FRIEDA VON RICHTHOVEN
AND KARL VON MARBAHR

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Anyone interested in Frieda is indebted to E. W. Tedlock’s book of her Memoirs and Correspondence, published in 1961. That book revealed many details of Frieda’s early life, and it highlighted the importance of the German aristocrat and soldier Karl von Marbahr, who had first been mentioned in Harry T. Moore’s The Intelligent Heart, and subsequently appeared in books by Lucas, Feinstein, Byrne, Gourand-Rousselon, Jüngling and Roßbeck, and Squires and Talbot, and in three of my own. Tedlock explained that one of Frieda’s draft memoirs was addressed “to her old friend, Karl von Marbahr”, “whom she had loved in her youth”.¹ It was Frieda’s sister Else who apparently identified Marbahr. Tedlock quoted a letter from Else:

A more serious attachment was that to Lieutenant K. von Marbahr; it remained, of course, in the conventional limits of that time. I don’t think they ever saw each other alone. When I was in Berlin as a student and he was stationed there, he sometimes met me just to talk about Frieda.²

In 1952, Frieda had sent Harry T. Moore a letter³ written to her around 1939 by someone who signed just his initials – “KvM” (not hard to identify as Karl von Marbahr) – a letter reminiscing about her at the age of eighteen:

Twice I should have given you a kiss, once when you had stepped in the mud near the tennis court and you stood close in front of me, and then at the station in Metz when you were going away.⁴
That is biographer Janet Byrne’s only source for her riff on Marbahr.⁵

Returning to Metz after a term, Frieda began dating a twenty-four-year-old Prussian lieutenant named Karl von Marbahr. Earnest, fretful, and plodding, Karl saw Frieda only under chaperonage, rarely summoning the courage to stand close enough for them even to touch. One of their sanctioned activities was tennis … one rainy day on the clay courts, she slipped, and Karl castigated himself afterward for not taking the opportunity to kiss her as he broke her fall; a half century later he still regretted the physical reticence.⁶

There is nothing in the sources about his being plodding, or fretful, or their playing tennis, or Frieda slipping, or Marbahr breaking her fall. All such details are generated by the biographer in the heat of the chase, as is Byrne’s later, contradictory statement that Frieda “received her first kiss” from Marbahr.⁷ But Byrne emphasises that Frieda’s mother decided to put an end to the relationship by sending Frieda to Berlin.⁸ Before she left,

Karl asked her for a photograph … and she went to a studio to have it done. Her face looked lopsided because of her crooked smile, but she gave it to him anyway.⁹

There is nothing in Tedlock or the letter about any such photograph, and Byrne gives no reference, but we may recall that in The Rainbow, when Skrebensky is going away, he asks the young Ursula “for a photograph”:

She went in great excitement to the photographer with five shillings. The result was an ugly little photograph of herself with her mouth on one side. (R 303)
Byrne steals that, trusting to luck that it’s about Frieda. Usual moral: never trust a biographer.

And yet, even if we ignore Byrne’s mythologies, we cannot doubt the importance of Frieda’s relationship with “KvM”. At the start of the memoir which Frieda wrote to him, around 1942, she stated:

I cannot talk to you, but I will write down all about myself and what happened to me, so when the war is over and we can write again I want you to read this because I know you care. You have always cared and you always will … I will tell you all about myself right from the beginning, as far as I can remember, and you will deal kindly with my offering. You understood me so well.10

A significant man, then. What about the web as a source? One site provides the following information:

… though junior army officers in Metz certainly courted the young Frieda, as her cousin Kurt von Elbe did, and later on Karl von Marbahr (“a very decent and cultivated officer”), they could not – as we know from the reminiscences of von Marbahr – afford to marry her.11

That adds the detail that the man was “very decent and cultivated”.12 But nobody else gives any more details, except for Byrne, who invents all hers; the other Frieda biographers have simply borrowed from each other.

