

## Ernst Abrahamson

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A German colleague who Ernst had met in 1936 in Florence, where both had taken refuge and were teaching, suggested the right channel to him, in Mexico, to obtain his stay permit and to manage to have his fiancée arrive. In this way he was able to remain in the USA, where he had arrived in 1939, after having journeyed from Germany and Czechoslovakia to Italy and France, each time leaving his work, his home and what he had, each time in flight shortly before the worst could arrive.

### Birth and Education

Born in Berlin on 26 December 1905, he was the son of Emil Abrahamsohn, Councilor of Justice, and his wife Elli. Ernst graduated in 1923 from Friedrichs-Werderschen-Gymnasium, and at the same time he had taken up the study of music and the piano, with a passion which in the years to come would prove useful to him. His university studies were intense and included study abroad. Between 1923 and 1928 he had studied classical philology, art history and philosophy at the Universities of Berlin, Freiburg and Heidelberg. In the 2-year period 1930-32 he specialized in art history at the University of Göttingen. Between 1928 and 1930 he followed a course in Paris in French literature and art history, and then in Prague, at the German University. In 1934 he obtained a PhD with a thesis entitled «Interpretationen zu Sapphos Liebesdichtung (Sappho's Love Poetry)». In 1938 the thesis was chosen for publication, but the events which would occur shortly thereafter in Czechoslovakia prevented it.

After a first year of experience as a research assistant in a project on the frescoes of Dura (Syria), led by Professor Eugen Täubler of the University of Heidelberg, in 1935 he had left Germany, by then under Nazi control.

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### **From Berlin to Florence**

His first move was to Florence where he remained for two years teaching Greek, Latin, French and art history at the Landschulheim Florenz, which had already moved from the hills of Fiesole to Villa Pazzi in Pian dei Giuliani, 52. In this boarding-school for refugee children and teenagers from Germany, Jewish and non-Jewish, he taught art history and the classical languages, and he made use of his musical studies, becoming the head of the music department. According to some sources, he obtained this position in Florence thanks to Paul Oskar Kristeller, philosophy historian and a childhood friend of Ernst's (through the friendship of their mothers), while according to Kristeller himself their friendship went back to the time of their university studies in Heidelberg<sup>1</sup>. In any case, the relationship between the two of them is clear from their frequent correspondence, in addition to that, in those same years, also with Ernst Moritz Manasse, met together with Heinrich Kahane, during the period in Florence at the community of the Florenz school, where Ernst enjoyed esteemed recognition from colleagues and students, as Manasse himself wrote to Kristeller at the end of November 1936<sup>2</sup>.

### **From Florence to Châlons-sur-Marne**

Before the end of the school year 1937-38, Ernst decided to leave Florence. No information is available on the contacts which led him to go to France, but there he also stayed for only two years, during which time he worked as a lecturer in German language and literature at the École normale d'instituteurs in Châlons-sur-Marne (which in 1941 would be closed), where

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<sup>1</sup> This is what Paul Oskar Kristeller himself wrote in his letter of recommendation to ECADFS, in NYPL, MAD, ECADFS, I.B. *Non Grantees*, b. 36, f. 18, «Abrahamson Ernst», 1938-42.

<sup>2</sup> For the reconstruction of this biographical profile, quite useful are the many pages dedicated to Abrahamson by Hans Peter Obermayer in *Deutsche Altertumswissenschaftler im amerikanischen Exil. Eine Rekonstruktion*, Berlin-Boston, De Gruyter, 2014, pp. 521-62, p. 538.

French public school teachers got their education. His position provided him with only room and board, and only through private lessons did he manage to earn any money<sup>3</sup>. He then began to establish contacts which could facilitate his emigration to the USA. The first was with Erwin Panofsky, professor of art history in Hamburg, who in 1933 had been forced to leave Germany and since 1935 taught at the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton, where he would then remain for the rest of his career.

