

## A NOBEL AFFAIR

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EDITED AND TRANSLATED  
BY ERIKA RUMMEL

# A Nobel Affair

The Correspondence between  
Alfred Nobel and Sofie Hess

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# Acknowledgments

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## A NOBEL AFFAIR

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# Introduction

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The letters exchanged between Alfred Nobel and Sofie Hess, his Viennese mistress, span almost two decades, from 1877 to 1896. The couple wrote to each other in German.<sup>1</sup> Surprisingly, given Nobel's prominence, this is the first English translation of their correspondence in its entirety – 221 letters by Nobel and 41 letters by Hess.<sup>2</sup>

After her lover's death, Hess offered to sell the collection to the Nobel Foundation, perhaps because she was dissatisfied with the annuity granted her under the terms of Nobel's will.<sup>3</sup> To prevent publication of the correspondence, which does not always reflect well on Nobel, Ragnar Sohlman, one of the executors, negotiated a settlement.<sup>4</sup> Sofie

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1 Nobel demonstrated an excellent grasp of the language; his lover, whose education had been neglected, tended to "mangle" her native language, as he noted in Letter 33. Among her egregious spelling mistakes we find "egsistirt" for "existiert" (SH Letter 1), "aprospos" (repeatedly) for "apropos" (SH Letter 6), and "dasperart" for "desperat" (SH Letter 16).

2 There is a Swedish translation of Alfred Nobel's letters, interspersed with some of Sofie Hess's: *Mitt hjärtebarn: De länge hemlighållna breven mellan Alfred Nobel och hans älskarinna Sofie Hess*, trans. Vilgot Sjöman (Stockholm, 1995). Excerpts from Nobel's and Hess's letters appear in the English translation of Kenne Fant, *Alfred Nobel: A Biography*, trans. M. Ruuth (New York, 2014).

3 She had asked for an annuity of ten thousand florins (SH Letter 34); Nobel left her only six thousand florins in his will. As he pointed out, a family of four could comfortably live on two thousand florins a year (Letter 197). See T. Cvrcek, "Wages, Prices, and Living Standards in the Habsburg Empire 1827–1911," *Journal of Economic History* 73/1 (2013), 1–37.

4 See Ragnar Sohlman, *The Legacy of Alfred Nobel: The Story behind the Nobel Prizes* (London, 1983), p. 78: "[The executors] were anxious to avoid further trouble, especially anything which might reflect badly on Nobel himself – and there was no knowing what scandal might be brought to light by the publication of the letters."

Hess was paid the substantial sum of twelve thousand florins – twice her annuity – and agreed not to comment publicly on her relationship with Nobel. The letters became the property of the Foundation and remained under wraps until 1976, when they were deposited in the Swedish National Archives and became accessible to scholars.<sup>5</sup>

During his lifetime, Nobel's fame rested on his inventions and on his success as a businessman. His correspondence may therefore be regarded as a primary source for historians interested in nineteenth-century economy, science, and technology. The letters Nobel wrote to Sofie Hess do indeed contain references to his scientific work and his business dealings, but they are too vague to contribute significantly to what we already know from other sources. They do, however, offer important new insights to readers interested in the biographical details of his life and to scholars of nineteenth-century social history. The fact that the Nobel Foundation paid Hess for the letters and kept them private for decades is in itself an indication of their historical significance. The Foundation was intent on reinforcing Nobel's image as a high-minded visionary and philanthropist. His correspondence with Hess, by contrast, shows up his all-too-human failings. Reading his letters, we encounter a man obsessed with work, whose tireless pursuit of innovation and business ventures took a heavy toll on his physical and psychological health, a man who was paranoid, cranky, sarcastic, bigoted, and old beyond his years. The discretion exercised by the Foundation led to misinterpretations, such as the suggestion that his relationship with Hess was platonic – untenable on the evidence of their letters – and to a one-sided picture of Nobel's personality.<sup>6</sup>

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5 My translation is based on the text in the Alfred Nobels Arkiv Ö I-5. The archive contains, in addition to Alfred Nobel's and Sofie Hess's letters (cited as "SH," followed by the number of the letter), twenty-one letters from Sofie's father, Heinrich Hess (cited as "HH," followed by the number of the letter) and assorted letters to Nobel from Sofie's sisters Amalie and Bertha, from her brother-in-law Albert Brunner, and from her husband Nikolaus Kapf. Some of these letters are included in the appendix below.

