could ride without hands. She fell from her bike, hitting her head. She was in a coma for three days and awoke with amnesia, recognizing no one. When her mother located her in a clinic, she was horrified by her condition. She had been wrongly diagnosed with schizophrenia. Her mother brought her home, then to her own house in Sils, Switzerland, which she had always adored. On November 15th, just before her mother was to arrive for a visit, she died. She was 34. She had defined herself by refusing to be defined and died not knowing who she was.*

In just over a decade, Schwarzenbach's prolific travelling and writing had amounted to more than 300 articles and 5,000 photographs from her journeys across Europe, the United States, the Middle East and Africa. On Annemarie's death, her mother, who had never been supportive, chose to destroy much of her daughter's work, and as time passed the memory of her achievements faded. In the 1980s, those of her writings which had not been destroyed were gradually recovered within the German-speaking world, but she remained almost unknown outside that linguistic community

until *All the roads are open* was published in English in 2021. Apart from her writings, Annemarie Schwarzenbach's legacy lives on in the form of two simple name-plates: one by the front door of Haus Jäger in Sils-Baselgia, indicating to passers-by her name and the dates of her birth and death; and another on the tracks of the Swiss Federal Railways, where a keen eye might occasionally spot the InterCity passenger locomotive which bears her name.

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