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# “It is a strange thing not to belong to any country, as is my case now”.<sup>1</sup>

Fascism, Refugees, Statelessness, and Rosika Schwimmer  
(1877–1948)

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by

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**Abstract:** This essay attempts to contextualise Rosika Schwimmer’s political, public, and literary activism, particularly pertaining to her outspoken resistance and protest against emerging European fascisms from the 1920s onwards. At that time, Schwimmer – one of the most transnational and transatlantic feminists-suffragists before and during the First World War – was stranded as stateless exile and dissident in the United States, with no prospects of gaining American (or any other) citizenship. Accordingly, her pacifist agenda also included administrative and parliamentary models of universal disarmament, war prevention, and international citizenship, such as, for instance, expressed by her Campaign for World Government, also briefly discussed in this essay. The essay then concludes with Schwimmer’s endeavours to help victims of fascism in Europe before, during, and after the Second World War.

The world is today a china shop and three or four mad bulls are raging through it, destroying life and material with cataclysmic fury. Countries disappear from the map of the world like caved-in geological formations during cosmic catastrophies [*sic*]. Tens of millions of human beings are sucked into the whirlpool and hundreds of millions of human beings look horrified at the spectacle. They stand motionless, petrified by the fear of meeting a similar fate. Fear is their only sensation. Will one or the other mad bull crash next into their corner of the china shop? Who is doomed next?

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<sup>1</sup> Rosika Schwimmer to Norwegian feminist and politician Betzy Kjelsberg, 25 Apr. 1930, Rosika Schwimmer Papers (hereafter RSP). Manuscripts and Archives Division. The New York Public Library. Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations, Box 203.

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But, ladies and gentlemen, the world is not a china shop and mad bulls can and must be over-powered. We are not being destroyed by the fury of the elements, but by the demoniac will of human beings. Against this mad, destructive human will we can and must set constructive human intelligence.<sup>2</sup>

With these words Rosika Schwimmer introduced her radio talk against fascism in 1939.<sup>3</sup> In fact, Schwimmer already predicted the outbreak of another world war after Mussolini's invasion of Ethiopia, and she foresaw a war of races as well.<sup>4</sup> She also wrote to King Victor Emmanuel III about immediate action, stating that Mussolini was insane and should be committed to a mental asylum.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, she tried to mobilise public opinion against Mussolini, and her correspondence is abundant with warnings against Italian fascism:

<sup>2</sup> Transcript of Schwimmer's radio broadcast, entitled "Constructive World Organization against World Chaos" (one of her few speeches preserved), for the radio station WEVD in New York City, 31 Mar. 1939, at 9 p.m., RSP, Box 479.

<sup>3</sup> Brief synopsis of Schwimmer's vita for further transparency: born 1877 in Budapest into a secular Jewish household, Schwimmer attained a prominent and pioneering role in the Hungarian women's movement of the fin de siècle. Multilingual and a gifted public speaker, she also productively liaised with the International Woman Suffrage Alliance (hereafter IWSA), organising its seventh congress in Budapest in 1913. At the outbreak of the First World War, she held the post of corresponding and international secretary for the IWSA and their journal *Jus Suffragii* in London.

Throughout the war, Schwimmer remained one of the most steadfast peace proponents, igniting the foundation of many peace groups and parties, such as the Woman's Peace Party, on her lecture tour for armistice in the United States, playing a pivotal part at the International Congress of Women at The Hague in spring 1915, and conceptualising the subsequent women envoys to neutrals and belligerents. In her relentless pursuit for continuous mediation and stop-the-war-at-any-cost efforts, she found herself increasingly alienated from former mentors or confidantes and scapegoated as subversive element by the general public. Largely haunted by a reputation for being excessively autocratic and egocentric, her negative image consolidated during the ill-fated Ford Peace Ship Expedition in 1916.