I resolved to track Karl von Marbahr back to his roots. Marbahr is an unusual name, and my own frequent living and working in Germany made the search easier. Tracking him down involved going through hundreds of indexes: those of the amazingly numerous blue volumes of the German Gräßliche Häuser (dukes), the multiple red volumes of the Freiherrliche Häuser (barons), the rows of grey volumes of the Adelige Häuser (simple nobility); the
indexes, too, of the 147 extant volumes of the *Deutsches Familienarchiv*. For if there was one thing sure and certain about Frieda’s aristocratic admirer, it was his “beautiful old family name”: in the memoir she addressed to him, Frieda declared that she loved it.

And what I found in those records of German titled families was very interesting: absolutely nothing. No German aristocrat, I am confident, has ever been called Marbahr (that is, outside the books by Frieda scholars Moore, Tedlock, Lucas, Feinstein, Byrne, Gourand-Rousselon, Jüngling and Roßbeck, Squires and Talbot, and Worthen – three of his).

I did one final test. There is a way of tracking down a “family name” not limited to German aristocrats. That is in the book popularly known as *Der Gotha*, familiar to some people (from T. S. Eliot’s *East Coker*) as the *Almanach de Gotha*. Its real title is *Die Gothaerischen Taschenbücher, Hofkalender und Almanach*; a list of names not only of German but of Continental titled families (a kind of Euro-Burke). The edition I used dated from 1942 – and Marbahr is not in *Der Gotha*.

So what about that web presence? The solitary entry comes in a piece written by John Worthen. I blush. Marbahr is, thankfully, not yet in Wikipedia. But quite simply there has never been anyone called Karl von Marbahr. Like Bunbury, Marbahr has been quite exploded.13

The whole business has been one cock-up after another, to which I have made my own modest contributions. Let me reconstruct what I think happened. Tedlock was the scholar who knew Frieda’s letters and manuscripts best, and Harry T. Moore passed on to him the letter written to Frieda signed “KvM”. Moore had been in touch with Frieda’s sister, Else; he may have asked her if she could identify “KvM”, or he may simply have asked her to name the young men she remembered being attracted to Frieda. And Moore gave Tedlock Else’s note about “Lieutenant K. von Marbahr”.14

I believe that either Moore misread Else’s handwriting (quite possible: I have struggled with it myself, and when she wrote to
Moore she was 85 years old) or that Else herself misremembered the name. I strongly suspect Moore of making the mistake. But, having acquired (I suspect misread) the name, Moore and Tedlock disseminated it most successfully. Tedlock attached “Marbahr” to the letter from “KvM” and deployed it in numerous notes as well as in the index to Memoirs and Correspondence; he also applied it to the memoir which Frieda addressed to her old love (Frieda herself never used any name when writing her memoir: she simply called the person “you”). The name was taken from Tedlock’s and Moore’s books by Lucas, Feinstein, Byrne, Gourand-Rousselon, Jüngling and Roßbeck, Squires and Talbot, and Worthen. I am as guilty as anyone. We have all borrowed from each other and never checked our facts, and there is no health in us. And I am responsible for Marbahr on the web (but the site is being altered).

So who was it who fell in love with Frieda in Metz, twice wanted to kiss her, and was addressed in Frieda’s memoir?

In the autumn of 2006, in Tufts University, I found a batch of uncatalogued German correspondence, apparently unread, which contains a letter written to Else on the day Frieda got married to Ernest Weekley in 1899 – a letter written in some distress by another man, who had loved her: a man named Kurt von Monbart (“KvM”). The Monbart family is in the Gotha; originally a French family, they settled in Prussia in the 1780s. Let me offer you three of Monbart’s qualifications for being “KvM”. “KvM” (according to his letter) worked for the German film company UFA. Monbart worked for a German film company. According to his letter, “KvM” had a sister whom he called “Lene, the writer”. Monbart had a sister called Helene (or Lene), born in 1870, who became a writer, publishing as Helene Keßler (as well as Hans von Kahlenberg), and writing a string of novels. And to clinch things, Kurt von Monbart and his Berlin address (and those of his sister Lene) are in Frieda’s address book (the address book has no entry for anyone called Marbahr).