### Stay permit in the USA

In January 1939 Ernst Abrahamson took a leave of absence for a few months from the *École normale d'instituteurs* and with a German passport (with an expiration date of 15 July 1940) and a visitor's visa issued by the US Consulate in Paris (valid until 19 June 1939), he arrived in the United States<sup>4</sup>. In February he contacted the Emergency Committee in Aid of Displaced Foreign Scholars of New York, sending Miss Betty Drury his *curriculum vitae*, in which he already presented himself as Ernest and no longer Ernst, and declaring that he spoke well English, French, Italian and of course German, and rather well Czech<sup>5</sup>. In the same letter he asked to be informed of any job opportunities appropriate for his profile, and he declared that he was living at 8 East 54<sup>th</sup> Street, New York, at his friend Lucien L. Goldschmidt's, who had emigrated in 1937 and was a dealer in antique books<sup>6</sup>.

The hospitality shown by various acquaintances and friends, as seen by his ever changing addresses, and the financial support of some of them and of

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3 Ivi, p. 539.

4 This information is taken from Abrahamson's first letter to Fanny Zlabovsky, 4 May 1939, in The University of Texas at El Paso Library, Sonnichsen Special Collections Department, *Fanny Zlabovsky - National Council of Jewish Women*, S. I, b. 1, f. 2, «Abrahamson Ernst», 1939-40, «German academic and his fiancée (Edith Rodler)».

5 That is what he said his name was in his c.v. attached to his letter of 20 February 1939, ivi. His publications also are sometimes signed Ernest and other times Ernst.

6 Lucien L. Goldschmidt (1912-1992), dealer in rare books and gallery owner, born in Brussels, studied in Berlin and Paris and in 1937 moved to New York, where he was very successful with his gallery and Lucien Goldschmidt, Inc. See the interview with his wife Marguerite Studer <<https://www.youtube.com>> (access 31 March 2019).

the National Coordinating Committee<sup>7</sup> helped him to overcome this first period during which he was looking for work and trying to obtain the arrival of his fiancée, Edith Rodler, Czechoslovakian, whom he had met when he was at the University of Prague, where she was studying medicine.

### **Regularizing his documents**

In May, following the advice of Fritz Neumann (1897-1992), another German colleague who he had met at the Florenz school and who had emigrated to Indiana, he asked for assistance from Fanny Zlabovsky of the National Council of Jewish Women, who in El Paso, in Mexico, assisted immigrants with the regularisation of their documents. That was Abrahamson's principale problem. He had found work as an instructor in the Department of Latin and Romance Languages at Howard University in Washington, «the best Negro University», but he needed a regular non-quota permit to stay in the USA. In order to obtain the visa, he had to have a two-year work contract, whereas Howard only gave renewable annual contracts. In addition, a series of other problems seemed to be due to his weak academic position. He was not a professor, but only an instructor for the near future, and until then he had only been an instructor in France. He could declare that he had been a professor in Florence, but only in a school and not in a university. That school, then, had been closed as a result of the Racial Laws and Ernst could not obtain the documents which he did not have. In this difficult situation, Zlabovsky reassured him that a solution would be found and advised him in the meantime to request an extension of his tourist visa<sup>8</sup>. On 8 June they met in New York.

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<sup>7</sup> An agency begun in 1934 which in 1939 became the National Refugee Service.

<sup>8</sup> The correspondence began with Ernst Abrahamson to Fanny Zlabovsky, 4 May 1939, and her answer on 14 May 1939, and continued until the next year, and is in the substantial dossier of the already-mentioned collection of The University of Texas at El Paso Library, Sonnichsen Special Collections Department, *Fanny Zlabovsky - National Council of Jewish Women*, S. I, b. 1, f. 2, «Abrahamson Ernst», 1939-40.

