

Herma Plazikowsky-Brauner

A Life Devoted to Ethiopian Languages and Cultures

Sophia Thubauville

The following article deals with the life and work of Herma Plazikowsky-Brauner, a dedicated researcher, who unfortunately has been only little mentioned until now in works on Ethiopian Studies.¹ She is remarkable for the tenacity with which she continued to devote her life to the research and teaching of Ethiopian languages and cultures even under the most difficult circumstances.

Herma Plazikowsky-Brauner was born in 1888 as Hermine Brauner, daughter of an army officer in Brünn, Austria. Her mother died while Hermine was still young and her father married a second time. The three girls from his first marriage were left in the care of their maternal uncle, who ensured they got a good education. Herma Plazikowsky-Brauner was sent to school in Hungary and Prague and later began her studies in Oriental philology in Prague.²

In 1909 Herma moved to Berlin, where she focused her studies on Ethio-semitic languages under Eugen Mittwoch. Max Leonhard Plazikowsky, who had moved to Ethiopia in 1907 and engaged in trade between Ethiopia and Germany, was a regular visitor to the seminars of Mittwoch during his stop-overs in Germany.³ Eugen Mittwoch suggested that his diligent doctoral student Herma, who was eager to visit Ethiopia, would make a good wife for him. The couple married with Mittwoch as a best man and, after Herma Plazikowsky-Brauner received her PhD for a dissertation on an Amharic glossary, they moved together to Ethiopia in 1913. There they established a farm for coffee and guavas near Lake Zway⁴ and later a mill in Addis Ababa. As the train connection between Djibouti and Addis Ababa had not been finished by 1926 when the mill was bought in, and shipped from, Germa-



Fig. 1: Herma Plazikowsky-Brauner as a university student



Fig. 2: Herma Plazikowsky-Brauner in Addis Ababa in March 1914

ny, the components of the mill had to be transported to Addis Ababa by camel caravan.

In addition to working for the family's enterprises, Herma Plazikowsky-Brauner also gave birth to seven children, four of whom unfortunately died at an early age. Two sons, Max and Wolfgang, and one daughter, Inge, grew up in Ethiopia and stayed there with their parents until their late teens.⁵

Alongside the practical work by which she and her husband earned their living and rearing her children, Herma Plazikowsky-Brauner collected vocabularies and texts in countless Cushitic languages. Most of these collections originated from extensive interviews with people from different areas of Ethiopia who came as customers to the family's mill in Addis Ababa. Herma Plazikowsky-Brauner offered them some payment to stay with her and answer her questions, often for



Figs. 3a–b: Lake Zway (picture by Max Plazikowsky) Inge Plazikowsky (second from left) on Lake Zway in 2000

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Fig. 4: Wolfgang and Max Plazikowsky Junior in Addis Ababa (c. 1925)

several weeks. At times she and her husband also travelled through the country with caravans to visit faraway places and people out of curiosity and scientific interest. While Herma Plazikowsky-Brauner used this time for her linguistic studies, her husband Max took photographs and films⁶ of the various ethnic groups and undertook anthropological studies and measurements. From the material gathered during her studies at the mill in Addis Ababa and her travels through Ethiopia, Herma Plazikowsky-Brauner prepared glossaries and grammatical sketches. Her dedication was such that, even though Eugen Mittwoch had kept a lecturer position for her in Berlin (Maas 2013), she decided to continue working and researching in Ethiopia.

In their later years in Ethiopia, even before the Italian occupation and Second World War, the life of the family as foreigners in Ethiopia became complicated. In 1931, after an argument with a member of staff at the German legation in Ethiopia, they lost their German nationality and became Ethiopian nationals. During the Italian occupation a



Fig. 5: Caravan crossing the Awash River

few years later, their nationality was again changed, this time to Italian. When Ethiopia was freed from the Italians in 1941, the couple became Ethiopian nationals again. However, the British administration soon denied them Ethiopian nationality and the family was dispossessed and finally deported from Ethiopia to Europe (Maas 2013). Unfortunately, Herma Plazikowsky-Brauner was unable to take all her linguistic research findings to Europe. In a letter she wrote to Frankfurt University years later, she mentioned that she had had to leave behind various manuscripts, collections and her library.⁷

In 1943 Herma and Max Plazikowsky reached Germany via Italy. They spent their first years in Berlin where, still stateless, the couple had to work for the Nazi regime. While Herma Plazikowsky-Brauner was translating Amharic texts, her husband was translating archaeological reports about Tigre from Italian into German. Shortly before the Second World War ended, they regained their German citizenship.