I reckon that when Moore transcribed Else’s letter, the “o-n” of Monbart became the “a-r” of Marbahr, the “r-t” of Monbart turned
into the “h-r” of Marbahr. Where “Karl” came from, goodness knows; not from Else. But there is now a new man in Frieda’s early life: Kurt von Monbart, who has the huge advantage for a biographer of being a real person, not a myth, and can therefore be researched.\textsuperscript{17} He is mentioned in several documents available for years but ignored.\textsuperscript{18} When Frieda got engaged to Ernest Weekley, for example, she wrote breathlessly to her sister Else: “dearest, I will say yes, because I like him as I have never liked anyone before”. That much has several times been quoted.\textsuperscript{19} The letter’s ending, however, has not. After exclaiming “this is the egoism, the brutality of the happy”, Frieda added “farewell Monbart”.\textsuperscript{20} So there goes Kurt von Monbart, kicked out of Frieda’s life and out of the record.

My researches are at an early stage. He was born in Wesel in 1874. He came to Metz as a Lieutenant, and regularly danced with – and nearly kissed – Frieda; he sent letters and postcards to her family; they saw each other in Berlin in 1898 (so much for Byrne’s myth that Frieda’s mother sent her to Berlin to get her away from the man: Monbart was actually \textit{in} Berlin). At some point, he asked Frieda to marry him, and she agreed.\textsuperscript{21} But then, on 17 June 1898, she actively resolved to go ahead and marry him. This is new, and exciting. She wrote to Else, “I want to marry Monbart”, and continued:

You will ask, how have you come to such a sudden decision? I don’t know, but this one thing has become clear to me, that I would be unhappy if I had to marry anyone else … “High over the ruins of the world pulses the flame of love”\textsuperscript{22}.

Just six weeks later, she left him when she met Ernest Weekley. I know some of the regiments in which he subsequently served, and some of the places where he was based. I have had in my hands the sad letter he wrote on Frieda’s wedding day. I have seen a pair of drinking glasses enameled with his coat of arms (three hammers). He married in 1906 and had three children. At Christmas 1927,
Frieda hoped that he would actually be visiting her and Lawrence at the Villa Mirenda, but he never came.\cite{footnote23}

What happened between him and Frieda? He was neither “fretful” nor “plodding”, the adjectives Byrne uses. Else thought him “decent and cultivated”; Frieda called him “passionate” and thought his voice “unforgettable”.\cite{footnote24} But for the moment, think forward to Kurt von Monbart in the late 1930s, when he re-established contact with Frieda. She quoted another of his letters in her memoir. He had written to her:

You are like the wild geese that fly overhead and honk their wild call and the tame geese on the ground hear them, would like to rise and fly with them, but they can’t.\cite{footnote25}

Intensely sad. He died in June 1940, just a fortnight after his youngest son Alexander had been killed in action in France.\cite{footnote26} But Monbart was a man who – more than forty years after not kissing Frieda – had also written to her: “There are women of sixty to whom a man still wishes to bring roses”.\cite{footnote27} He had always been the one to bring her her first bouquet of flowers at the balls in Metz at which they had danced when she was eighteen. He has reappeared, one hundred and nine years after Frieda’s impulsive “farewell”. Welcome back, Kurt von Monbart.