6 Henrik Schück, for example, completely ignored Nobel's long-standing relationship with Sofie Hess in his biography *The Life of Alfred Nobel* (Uppsala, 1926; English translation London, 1929). Sohlman quotes him as saying that Nobel's mother was his great love: "He appears to have had no other – with the possible exception of a girl mentioned in one of the poems of his youth" (Legacy, p. 52). Similarly, Erik Bergengren in *Alfred Nobel: The Man and His Work* (New York, 1960) refers to Nobel's lover only as "H," as if he wanted to minimize her existence. He likens Nobel's attitude towards Hess as that of "a kindly social reformer of the Victorian school with pointer in hand"

The correspondence sheds light not only on Nobel's character and his relationship with Hess, but more generally on the position of mistresses in nineteenth-century Europe. The lives of women supported by wealthy bourgeois remain a somewhat neglected area of research, lost between the well-documented subjects of prostitution<sup>7</sup> at one end of the scale and the lives of celebrated courtesans at the other.<sup>8</sup> Sofie Hess does not fit either category. She has little in common with Lillie Langtry or Cora Pearl, who like her had migrated to Paris and soon acquired celebrity status.<sup>9</sup> Hess was stylish and vivacious, but no match for the wit, enterprise, and love of spectacle exhibited by the grand *maitresses*. Nor was this what Nobel wanted from her. He was looking for relaxation and was notably averse to public displays. Indeed, he wanted Hess to provide him with a cozy, home-like atmosphere and with quiet cheer and comfort.<sup>10</sup> Although Hess had no independent source of income and fully relied on Nobel to look after her expenses, their relationship cannot be described simply as an exchange of sex for money, such as occurs between a prostitute and her client. Indeed, Nobel continued to support Hess after their physical relationship ended, and Hess in turn was loyal to him for many years until he himself suggested she look for another man and find a suitable marriage partner.

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(p. 170). Their relationship, he says, was a "touching example of Nobel's daily avuncular care, instructive and pecuniary" (p. 199). A recent publication of the Nobel Museum (Ulf Larsson, *Alfred Nobel: Networks of Innovation* [Stockholm, 2008]) perpetuates the impression that Nobel was merely searching for friendship and saw in Sofie Hess "someone to be together with, to share tenderness and confidences with" (p. 165).

- 7 For a study and full bibliography on the subject of prostitution in Paris, where Nobel lived, see Andrew I. Ross, *Urban Desires: Practicing Pleasure in the "City of Light" 1848–1900* (doctoral diss., University of Michigan, 2011, [http://deepblue.lib.umich.edu/bitstream/handle/2027.42/89671/aiross\\_1.pdf?sequence=1](http://deepblue.lib.umich.edu/bitstream/handle/2027.42/89671/aiross_1.pdf?sequence=1)).
- 8 See, for example, Elizabeth Abbott, *Mistresses: A History of the Other Woman* (London, 2010); Victoria Griffin, *The Mistress: Histories, Myths, and Interpretations of the "Other Woman"* (New York, 1999), and, more generally, Priscilla Robertson, *An Experience of Women. Pattern and Change in Nineteenth-century Europe* (Philadelphia, 1982).
- 9 See Katie Hickman, *Courtesans: Money, Sex, and Fame in the 19th Century* (New York, 2003).
- 10 See Letter 130 in which he praises compassion and cheer. In Letter 78 he notes that "the true woman" adapts to a man's feelings; in Letter 30 he states that the role of the woman is to "sweeten" a man's life; in Letter 164 he compliments Hess on the comfortable atmosphere of her apartment and the peace and quiet she provided for him on a visit.

Unlike the lives of the great *maitresses* of Paris, which are generally reflected in the comments of others or described in carefully construed autobiographies referring to events long past, the lives of Hess and her lover are given immediacy through letters written “in real time.” It is tempting to compare (or rather, contrast) their correspondence with another collection: the letters exchanged between Victor Hugo and Juliette Drouet, his “Muse” and mistress. Such a comparison is suggested by the fact that the two men, Nobel and Hugo, were on visiting terms and familiar with each other’s life and work.<sup>11</sup> Drouet, a well-known model and actress, wrote numerous letters to her lover, pouring out a flood of passionate words. After one romantic evening, she writes to Hugo: “I drank everything you left in your glass ... I shall eat with your knife and sup from your spoon. I kissed the spot where you rested your head ... I surround myself and steep myself in all that was close to you.”<sup>12</sup> Sofie Hess, by contrast, had to be prompted to write. Her letters to Nobel focus on mundane subjects – most often his and her poor health and her financial needs. They are devoid of passion. Any expressions of affection and longing are trite and lacking in emotional warmth, but if Hess was no “Muse,” Nobel was no Hugo. His letters were hardly of a kind to evoke the sort of passion Hugo called forth with his “battering-ram of adjectives” describing his love for Drouet as “insane, absurd, extravagant, malicious, jealous, nervous – whatever you will – but it is love ... I long to be lying at your feet, kissing them.”<sup>13</sup>

Like Nobel, Hugo tried to hide his lover away and isolate her in a rented apartment to keep the affair out of the public eye (and in Hugo’s case, out of his wife’s eye). How scandalous was it for a man to have a mistress in nineteenth-century Paris? It seems the position of the kept woman was ambiguous. Alfred Delvau, a contemporary of Nobel and Hugo and the author of *Les Plaisirs de Paris*, remarks that men were proud of their conquests. “Going to the Bois was an excellent occasion to show off their horses or their mistress” – but only if the woman of their choice was “à la mode,” that is, was chic and had a “laughing grace of manner.”<sup>14</sup> Nobel may have had such expectations of Sofie Hess and found that she could not fulfil them. But whether or not a

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11 See for example Letters 52 and 60. Nobel had fifteen works of Hugo in his private library. See [http://www.nobelprize.org/alfred\\_nobel/library/fiction-fr.html](http://www.nobelprize.org/alfred_nobel/library/fiction-fr.html).

