

The Young Rosa Luxemburg

Rosa Luxemburg's socialism was shaped by a deep internationalism, much of which she imbibed from her Jewish upbringing in what was then known as 'Russian Poland.'

This article is excerpted from 'Rosa Luxemburg' by Dana Mills, [now out](#) from Reaktion Books.

Rozalia (Rosalie, Rosa) Lukensburg (Luxemburg) entered the world as a Jewish Polish citizen of the Russian empire on 5 March 1871 in the small town of Zamość. She was the youngest to join the Luxemburg family after Anna (born 1854), Mikolaj (1855), Maximilian (1860) and Jozef (1866).

The Luxemburgs were a middle-class Jewish Polish family. Jews in the Russian empire were twice oppressed: once as imperialist subjects, then as victims of religious discrimination, excluded from the minimal civil rights that even their fellow Poles had. They were committed to the values of the Haskalah movement, a Jewish enlightenment movement that sprung out of Central and Western Europe between the 1770s and 1880s, as well as to the Continental culture that would be Rosa's intellectual cradle.

The Luxemburg family was friendly with another famous descendant of Zamość, the Yiddish author Isaac Lieb Peretz. The family was involved in both gentile and Jewish life. Rosa's paternal grandfather, Abraham Luxemburg, was a successful timber merchant. Edward Luxemburg was born to Abraham on 17 December 1803. His Hebrew name was Elisha, and later he adopted the name Elias. Edward was raised with both Polish and Yiddish, and attended school in Germany, where he embraced progressive ideas and in particular a passion for West European literature. Rosa's mother, Lina Lowenstein, was the daughter of a rabbi. Lina was deeply religious and a passionate advocate of art, but the Luxemburg household was an assimilated Jewish home, with great sensitivity to culture. Rosa recalled in 1917 that her mother considered Schiller to be the second-highest source of wisdom, after the Bible.

Elias strove to give his children better possibilities in the world. The Luxemburg home was filled with poetry, which became intertwined with the narrative of Rosa's life. Rosa herself preferred Goethe; yet the Jewish strands of her home never left her. She was also a dedicated reader of the Polish poet Adam Mickiewicz, part and parcel of her Polish-Jewish household. At age 47, she wrote about the Russian author Vladimir Korolenko, 'my soul, of a threefold nationality, has at last found a home – and this above all in the literature of Russia.' She writes:

descended at once from Poland, Russia and the Ukraine, Korolenko had to bear, even as a child, the brunt of the three 'nationalisms', each one expecting him to 'hate or persecute someone or other'. He failed these expectations, however, thanks to his healthy common sense... And thus, from the conflict of three nationalities that fought in his native land of Volhynia, he made his escape into humanitarianism.

The Luxemburg family moved to Warsaw when Rosa was two and a half years old, as Elias was searching for a better education for his children. Shortly after arriving in Warsaw, Rosa developed a disease of the hip, which was wrongly diagnosed and left her with a limp that would remain a lifelong condition. Her intellectual excellence as well as her disability made the Luxemburg siblings protective of her, and she quickly became the family's favourite. Rosa's sister Anna had suffered the same hip disease as Rosa and was not perceived as suitable for a life as married woman and mother due to her disability. She stayed with her parents while Rosa was granted freedom to explore her destiny along a remarkably different path. A warm disposition combined with sharp intellectual wit allowed her to quickly win over the affections of all who met her. Her brilliant mind shone early; it is believed that at the age of nine she was already translating German poems and prose into Polish.

The use of the Polish language was not allowed in the school Rosa attended in Warsaw. At school, the combination of the repression of culture and absolutist rule created hotbeds of resistance. Young Rosa, with a feisty and disobedient nature, soon became a leader in those circles. In 1884, at the age of thirteen, she wrote a poem at the occasion of the visit of the German emperor William I to Warsaw:

Finally we shall see you, mighty man of the West,
At least, if you deign to enter our local park,
Since I don't visit at your courts.

Your honours mean nothing to me, I would have you know,
But I would like to know what you're going to chatter about.
With our 'royalty' you are supposed to be on intimate terms.
In politics I'm still an innocent lamb,
That's why I anyhow don't want to talk to you.