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1 Frieda Lawrence: The Memoirs and Correspondence, ed. E. W. Tedlock (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1964) [hereafter M&C], 4, 20, 52, 62, 296, 348. This section of the memoir (University of Texas, Humanities Research Center [hereafter HRC] Box 1 Folder 4) was apparently written in the second half of 1942; Frieda notes that she had not heard from her correspondent “for more than three years” because of “this war”; she also states “I am sixty-three” (i.e. after 11 August 1942) (M&C 20, 15).
2 M&C 62.
3 Ibid., 348.
4 Ibid., 297.
5 Ibid., 348.
7 Ibid., 392. This must be an error for Frieda’s cousin, Kurt von Richthofen, who did indeed give her her first kiss: see the account in *M&C* 68, in which he is “Olaf” and she is “Paula”.
8 Janet Byrne, *A Genius for Living*, 34.
9 Ibid., 35.
11 [www.nottingham.ac.uk/english/research/lawrence/cold_Hearts.html](http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/english/research/lawrence/cold_Hearts.html)
The only other web sites to incorporate “Marbahr” are web addresses belonging to Martin Bahr and Mark Bahrenfuss.
12 *M&C* 79.
13 Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1893):

Jack: Well, the only small satisfaction I have in the whole of this wretched business is that your friend Bunbury is quite exploded (Act II)

... Algernon: ... poor Bunbury died this afternoon.
Lady Bracknell: What did he die of?
Algernon: Bunbury? Oh, he was quite exploded ... The doctors found out that Bunbury could not live, that is what I mean – so Bunbury died. (Act III)

14 *M&C* 62.
16 MS Tufts, ‘Unsorted Letters in German script’, Box 003, no. 9. (All translations by John Worthen and Cornelia Rumpf-Worthen).
18 Kirsten Jungling and Brigitte Roßbeck, e.g., note the appearance of the phrase “Schick mir M.s Briefe” [“send me M’s letters”] in a letter from Frieda to Else of 21 February 1898 and add the comment “vermutlich Marbahrs – Ann. d. Verf”. [“presumably Marbahr’s – authors’ note”].
Kirsten Jüngling and Brigitte Roßbeck, *Frieda von Richthofen* (Berlin: Ullstein, 1998), 14. The letters were Monbart’s.
19 See, e.g., Janet Byrne, *A Genius for Living*, 41.
20 Frieda to Else [?mid to late July or early August 1898], MS HRC.
21 See Frieda to Else, 3 May 1898 (MS Tufts 120): “Findest Du es nicht die niedere Gemeinheit, wenn man 2 Menschen im Glauben lässt man würde sie heiraten?” [“Don’t you find it really common and vulgar, to leave two people believing one would marry them?”].
22 The whole section of the letter runs as follows: “Dearest Else, You are in celebratory mood, aren’t you? Then listen to what I shall now tell you: I want to marry Monbart. And I would like not to have to wait so endlessly, but for him to have the strength to take off his sabre and his beautiful uniform and to go to the office of the director or anywhere where he could use me, as soon as possible. You will ask, how have you come to such a sudden decision? I don’t know, but this one thing has become clear to me, that I would be unhappy if I had to marry anyone else. It came over me like a storm and has really shaken me up these last few days, every objection is swept away, every other thought has ceased to exist. “High over the ruins of the world pulses the flame of love”. I am so happy in my mind to have got things clear, about what I want and must and I will be able to do it too. I am young and healthy and will work. I don’t need wealth, I’m not domineering and I don’t want anything except to make him happy and cheerful. Can he do it, give up everything for my sake? We would naturally still have to wait two or three years, if only he’s not got lots of debts, that would be awful. If his job wasn’t demanding enough for him, then he could go on studying, I’ve worked it all out and am confident that everything would go well”. (Frieda to Else, 17 June 1898, MS Tufts ‘Unsorted Letters in German script’, Box 003, no. 6).
23 Frieda to Anna von Richthofen, 28 December 1927 (MS HRC).
24 Frieda to Else, 21 February 1898 (MS HRC); *M&C* 17 (in manuscript she crossed out the word “stirring” – MS HRC 1.4).
26 Information from Kurt von Monbart’s son Gilbert (b. 1914).
27 *M&C* 20.