**How to have Edith come?**

The plan devised entailed an affidavit from an amenable professor (Shereshevsky?), and a period in Mexico where Abrahamson's fiancée would join him for both of them to get permanent visas. The first impediment was the fact that Edith had a Czechoslovakian passport and with that it was impossible to reach Mexico. It was necessary therefore that they first get married in Europe, that is in France. If he had embarked immediately, Ernst would have had three days' time before the expiration of the temporary permit which he had been issued in France and which, therefore, he had been told, could not be extended from the USA<sup>9</sup>. They thought that they could get married immediately and leave again for El Paso, if Zlabovsky agreed.

This plan did not work either. It turned out that according to the French laws for foreigners, their marriage would not have been valid since she was only a temporary resident in France. The only possible alternative, Abrahamson wrote her, was for him to go alone to El Paso, manage to become a regular immigrant to the USA and then go to get Edith in France. But in the meantime new difficulties had arisen in Mexico, Zlabovsky informed him, and she advised him to try to enter crossing the border with California<sup>10</sup>. So Abrahamson undertook what was necessary to obtain a non-quota visa in Cuba, which from Havana allowed him to re-enter definitively 21 August 1939, and also a temporary visa to go to France. He was readying to embark but 3 September France went to war.

**International bureaucracy: the USA, Mexico, Czechoslovakia, France**

His main concern was to get Edith out of that country. He filed an application on the case at the Visa Division of the State Department in Washington. He examined in detail all of the pros and cons of the procedures. He was then

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<sup>9</sup> Ivi, letter from E. Abrahamson to F. Zlabovsky, 18 June 1939.

<sup>10</sup> Ivi, letter from E. Abrahamson to F. Zlabovsky, 14 July 1939 and her response, 20 July 1939.

receiving a salary of \$1,800 from Howard. He was ready to procure money, documents and whatever was necessary so that Zablovsky could get his fiancée out of France. When she arrived in Mexico, they would get married immediately, there or «anywhere»<sup>11</sup>. He had become such an expert on the extremely complicated regulations, Zablovsky answered him, that she had nothing to advise him; if he wished, she could procure a lawyer for him and she detailed the expenses. Yes, of course; he sent her a check and an affidavit with a sworn declaration that it was his «intention and wish to marry his fiancée»: Edith Rodler or Rodlerova, born 11 February 1913 in Troppau-Opava, Czechoslovakia, 26 years old, living in Villers-sur-Mer, Calvados. He was in a position to maintain her and he wished to have her with him in the USA, immediately legalising their situation<sup>12</sup>.

At the beginning of October, Attorney Gustavo Arce of Mexico City accepted the case and specified his fees. He advised Miss Rodler, who was not Jewish and this was one less «inconvenience», to stay close to a Mexican consulate. The closest was in Paris, two hours by train in peace time, which in time of war had become about seven hours, Professor Abrahamson (as they had tacitly decided that he should present himself) pointed out. The case was already resolved, the lawyer announced on 13 October. He however did not seem very convinced: the new Mexican procedure required readmissability for one year to one's country of origin. His fiancée could certainly not return to either Czechoslovakia or France, holding a passport shortly to expire which in war time would not be renewed for her<sup>13</sup>.

The triangular correspondence went on for months, with Zablovsky acting as go-between with the German scholar, who struggled through the bureaucratic procedures so as not to find himself unprepared, and the

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11 Ivi, letter from E. Abrahamson to F. Zlabovsky, 24 September 1939; her response 25 September 1939.

12 Ivi, letter from E. Abrahamson to F. Zlabovsky, 2 October 1939, and the other papers cited in the text.

13 Ivi, letter from E. Abrahamson to F. Zlabovsky, 25 October 1939.

Mexican attorney, who above all continued, with a certain embarrassment on her part, to ask for and receive money, for the hotel, for a bank account in Mexico City as a deposit, for reimbursement of expenses, etc.