Just one thing I want to say to you, dear William.
Tell your wily fox Bismarck,
For the sake of Europe, Emperor of the West,
Tell him not to disgrace the pants of peace.

A complete irreverence to authority combined with a sharp perception of the world accompanied Rosa from childhood. And this disregard for authority and ceaseless questioning of order went hand in hand with her deep engagement with humanity – as a concept and in practice. Rosa recalled waking up one day before her father when everything was still asleep; a cat crept by on its soft paws across the courtyard, a pair of sparrows were having a fight with a lot of cheeky chirping, and long, tall Antoni in his short sheepskin jacket, which he wore summer and winter, stood by the pump with both hands and chin resting on the handle of his broom, deep reflection etched on his sleepy, unwashed face.

She recounts how Antoni, a man of 'higher aspirations' to whom she gave books, but who was apparently a caretaker around the Luxemburg household, was guided by a higher interest in arts and letters – he loved letters in and for themselves. 'Back then I firmly believed the "life", that is "real life", was somewhere far away, off beyond the rooftops. Ever since then I've been chasing after it. But it is still hiding beyond one rooftop or another.' For Rosa, humanity and nature were always linked; she delved

into the core of the matter she investigated, whether that was herself or another natural being she was studying. And whereas 'life' could be far away, she would never really stop from trying to chase it.

One particular photo of Rosa as a child reveals deep, warm eyes, a confident gaze that warmed the hearts of others and an assured posture. She would never suffer fools gladly. The young Rosa Luxemburg displayed some characteristics that would be part of the older Rosa's psyche in later life; strong-headed, extremely empathic, extraordinarily intelligent, with a fierce sharpness alongside immeasurable emotional depth, teenage Rosa showed her commitment to justice early. She had a fiery temperament and would love and hate with the same passion; her vivid eyes and mischievous smile would accompany her throughout her life.

In the year of Rosa's birth, 1871, Warsaw's Jews experienced one of the worst pogroms in Poland's history. Anti-Jewish violence was prevalent in the Russian empire of the nineteenth century, yet its surge in 1881–2 was a watershed moment for both imperial policy and Jewish response. Rosa's childhood was at a time of escalating tensions between Poles, Russians and Jews. Rosa was homeschooled by her mother, Lena, until she was nine. Her multilingual childhood enabled her to acquire further languages. As an adult Luxemburg spoke Polish, Yiddish, Russian, German, English and French, and often undertook work in translation in addition to her own writing.

There were quotas for Jews in educational institutions, and discrimination and oppression continued even if they did manage to be accepted. Despite being top of her high-school class Rosa did not receive the distinction she deserved – Jews were not awarded these prizes. In 1887-'88, Rosa joined her first ever political organisation, the Proletariat Party, which stood against strands of Polish independence gaining prevalence at that time; as stated in a party pamphlet, 'the Polish proletariat is completely separate from the privileged classes and enters the struggle as an independent class, distinct in its economic, political and moral undertakings'.

In 1883-'84 the main activists of the party were arrested, and in 1886 many were either in prison or executed. Rosa was fifteen and already highly involved in her homeland's politics when four executions of central revolutionaries in the party were carried out. The party later changed its name to the Second Proletariat. In 1903, in [*In Memory of the Proletarian Party*](#), she wrote about the first political organisation she had joined, seventeen years earlier, and in it she recounted the emphasis on education of the masses: even if their final goal was far from achieved, education nonetheless helped to galvanise them into action. It was in this party that Rosa's own political education commenced. The death of the martyred politicians urged Rosa to acknowledge the high price human beings may pay for dissent:

'Men who stood on such a high intellectual plane as those four, who met death for an idea with heads held high, and who in dying encouraged and inflamed the living, are doubtless not the exclusive property of any particular party, group, or sect. They belong in the pantheon of all mankind, and anyone to whom the idea of freedom, no matter what its content or form, is truly precious should embrace them as kindred spirits and honor their memory.'

From childhood she would be sensitive to the cause of fighting for the right to think differently, including within socialist circles themselves.

A Revolutionary Life

Rosa Luxemburg was released from prison on 25 October 1904, suddenly and unexpectedly a month ahead of planned, as she recounted in a letter to her friend Henriette Roland Holst.