Figs. 6a–b: Photographs taken by Max Plazikowsky during his travels

They were able to leave Berlin and stay with their daughter Inge, who was working as a nurse near Hannover. Unable to find jobs in such a rural setting, Herma and Max decided to try their luck in Frankfurt, where they knew that the Frobenius Institute had a regional focus on Ethiopia and the university had a department for African linguistics. Furthermore, one of Herma Plazikowsky-Brauner's sisters was living there. In Frankfurt they inquired directly about job possibilities but, as the university was in financial difficulty after the war, their request was rejected (VA 0097). Even after this drawback Herma Plazikowsky-Brauner continued her research. In 1950 she received a type writer sponsored by the German Research Foundation and began working with the documents on twelve Cushitic languages that she had rescued from Ethiopia and brought to Germany. She got into contact with Italian colleagues from her years in Ethiopia and published pioneering descriptions of Highland East Cushitic languages and cultures in German and Italian (Meyer, see bibliography). The documents that she had left behind in Ethiopia on the languages of the Oromo, Harari, Somali,

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Wörterbuch deutsch=Harari:—

Ans = x	gimajo	ablehnen	magrapab
abbitten =	gadabu biyji		matalak
	aufi mōsa.		
abblud	misel, ordi	abliefern	mārhēb
abendenessen	herāt		araxabehū
"	dāmūyū ēr		araxabach
abermals	acham	ablisten	mabled
abfallen	machād,		balabū
	chada?		ebelach
	ichadal	abmessen	mahēled
abfahren	sibachpro- pla	verändern	hēledetū
			ihēblach
abfertigen	sat mōsāma	abmessen	magofal
	matalak		gofatetū
			egoflach.
abgabe	magēber	abmessen	Amō bēhū
abgrund	tes		machat
abhang	zaraf		chalarach
abladen	māhach	abmessen	chabach
	fatāxhetū		mākājer
	ēfatphach		wājorshū
ablaufen	mūf biyji	abnehmen	i'kājach
			manāka
			nākachū
			ināteghach
			abnehmen mātored

Fig. 7: Extract from the Harari dictionary manuscript of Herma Plazikowsky-Brauner

Madji, Konta, Gimira, Keffa and on four languages from Yemen were unfortunately lost (UAF, Abt. 134, Nr. 440, Bl. 40) and, with their loss, her long-term aim of publishing a comparative grammar of Cushitic languages was also out of reach.

In 1954, when she was already 66-years-old – an age when many people think of retiring – Herma Plazikowsky-Brauner started working as an unpaid lecturer at Frankfurt University, teaching Ethiopian languages and cultures. Although it was a voluntary position, as the department for African Linguistics was not able to afford an additional lecturer, she was highly recommended for it by Professor A.E. Jensen and Professor Enno Littmann (UAF, Abt. 134, Nr. 440, Bl. 39). After four years of teaching, she finally began to receive a salary for her work at the university.

As Herma Plazikowsky-Brauner and her family had been dispossessed in Ethiopia and never received any compensation for the belongings they had left behind, they were upset and never wished to visit the country again. Herma Plazikowsky-Brauner never returned to Ethiopia to continue her language studies. Instead, at 76 years of age, she started a new research project amongst the Hadab, a Cushitic speaking people in Sudan. She travelled there twice in 1964 and 1965. Unfortunately, before she was able to publish her findings, she was involved in a traffic accident in Frankfurt and died there in December 1965.

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Endnotes

- 1 I would like to thank Wolfgang Plazikowsky and his daughter Katja for generously sharing their memories of their mother/grandmother with me in September 2014 and for allowing me to use their private photo collection.
- 2 Her sisters also both studied at university. One of them became a medical doctor, the other a pharmacist.

- 3 Max Leonhard Plazikowsky had left Germany in 1905 for the USA. After surviving the 1906 earth quake in Los Angeles, he was looking for a safer place to settle and decided that this place should be Ethiopia. The first years he visited Germany every second year to purchase supplies and take care of his two houses in Berlin. However, already with the outbreak of World War I in 1914 he nearly lost all his property in Germany.
- 4 Menelik II had offered Max Plazikowsky to lease a farm of 860 hectares for the usual period of 99 years. The name that they had given the land, Llafas Sorssi, was still used on Italian maps.
- 5 The eldest son Max was born in 1914, Inge in 1917 and Wolfgang in 1923. Inge was the first to leave Ethiopia, in 1933. A foster family in Germany accommodated her while she attended school and trained as a nurse. Max left Ethiopia to join the German troops in World War II in 1938. Wolfgang was sent to a boarding school in Germany in 1936, but after successfully simulating an illness was allowed to return to Ethiopia in 1939. There he was conscripted by the Italian troops and ended up as a prisoner of war in Kenya. He was released in 1948 and then joined his family in Germany. In 2014 Max and Wolfgang were still alive. Their sister Inge passed away in 2005.
- 6 Max Plazikowsky had a film camera and wanted to document his wife's research not only through photography but also by moving images. Unfortunately, the films and camera seem to have been destroyed when the couple had to leave the country in 1941.
- 7 Her son Wolfgang is still in possession of some of her original notebooks, card boxes with vocabulary of Cushitic languages and her letters from Sudan.
- 8 Only Inge who, while living in Germany, cherished her Ethiopian memories and had built a tukul in her garden where she prepared Ethiopian food and celebrated Ethiopian holidays, travelled back to Ethiopia in 2000.