After serving as first female diplomat of modern times in Switzerland, appointed by Count Mihály Károlyi in 1918, and her adventurous escape from Hungary under Miklós Horthy, she emigrated to the United States, where she fought (and lost) a paradigmatic naturalisation case and co-launched the so-called Campaign for World Government with Lola Maverick Lloyd (1875–1944), a social activist and Texan heiress. In the 1930s, Schwimmer was also instrumental in originating the project of the so-called World Center for Women's Archives, spearheaded by historian Mary Ritter Beard. Shortly before her death in 1948, Schwimmer was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. Biographical entries about Rosika Schwimmer can be found by Martin D. Dubin, "Schwimmer, Rosika", in Edward T. James, Janet Wilson James, and Paul S. Boyer (eds.), *Notable American Women: A Biographical Dictionary*, 5 vols. (Cambridge, MA, 1971), III, pp. 246–49; Edith Wynner, "Schwimmer, Rosika", in John A. Garraty (ed.), *Dictionary of American Biography: Supplement*, 10 vols. (New York, 1973), IV, pp. 724–28; Gayle J. Hardy, *American Women Civil Rights Activists: Biobibliographies of 68 Leaders, 1825–1992* (Jefferson, NC, 1993), pp. 338–41; Susan Zimmermann and Borbala Major, "Schwimmer, Róza", in Francisca De Haan, Krassimira Daskalova, and Anna Loutfi (eds.), *Biographical Dictionary of Women's Movements and Feminisms: Central, Eastern, and South Eastern Europe, 19th and 20th Centuries* (Budapest, 2006), pp. 484–9.

<sup>4</sup> Schwimmer to Swedish activist of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (hereafter WILPF) Elisabeth Wærn-Bugge, 15 Aug. 1935, Lola Maverick Lloyd Papers (hereafter LMLP). Manuscripts and Archives Division. The New York Public Library. Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations, Box 17.

<sup>5</sup> Schwimmer to His Majesty, King Victor Emmanuel III, 14 Sept. 1935, LMLP, Box 17.

I am unspeakably distressed by the failure of the leaders of people to rise in action against that one insane man – Mussolini – who is now demonstrating the superior proof that as to self-destruction the human race has stopped in its evolution.

To realise that one single insane man – Mussolini – keeps the rest of the world in hypnotized inactivity!<sup>6</sup>

Furthermore, in a letter to President Roosevelt as early as 1933, she claimed: “All my international information—and it comes from nearly every European country to which ties of former pacifist and feminist work are connecting me—indicates that Fascism of the Hitler variety is about to conquer one country after the other.”<sup>7</sup> Subsequently, she published *Hitler’s Deeds and Words* in the same year to awaken the American public. In an article about Hitler specifically and fascism generally she also mockingly stated ‘internal German weakness and external ignorance [...] permitted an Austrian house painter to become the dictator of the German empire.’<sup>8</sup>

Schwimmer’s uncompromising stand against fascism was closely intertwined with her personal fate of statelessness, succeeding her escape from another European totalitarian regime in the early 1920s. After her failed application for US citizenship, Schwimmer had to live in permanent danger of being expelled from the United States and thus being forced to return to Europe. Her status as resident alien also gave her critics and opponents ample opportunity to demand the discontinuation of her right for permanent residence. When Schwimmer arrived in the United States in August 1921, she held an emergency passport as well as a visa of the American Mission in Vienna. She had obtained that visa from the Austrian government during her stay in Vienna as refugee from the White Terror in Hungary. As this visa was no guarantee that she could enter the United States without complications, she also carried with her a letter from the State Department to the assistant secretary of the Treasury. Lola Maverick Lloyd vouched for Schwimmer’s respectability and provided her address in Winnetka, Illinois, as Schwimmer’s first official residence in the United States.

During Schwimmer’s fight for naturalisation, she faced several incidents of deportation. For instance, she had to report to the authorities on Ellis Island in 1927, but was cleared after an inquiring session. In 1941, however, policemen and federal agents started to call at her New York apartment. Schwimmer also claimed frequently that her mail had been secretly opened by the State Department.<sup>9</sup> Until her death, she had to apply periodically for her alien registration card, which was usually issued reluctantly by the officers in charge. Due to her special status as resident alien, she was not permitted to travel outside of the United States or vote. Considering Schwimmer’s earlier career as cosmopolitan feminist-suffragist, these

<sup>6</sup> Schwimmer to Mary Ritter Beard, 22 Aug. 1935, and to Californian feminist Alice Park, 22 Aug. 1935, both in RSP, Box 501.

<sup>7</sup> Schwimmer to Franklin D. Roosevelt, 22 June 1933, RSP, Box 235.