The early twentieth century, following her imprisonment, was a period of continual travel for Rosa. Between speaking tours in Germany and her attendance at the Internationals she was rarely still. Ill health haunted her all her life: anaemia, a sensitive stomach, often exhaustion from work and periods of depression – the robust approach to her vocation is all the more impressive when juxtaposed with her physical frailty.

Despite this, 1905 would prove to be a crucial year for a woman whose life was underpinned by the concept of revolution. The seeds of dismantling the old regime were being firmly sown in the Russian empire, and Rosa was able to observe her ideas being tested on the ground. ‘I do see the strengthening of international feeling to be, in and of itself, a means of fighting against bigotry and ignorance, on which such a goodly part of opportunism rests.’

The ‘Revolution of 1905’ – a shorthand for events that took place between the end of 1904 and the summer of 1907 – began with a great strike in St Petersburg, the consequences of which shocked the Russian people greatly. It involved 150,000 workers on strike across 382 factories and a period of labour unrest that led to the march of workers to the Winter Palace. On 22 January 1905, known as ‘Bloody Sunday’, the strikers were on their way to protest the tsar when they were targeted with harsh violence and gunfire, Russian soldiers consequently murdered several hundred factory workers.

Rosa’s work on this revolution showed her theoretical focus: she only engaged in writing when it achieved practical significance within the march of history. At the same time Rosa was completely emotionally committed to the concept of revolution and living within it, never shying away from turmoil and rupture whatever their cost, as she herself said, ‘I live happily in the storm.’

The 1905 revolution was also a catalyst for change in the Polish ranks. The SDKPiL (Social Democracy of the Kingdom of Poland and Lithuania, the party which Luxemburg was a leading member of) grew from 25,000 to 40,000 members, issuing papers in Polish, Yiddish and German. At the same time, the period didn’t distance her – she became more distant during this period. The Polish national question was challenged anew, with some in the left of the PPS, the Polish Socialist Party (her partisan nemesis from her homeland) swaying towards her position of opposing national self-determination within Poland, yet the party did not merge with the SDKPiL and ideological differences remained.

Rosa revisited the national question within the Polish context and asserted: ‘In other words, when revolution broke out, the *only thing* that remained of nationalism was *reaction*, while its *outwardly* and *formally* revolutionary side, that which flaunted the

slogan of armed insurrection for national independence, vanished at the first wave of the present revolutionary upsurge, never to be seen again.’

The primary role of the proletariat led her to refuse alliances with the peasants and nationalists as much as with the bourgeois liberals. Lenin took this position to a different conclusion; he too refused alliances with liberals who agitated for bourgeois democracy, and yet advocated alliances that strategically allowed him to move his revolutionary cause forward.

These ideological differences heightened ongoing processes of allegiances, loyalties and divergence. One such process was the development of the Bund. The Bund, a group which aimed to unite Jewish workers on the basis on their Jewishness, split from the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party in 1903 due to demands for cultural autonomy. Rosa and her partner Leo Jogiches both had consistently refused to join the Bund and support its causes.

In 1904, before the Amsterdam congress, Rosa sent a letter to Alexander N. Potresov in which she claimed that the Bund was causing divisions under the guise of federalism. At the same time, the Bund preferred Luxemburg and Jogiches to other Polish Marxists, and Luxemburg had published several of her articles in the Bundist paper *Der Yiddischer Arbeter* in 1899.

As one of Rosa’s biographers, J. P. Nettle, notes, although John Mill, one of the Bund’s founders, viewed Luxemburg and Jogiches as resistant to his early appeals, and firmly opposed to any obligation to a specifically Jewish socialist movement, he saw them with an eye that was politically and personally neutral if not overly friendly. Rosa was never estranged from her own Jewishness, but her relationship to her Jewish roots was – much in line with her entire personality – *sui generis*. In a letter later in life she wrote:

what do you want with this theme of the ‘special suffering of the Jews’? I am just as much concerned with the poor victims on the rubber plantations of Putumayo, the Blacks in Africa with whose corpses the Europeans play catch... I have no special place in my heart for the [Jewish] ghetto. I feel at home in the entire world wherever there are clouds and birds and human tears.

