

Open Questions in H. P. Blavatsky's Genealogy:

Review of:

“Peter Laur: Ein deutschbaltischer Hintergrund der “Theosophie”?”, in: Jahrbuch des baltischen Deutschtums, Band LIII (2006), Carl-Schirren-Gesellschaft, Lüneburg 2005

[“Peter Laur: A German-Baltic background of “Theosophy”?”, in: A Yearbook of the Baltic Germanity, vol. LIII (2006), Carl-Schirren-Society, Lüneburg 2005]

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Peter Laur is a Professor in Chemistry at the University of Aachen. Over the years he did extensive research on the “Occult Chemistry” of Annie Besant and Charles Leadbeater, which he found to be false. This research led him to an interest in Theosophy in general and with the founder of its modern form, Helena P. Blavatsky, in particular.

His article in the recent issue of the 2006 Yearbook of the Carl-Schirren-Society, which preserves the rich 800-year long cultural heritage of Germanity in the Baltic area, is the result of his research on H. P. Blavatsky's genealogy. He discovered some new facts, which have not been published by any Blavatsky-biographer as of yet, and he wonders why modern biographers have accepted what has come before in such an uncritical fashion.

Laur's definition of the term Theosophy is that of most dictionaries: a syncretic doctrine with Christian, Hindu and Buddhist elements, but the author is fair enough to mention, that for theosophists the view is quite contrary: That there existed an Ur-Religion, an original religion, of which the religions of today contain portions of it. The author dwells on the fact that Helena P. Blavatsky's modern form of Theosophy allegedly has nothing to do with the “classic” Theosophy of the Christian mystics like Jacob Boehme or William Blake and there exists only a similarity of the names. This is a common stereotype, stressed in Germany especially by theological authors and by Anthroposophists, the latter speaking always of the “Anglo-Indian Theosophy”, which they want to classify as different (not understanding the

thread that runs through both) from the medieval Theosophy¹.

After a short introduction into the historical events of the Theosophical Movement, Laur opens his debate on Helena's genealogy with the concession, that as yet no satisfying answer about H.P.B.'s ancestry is possible. He describes the known and always republished details about her birth and her ancestors, coming to the conclusion that the relationship from her mother's side is well documented and without question. What is problematic is the lack of, or even wrong, information of her paternal heritage. Prof. Laur guesses that this may be the result of rancor against the Germans in her family, which began with the mother's brother Rostislav (1824-1884), a known Panslavist, which was continued by Helena's first cousin Sergej Witte (1849-1915), the known minister of finance and prime minister of Russia, whose counterparts denounced him ironically enough a “German”.

To have a career within the Russian hierarchy the von Hahns had to downplay their Germanity, and consequently, needed information on the ancestry of Helena's father (Peter von Hahn, 1798-1873) had been lost, so that he, as the story went, even held seances in order to discover them. Even the birth place of Peter is unknown today. The author guesses that it could have been Narva, as with his brother Gustav Adolf. Also it is not clear how much Peter was still influenced by his Germanity and whether they even spoke German at home. Also information is missing



about Helena's grand-parents Axel Heinrich (russianized Aleksej Gustavovic) and Elisabeth (Maksimovna) von Pröbsting. It seems that the Pröbsting knight family has declined, the genealogic handbook of the Estonia Knighthood has no entry for Elisabeth, although the author has recognized a likelihood in look and temperament of Helena's family with that of her grand-mother Elisabeth von Pröbsting. The father's name Gustavovic refers to a father named Gustav, but no information of him could be found.

The pedigrees as given by Boris de Zirkoff in his *Blavatsky: Collected Writings*² is described by Prof. Laur as highly selective, partly misleading and wrong. Here Helena's grandfather Alexis Gustavovich is placed in the same line as Fedeor Gustavovich and Karl Gustavovich as to indicate that they were brothers, which is not correct according to well documented sources. Also the family name Rottenstern-Hahn is an invention, as no such or similar family name ever existed. The same for the father's name Gustavovich. The correct names of Fedor and Karl have been identified as Friedrich August (Fedor Avgustovic) and Otto Karl (also: Carl August) (Avgustovic) von Hahn. The death date of Fedor was identified as 1851 in St. Petersburg; he had married Gerduta Wilhemine Augusta von Stryk in 1805. His brother Otto Karl von Hahn was born 1782 and his first marriage was to Marie Elisabeth Findeisen in 1803 in Wesenberg. There was no information to be found that there exists any relationship between Axel von Hahn (and therewith with Helena) and the two brothers Friedrich August and Otto Karl von Hahn. The author believes that this relationship had probably been constructed arbitrarily. For this the author gives Boris de Zirkoff the main responsibility who is described as being through his mother a great grand-son of Otto Karl von Hahn. It was de Zirkoff who was attributed with bringing forth most of the genealogical information, with additional information from Helena's sister Vera Jachontov or Zhelihovsky, which information Laur describes as a vivid fantasy. That de Zirkoff is labeled in theosophical circles as grand-nephew or even as nephew of Helena is at best only "cum grano salis" correct, according to the author.

It was striking to Prof. Laur that de Zirkoff gives no proof of a direct relationship between Helena and the von Hahn family, who are mentioned nevertheless numerous times in a selective fashion, while on the other hand clearly documented near relatives of Helena such as the numerous progenies of her father's siblings, her ten cousins, whose families may be in existence even today, are ignored. With one of them, Nikolay, Helena had lived with in Paris in 1873.³

Theosophists repeat always that Helena's Hahn line came from Mecklenburg in Germany and settled later in the Baltic states. Laur writes that he did extensive research with members of the Hahn families of this region and consulted various of the families, and associations' genealogies, but he did not find any proof that Helena was related to these Hahn families. It is also often believed that the famous authoress Ida Gräfin Hahn-Hahn (1805-1880) was a "cousin" of Helena's father or even a "grand aunt" of Helena, which designation must not be understood literally, as there exists also no proof for that relationship. That some ancestor's name was allegedly "Rothenstern-Hahn" or "Rottenstern-Hahn" is, according to the author, a claim based on "clairvoyant experiences" (of Peter von Hahn together with his daughter Helena), and therefore, as Prof. Laur decides, not to be taken seriously.⁴

From the reviewers point of view it is to be regretted that 115 years after the death of Helena Blavatsky no more information about her German ancestors is available. Prof. Laur's research deserves the attention of all theosophists and theosophical historians and it is to be hoped that this impulse encourages further research on Blavatsky's genealogy and that more reliable information concerning her ancestry will soon enter the theosophical literature. It is further hoped that in the future, German theosophists will not be so ready to ignore, bury or even destroy anymore historical documents but rather embrace it in the true spirit of theosophical inquiry as espoused by H.P.B. — of open-mindedness, readiness to search for the truth, and freedom of speech. Therefore the reviewer thanks the Editors of *FOHAT* for giving him the opportunity to share this information with the theosophical public. 🐞

¹ Cp. my reader's letter in: Communications, Theosophical History, July 2003, pp. 6ff.

² Wheaton, Illinois, Third Edition 1988, pp. lxix-lxxiii.

³ Cp. *Blavatsky Collected Writings*, Wheaton, 1988, vol. I, Third ed., p. I.

⁴ Cp. A. P. Sinnett: *Incidents in the Life of Madame H. P. Blavatsky* London, Redway 1886, p. 97.

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