<sup>8</sup> Schwimmer, “Exiled Hungarian Feminist Pleads for Refugees, German and All Others”, *The Republican* (Springfield, MA), 11 June 1933, p. 234, RSP, Microfilm Reel 100:41.

<sup>9</sup> Schwimmer to the Department of Justice, 30 June 1941, RSP, Box 555.

restrictions were a hard blow to her ego. For example, Schwimmer could only venture on her final trip to Europe in 1929 with a special re-entry permit and affidavit identification for the United States.

Thus, next to the so-called World Center for Women's Archives in New York City of the 1930s, Schwimmer pursued another major project, the Campaign for World Government and World Citizenship, as she and Lola Maverick Lloyd decided to call it.<sup>10</sup> Perturbed by her own stateless status after her lost naturalisation case and aware of how common the phenomenon of statelessness was, especially after the First World War, for many dispersed persons, Schwimmer drafted a concept of global citizenship.<sup>11</sup> Along those lines, world government was in her eyes the only solution to prevent war and foster transnational, non-military approaches to conflicts. Schwimmer and Lloyd favoured a model of federalism between nations and also tried to organise a so-called World Constitutional Convention. As Schwimmer explained to Mary Ritter Beard, "All in all, we visualize a United States of the World, organised on the basis of a constitution like the U.S.A., the Swiss Federation etc. have created, taking all their best features and improving what has been found harmful, unnecessary, or useless in their experience."<sup>12</sup>

When Schwimmer's predictions about the spreading of fascism and the unfolding of another world war sadly came true, she devoted all her energies to secure affidavits for refugees, especially from Central Europe. This relief work, again, was seriously impeded by her stateless status in the United States. An alien herself, Schwimmer was not permitted to obtain affidavits and hence could only indirectly help friends and acquaintances to escape from warfare and persecution. Inundated by numerous pleas for help from Europe, she addressed many American citizens, especially women activists like Carrie Chapman Catt and Alice Paul, to elicit affidavits. Catt, however, refused to provide support.<sup>13</sup> When her efforts had little or no success at all, Schwimmer desperately confessed to Alice Park, "I have literally

<sup>10</sup> The official name of their campaign experienced a long evolution. In 1924, they called themselves Union of World Patriots, demanding complete and universal disarmament on land, sea, and air; a world organisation for social, political, and economic cooperation; social, political, and economic equality for all without distinction of sex, race, class, and creed. Membership was open to all who accepted their principles. By 1947, they called themselves United World Federalists. See Campaign for World Government. Records of the New York Office, 1917–1972. Manuscripts and Archives Division. The New York Public Library. Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations, Box 3.

<sup>11</sup> Schwimmer also publicised her alien existence, see, for example, "Madame Schwimmer – "Without a Country", *Literary Digest*, 101/10 (1929), p. 9.

For literature on statelessness and (female) aliens, see especially Virginia Sapiro, "Women, Citizenship, and Nationality: Immigration and Naturalization Policies in the United States", *Politics and Society*, 13/1 (1984), pp. 1–26; Elizabeth Hull. 1985. *Without Justice For All: The Constitutional Rights of Aliens*. Westport, CT: Greenwood; Judith N. Shklar. 1991. *American Citizenship: The Quest for Inclusion*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; Linda K. Kerber, "The Meanings of Citizenship", *The Journal of American History*, 84/3 (1997), pp. 833–54, "Toward a History of Statelessness in America", *American Quarterly*, 57/3 (2005), pp. 727–49, and "The Stateless as the Citizen's Other: A View from the United States", *The American Historical Review*, 112/1 (2007), p. XVI and pp. 1–34.

<sup>12</sup> Schwimmer to Beard, 7 Oct. 1935, RSP, Box 266 and 501.

<sup>13</sup> Catt to Schwimmer, 19 July 1946, RSP, Box 497.

hundreds of requests for affidavits on hand. To know of their terrible conditions there and to be so helpless in getting support for them makes life quite unbearable.”<sup>14</sup> Alex Kremer, chairman of the American League to Aid Young Hungarians, received an urgent letter by her, stating “I am, so to speak, a committee of one, receiving hundreds of requests not only from Hungary but from all the European countries where barbaric measures drive hundreds of thousands of people into sub-human existence.”<sup>15</sup> Additionally, while another world war was still fought, Schwimmer wrote ardently and profusely for a global demobilisation of attitudes and ideologies, which otherwise threatened to prepare the grounds for future belligerence, ‘War is being waged on every battlefield today with men, machines – and ideas. When the last gun is fired, the soldiers will become civilians again and the engines of destruction will be stopped. But the most powerful force of the trio – the ideas – they will go marching on.’<sup>16</sup>