Rosa’s own Jewishness always gave her the outsider’s point of view, yet she shied away from leaning on these perspectives to create cultural or religious loyalties. She did not see the need to organise with her fellow Jews, and certainly not to seek cultural autonomy as a Jewess. Rosa Luxemburg could never be solely defined as a Jew; the human race was her category of reference and the revolution her category of action.

Luxemburg’s writing on the Russian Revolution, published as daily reports in the German press, showed the consolidation of her thought and style. She wrote as a form of agitation, and her internationalism not only lies as a theoretical foundation, but was interleaved in the practice of writing itself. Her reports reveal her excitement about the unfolding of the revolution, including specific events and issues.

Like many revolutions, that of 1905 was crucial for women. Rosa’s approach to the woman question arose out of her commitment to revolutionary socialism, and yet her analysis shows precision and commitment to change in woman’s position in society.

She wrote forcefully, in an essay titled ‘Russian Women Workers in the Battle’: Whoever needs convincing that women are just as capable as men of experiencing both citizenship in its highest sense and the noblest of civic virtues would do well to study the history of the liberation struggles that have shaken Russia since the abolition of serfdom.

Luxemburg also showed a significant amount of empathy towards the victims of the escalating violence (a very different image to the ‘bloody Rosa’ stereotype that would haunt her). Specifically, she wrote about the growing anti-Semitic violence unfolding during the revolution. Other themes recur in her accounts: the focus on the eight-hour day ties events in Russia to the overarching agenda of the Second International, exemplifying Rosa’s commitment to internationalism in theory and action.

The emphasis on the need to free prisoners of conscience and allow freedom of thought in the revolutionary process itself returns in many of her writings. For Rosa, freedom was essential to the revolutionary process itself; emancipation would not start in post-revolutionary society, but rather is part and parcel of the process of liberation. Rosa’s reporting quotes Marx throughout, showing a continuity between his writing (including on bourgeois revolutions) and these events. The emphasis on the need for the working class to emancipate itself occurs throughout the reports. Her loyalty to Poland in these revolutionary times appears, too:

Social Democracy in our country, just as in Russia – as is usual for all true revolutionary mass movements – could barely keep up with, and give expression to, the feelings and desires of the masses, which had erupted volcanically.

In a letter to Leo Jogiches in 1905, she wrote, ‘I’m terribly happy about what our people are doing at home.’ The woman of three homelands finally saw them united through revolution. And in a statement that carries great weight, she penned: ‘In Russia, as everywhere else in the world, the cause of freedom and of social progress now lies with the class-conscious proletariat. And it is in good hands!’

Daily reporting from afar allowed Luxemburg to develop her analytical focus on the revolutionary events: she wrote on strikes and actions of the working class as emblematic of revolutionary action; the necessity of internationalism and resistance to war; seeing failures and successes as inevitable outcomes of the dialectic between human agency and history; and the intertwining of liberation within the revolutionary cause as a whole. Energetically looking towards the future, she wrote:

The year 1906 will not be short of storms and battles demanding utter devotion and taking heavy casualties. We can only rely on our hopes that German Social Democracy will know how to fulfil her world-historical-duty as the spearhead of these conflicts, and so I say – *to work, onward to new battles!*

On the morning of 28 December 1905 Rosa Luxemburg, disguised under the pseudonym Anna Matschke, crossed the border into Russian Poland to observe the last stages of the revolution and report on it from the ground. The Kautskys and a few others saw her off from the Friedrichstrasse station in Berlin.

A strike on the railway demanded a detour via East Prussia, where her first Prussian experience was a good meal of schnitzel; she then proceeded on another train, the only woman and only civilian on board. Rosa’s arrival in Russia for her first revolution was

as anti-climactic as her journey. She had missed the height of the revolution, which proved to be unsuccessful yet vital.

In *The Problem of the "Hundred Peoples"*, Rosa referred to the current revolutionary rising of the proletariat as 'the first act in the process of fraternisation among the people of tsarist empire', yet the revolution of 1905 was more of a dress rehearsal than a first act. Like all dress rehearsals the intensity felt in this stage of history was high, and she was getting ready for the curtains to rise on the main stage.

In another essay, *In the Bonfire Glow of the Revolution*, she claimed that the most important motto is 'to be prepared is everything!' Rosa Luxemburg was preparing herself to march into the next chapter of history.

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