### **Marriage and reunification**

The 14 February 1940 Abrahamson wrote Zlabovsky that «after a long period of uncertainty, I finally have some good news. My fiancée, now my wife, has arrived. At this moment she is here in Washington». The happy ending had been reached through somewhat different ways which he explained to her as usual in detail. The US Consul in Paris had been of great assistance, furnishing Edith with a transit visa, and advising her to travel by train to the Mexican border, once she had disembarked in New York where Ernst had gone to wait for her<sup>14</sup>. They were married 10 February. Documents were still missing which the newly-wed Abrahamson was trying to procure, while Edith, on her own, because he had to go back to work, went to El Paso in Mexico where, with the assistance of the same woman at the National Council of Jewish Women (NCJW), she obtained her stay permit for the USA<sup>15</sup>. She was so grateful that she gave Mrs Fanny Zlabovsky a small donation, ten dollars, «unfortunately I'm not in a position to give any more», for the NCJW to help other women who found themselves in difficulties similar to those experienced by Edith. Now she was already trying to find employment in a Washington hospital. She began her internship 1 July 1940, while Ernst found a position teaching in a summer school in Oklahoma, at the Stillwater Community College<sup>16</sup>. In short, they had to separate immediately for work-

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<sup>14</sup> Edith Rodler left on 21 January 1940 from Marseille on The Excalibur, listed as a student, Czechoslovakian, with a transit pass issued on 12 January in Paris, and she arrived in New York on 3 February; cfr. Ellis Island Foundation, *Passenger Search, ad nomen* <<https://www.libertyellisfoundation.org>> (access by registration 28 November 2018).

<sup>15</sup> The University of Texas at El Paso Library, Sonnichsen Special Collections Department, *Fanny Zlabovsky - National Council of Jewish Women*, S. I, b. 1, f. 2, «Abrahamson Ernst», 1939-40, letter from E. Abrahamson to F. Zlabovsky, 14 February 1940. Founded by Hannah G. Salomon in 1893, the NCJW since 1903 had established the Department of Immigrant Aid, through which it assisted, in particular, women immigrants alone in the USA.

<sup>16</sup> Ivi, letter from E. Abrahamson to F. Zlabovsky, 10 March 1940 and the cordial response

related reasons, but they were in any case together, safe from Nazism, free and full of projects.

### **Academic (and non-academic) work in the USA**

The 13 April 1939 «The Jewish Telegraphic Agency» reported that two refugee scholars had started teaching at the University of Howard, Negro Institution, Washington. One of the two was in fact Dr. Ernest L. Abrahamson, with the position of instructor in Latin and Romance languages. In the summer of 1940 he also assumed the position of head of the Language Department at Stillwater Community College, where he taught French, German and grammar.

It was all provisional, however. In Washington he had been taken on as a substitute for a professor on leave, and for this reason he also received a good salary. That professor, however, had come back, and for the «very satisfactory» services of the substitute, Howard University no longer had the necessary funds. The university, in conformity with the policy of the ECADFS of New York, asked the Emergency Committee for \$1,050 in financing for refugee Abrahamson, so that they could renew his contract for 1941-42 with the intention then of taking him on permanently. He in turn declared that he did not have personal resources, or relatives who could assist him in the USA. He only had his wife who until June 1941 had been a resident at the National Homeopathic Hospital in Washington and was currently assistant resident at the University Hospital of Baltimore, but she had never received monetary remuneration. In terms of their savings, they had almost completely depleted them due to a surgical operation which she had been in need of<sup>17</sup>.

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from her with her felicitations, 12 March 1940. The other information in the text comes from further correspondence, in particular from Edith Rodler Abrahamson's letter at the bottom of her husband's, 7 April 1940, and E. Abrahamson's letter, 8 July 1940, which asked for assistance for another couple of German friends, the musician Helmut Wolfes who had already emigrated to the USA and his fiancée who had remained in London since 1937, Mrs Traute Loewenheim, born Kahan.