After the war, Schwimmer was equally engaged in securing material help for survivors, distributing a mass letter to American groups and individuals with detailed instructions about which products to send and how to package them. Her suggestions ranged from canned preserves, clothes, and soap to saccharine, aspirin, sewing kits, and toothbrushes. Whereas she tried to distribute these packages evenly, she particularly emphasised aid towards feminists as an antidote to reactionary tendencies, warning:

Above all, they are the only link the younger women have with the past—its aspirations, traditions, integrity and courage. These women have much to give in guidance, inspiration, knowledge and organizing ability. If we abandon them, the field of women’s activity from Europe will be largely in the hands of disguised fascists from the right or communists from the left. Let’s keep alive those who believed in serving not one or another party but all of humanity.<sup>17</sup>

Schwimmer also planned to publish accounts of refugees after the Second World War in a book, entitled “We Who Have Survived”.<sup>18</sup> She collected reports and stories of war experiences, for example, by people like Jane (Janka) Dirnfeld (1876–1954), her former feminist-suffragist co-worker in Hungary before the First World War. Dirnfeld was part of the team of organisers Schwimmer gathered for preparing the seventh IWSA congress in Budapest in 1913. Dirnfeld also continued to work for the Feministák Egyesülete [Feminist Association], mainly established by Schwimmer in 1904 in Budapest, after Schwimmer had left for the United

<sup>14</sup> Schwimmer to Park, 22 Feb. 1939, RSP, Box 497.

<sup>15</sup> Schwimmer to Kremer, 12 June 1939, RSP, Box 497. Schwimmer made a similar appeal to other organisations, like the Hebrew Sheltering & Immigrant Aid Society, for example.

<sup>16</sup> Schwimmer’s unpublished manuscript, ‘Scrap the Ideas That Go to War’, 1944, p. 1, RSP, Box 475.

<sup>17</sup> Schwimmer to “Dear Friends and Organizations”, 5 Mar. 1946, RSP, Box 497. Recipients of such packages were, for instance, Hungarian women activists Jane Dirnfeld, Janka Gergely, or Dr Charlotte Steinberger as well as Mihály and Katalin Károlyi.

<sup>18</sup> Another book project of Schwimmer was “Heroes All”, which should be a compilation of anti-war stories, for instance, by Mark Twain, satirising militarism and war. Both book projects, eventually, had to be abandoned, because she could not find a publisher.

States in 1921, and they kept in touch during the inter-war years. Here some excerpts from Dirnfeld's eye-witness narrative of 1945:

I sit here alone weeping. For months I was like a stone unable to shed a tear. Now I can only weep. [...]

I came out of the ghetto a year ago on January 18<sup>th</sup>. I found horrible conditions; the city was dead. No street-cars, no cars, no horses, no light, no water. Everywhere snow, mud, human and animal cadavers. Mountains of rubble everywhere. The apartments are still largely in this condition. My windows are of paper. [...]

I have survived incredible tortures and suffering. I was seized and taken to Hungarian Nazi headquarters and there robbed. Then for three days and nights, without food or water, I was locked up in the synagogue in Rombach Street. During this time, they pillaged my apartment. My sister Erna had been dead six days. ... I was still able to arrange for her burial. [...]

What more shall I write? I am so ashamed: I have no dress, no shoes, no stockings, no underwear. I was robbed of everything. Our house was damaged by bombs. Our bank deposits and papers were seized. [...]

I am starving. I live entirely on soup made with water, flour and fat – when I have the fat.<sup>19</sup>

Dirnfeld also provided testimony about the deportation of Hungarian feminists Eugénia Miskolczy Meller (1872–1944) and Melanie Vámbéry (18??–1944). After Rosika Schwimmer and Vilma Glücklich (1872–1927), Eugénia Miskolczy Meller was the most active feminist in the Feministák Egyesülete (hereafter FE), but, unlike her two colleagues, she was married with four children. Her husband was Arthur Meller, an employee of the Hungarian National Bank.

Meller was one of the founding members of the FE in 1904 and, from 1906 onwards, she was also a board member and therefore actively engaged in FE agendas. She lectured and published widely on child welfare, education, and votes for women, especially in the FE's official organ, *A Nő* [(The) Woman]. Meller particularly earned her public profile within the FE when she wrote a sceptical tract about marital statutes in the 1913 draft of the Civil Code in Hungary. She was also heavily involved in the organisation of the IWSA congress in 1913, hosted in Budapest. While Schwimmer was travelling and lecturing in Europe before 1914, Meller substituted for her post as chair of the FE's political committee, until she finally assumed this role fully after Schwimmer had left for London in 1914 to work for *Jus Suffragii*. It was predominantly due to Meller's agitation that the FE fully subscribed to pacifism and peace work all throughout the First World War, while other women's groups, one by one, faltered for relief work and war support.<sup>20</sup> This ideological defiance resulted in severe censorship of *A Nő*.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, Meller's planned feminist congress in 1916 in Budapest as a rally against the war was prevented by officials.

<sup>19</sup> Dirnfeld to Schwimmer, Christmas 1945, RSP, Box 497. Another plan of Schwimmer was to convince Hungarian exiles in the United States to testify against Horthy, so he could be brought to justice. See Schwimmer's confidential letter to 'Dear fellow Horthy refugees', 26 Oct. 1945, RSP, Box 423.

<sup>20</sup> For Meller's pacifist story, see Andrea Pető, "Broken Continuities and Silencing the Feminist Legacy of the First World War", *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 21/3 (2014), pp. 304–307.

<sup>21</sup> Interestingly enough, the censors only focused on the actual articles and ignored the table of contents, so the titles of the articles are still preserved.

After the First World War, Meller, who was fluent in English and French, taught languages and worked for the Társadalmi Múzeum [Social Museum]. However, her pacifism and constant fight against the clipping of women's rights and franchise did not make Meller's life any easier in inter-war times. For instance, she protested against the ban of female students from the medical faculty in 1919. Together with Vilma Glücklich, she even supported the only female candidate for the 1920 election – Margit Slachta of the Keresztény Nemzeti Egyesülés Pártja [Christian National Union Party], who was by no means known to be a like-minded feminist – for lack of other female representative options.

Due to Glücklich's untimely death from cancer in 1927, Meller took over almost complete control of the FE and led it in oppressive times.<sup>22</sup> Meller also engaged in international pacifist work during this difficult period. For instance, she acted as Hungarian delegate to WILPF congresses – meetings the branded Schwimmer then avoided. As convinced pacifist, WILPF work was essential for Meller, but it also supported her FE financially, because of WILPF donations. At last, the FE was dismantled by authorities in 1941. Many independent women's groups shared the same fate and had to give way to or were subsumed under the so-called Egyesült Női Tábor [United Women's Front]. Meller herself paid with her life for her beliefs. She was arrested four times by the Gestapo and murdered in Kistarcsa in 1944. Another prominent Jewish feminist of the post-Schwimmer FE era, Melanie Vámbéry, also became an NS-victim in 1944. Little is known about Vámbéry, who acted as FE secretary from 1919 and was a cousin of liberal politician Rusztem Vámbéry. In fact, not even her birth year is recorded.<sup>23</sup> Both women tragically counted amongst Schwimmer's unsuccessful cases for affidavits to escape to the United States.

In her journalistic piece about Hitler's usurpation of power, cited earlier, Schwimmer also argued that "Super-nationalism has raised insurmountable walls between bits of the earth and spiked them with electrically charged rules against the admission of foreigners."<sup>24</sup> – A statement still topical today.

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<sup>22</sup> Meller also kept Schwimmer informed about inter-war goings-on in Hungary. See, for instance, her correspondence about political prisoners and about female candidates for local and national elections: Meller to Schwimmer, 24 Oct. 1929, RSP, Box 197.

<sup>23</sup> The scant data about Vámbéry's disappearance from her daughter's home in 1944 is mentioned in the minutes to re-establish the FE, 8 Nov. 1946, Magyar Országos Levéltár [Hungarian National Archives], Budapest, Font P999/FE Vel/1947, 91 and 95–101.

<sup>24</sup> Schwimmer, "Exiled Hungarian Feminist Pleads for Refugees", p. 234.