17 NYPL, MAD, ECADFS, I.B. *Non Grantees*, b. 36, f. 18, «Abrahamson, Ernst», 1938-42, letter from E. Abrahamson to Betty Drury, 8 October 1941. Ivi the correspondence cited between the



The response to Howard was negative, also on the part of the Oberlander Trust which assisted refugees from Germany and Austria with financing for the institutions or directly to the individuals<sup>18</sup>. Miss Drury motivated the denial with the diminished financial resources and with the lack on the part of the candidate of the academic status required by the ECADFS, even though aware that for that requisite her Committee acted with ample discretion (even drawing criticism as in the Kempner case, another German whom they assisted). For Abrahamson they also decided to reconsider their evaluation, asking for further references. Paul Kristeller, who Miss Drury usually held in high consideration, provided a very warm letter of recommendation for one of his «oldest and closest friends»<sup>19</sup>.

Notwithstanding the intercessions on Abrahamson's behalf, at a meeting of 24 November the Committee confirmed its negative response to the request for financing, specifying that it was not a value judgement on the excellent candidate<sup>20</sup>. Howard University did not renew his position and the ECADFS considered the case closed on 8 December 1941. Ernst then went through a difficult period professionally, working as a salesman selling books and as a taxi driver in Washington. In the autumn of 1942, he managed to enter St. John's College in Annapolis, Maryland, as a tutor. His wife Edith followed him. But this work experience was also temporary and ended in 1949. Unemployed, at 44 years old Abrahamson was obliged once again to ask for support from his old friends. He needed to work, especially now that since the spring of 1947 he had become a father.

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institutions in question, from Howard University, 3 September 1941 and 29 September 1941.

18 Ivi, copy of the letter of 14 October 1941. Established in 1930, the Oberlander Trust had its headquarters in Philadelphia; see YIVO, Institute for Jewish Research, *Carl Schurz Foundation-Oberlander Trust Fund*, ca. 1933 - ca. 1945 <<http://www.yivoarchives.org>> (access 21 March 2019).

19 NYPL, MAD, ECADFS, I.B. *Non Grantees*, b. 36, f. 18, «Abrahamson, Ernst», 1938-42, letter from P.O. Kristeller to Betty Drury, 5 November 1941.

20 Ivi, «Reconsideration of application for the scholar», 24 November 1941 and letter to Howard University, 8 December 1941.

He found out that at Washington University in St. Louis there was the possibility of substituting for a year a Canadian teacher who the FBI accused of being close to the socialist party in his country of origin. Finally this turned out to be the right occasion. In that university in Missouri, Abrahamson taught first as visiting assistant professor of French, in 1950 he was promoted to associate professor, and in 1951 his position was changed from a temporary to a permanent contract. In 1957, finally, he was named full professor of classics and comparative literature.

He only enjoyed for a short time the stability and the economic position which he had finally reached many years after his arrival in the USA, and just as briefly did he enjoy his son David (who would become a journalism professor): the 18 December, at the age of 53, Ernst Abrahamson died unexpectedly.

### Major publications

- *Homer*, «The Classical Journal», 46, 7, 1951, pp. 359-361.
- *Euripides' Tragedy of Hecuba*, «Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association», 83, 1952, pp. 120-129.
- Jean Zafiropulo, *L'Ecole éléate: Parménide - Zénon - Mélissos*, «Classical Philology», 49, 1, 1954, pp. 48-50.
- *The Adventures of Odysseus*, Saint Louis, Washington University Studies, 1960, posthumous publication.

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- NYPL, MAD, ECADFS, I.B. *Non Grantees*, b. 36, f. 18, «Abrahamson, Ernst», 1938-42 (in the inventory of the ECADFS, I.B. *Non Grantees*, b. 36, f. 19, there also appears an «Abrahamson Hans», 1939, but it is an error because the f. still refers to Ernst).
- Ellis Island Foundation, *Passenger Search*, «Edith Rodler»

<<https://www.libertyellisfoundation.org>>.

- The University of Texas at El Paso Library, Sonnichsen Special Collections Department, *Fanny Zlabovsky - National Council of Jewish Women*, S. I, b. 1, f. 2, «Abrahamson Ernst», 1939-40.

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