12 Quoted in Graham Robb, *Victor Hugo: A Biography* (New York, 1997), p. 247.

13 Robb, *Victor Hugo*, p. 188.

14 Alfred Delvau, *Les Plaisirs des Paris: Guide pratique et illustré* (Paris, 1867), pp. 28, 285.

man was proud of his mistress, a certain protocol had to be followed to avoid scandal. Listing fashionable restaurants in Paris, Delvau distinguishes between those “where you would want to take your wife and others where you would take your mistress.”<sup>15</sup> Proprieties had to be observed. It was for this reason that Nobel, even though he was unmarried, kept a separate establishment for Sofie Hess. When they travelled, however, they shared accommodations, and a mock-propriety was observed by referring to Hess as “Mrs. Nobel.”<sup>16</sup> Far from causing scandal, their relationship was tolerated, and Hess commanded a certain measure of interest and respect as the companion of an important man. Similarly, Hugo’s mistress Juliette Drouet, who died of cancer in 1883, was honoured posthumously by politicians, literary men, and indeed Nobel himself, whose name appears in the condolence book.<sup>17</sup> Thus Sofie Hess was by no means ostracized because she was the mistress of Nobel. It was only in later years, when she lost his protection and was burdened with an illegitimate child fathered by another man, that she was discriminated against and suffered the fate of a “fallen” woman.<sup>18</sup>

Nobel made Sofie Hess’s acquaintance relatively late in life, at the age of forty-three. He was born in Stockholm in 1833, the fourth son of entrepreneur and inventor Immanuel Nobel and his wife Carolina Andrietta. He and his siblings grew up in poverty until the elder Nobel emigrated to St. Petersburg and prospered there as a manufacturer of military and construction equipment. Alfred therefore received an excellent private education. He took a special interest in chemistry<sup>19</sup> and language studies, acquiring fluency in English, French, Russian, and German.<sup>20</sup> At the age of eighteen he embarked on educational travels in Western Europe and America. In Paris, he worked under the direction of the chemist Théophile Jules Pelouze and in New York under John Ericsson, who built the first armoured warship. In 1859 Nobel returned to his native Sweden with his father, who had suffered financial setbacks, and built an explosives factory near Stockholm. Over the next

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15 Delvau, *Les Plaisirs des Paris*, p. 113.

16 See Letters 32, 185, 186.

17 Robb, *Victor Hugo*, p. 318.

18 SH 17.

19 His tutor was Nikolaj Sinin (1812–1880), professor of chemistry at the university of St. Petersburg.

20 He also tried his hand at literary productions. In 1851 he wrote a long autobiographical poem in English, entitled *The Riddle*. In the last year of his life he wrote a play in Swedish, which was printed (*Nemesis*, Paris, 1896) but never staged.

thirty years, he obtained more than three hundred patents, among them one for “blasting oil” in 1863.

Nobel’s brothers, Ludvig and Robert, remained in Russia and continued with the manufacture of military equipment. In 1873 they acquired oil fields near Baku and in 1879 they founded Branobel, an oil company, in which all three brothers held shares.<sup>21</sup> Nobel himself formed a network of corporations and factories for the production of explosives in Sweden, Germany, Austria, Scotland, France, Italy, and America. For many years (1873–1891) he made his home in Paris at 53 Avenue Malakoff and conducted his tests in a laboratory in nearby Sévran. The manufacturing process was marred by accidents at first<sup>22</sup> and motivated Nobel to develop a safer product by mixing nitroglycerine with kieselgur (patented in 1867 as “dynamite”). His wide-flung business empire required Nobel to travel incessantly and took a toll on his already compromised health. Victor Hugo quipped that he was the wealthiest vagabond in Europe.<sup>23</sup> After the reckless speculations of Paul Barbe, Nobel’s French partner, involved Nobel in a financial scandal and exposed him to sharp attacks in the press,<sup>24</sup> he moved to San Remo on the Italian Riviera, where he died in 1896.

Designed originally for industrial blasting operations, dynamite was more commonly employed in warfare, earning Nobel the sobriquet “merchant of death,”<sup>25</sup> but he was also hailed as a man of genius and a philanthropist. In accordance with the directions in his will, the bulk of his estate was used to fund annual prizes for advancements in physics, chemistry, medicine, literature, and – ironically – the promotion of peace. The peace prize may have been inspired by Bertha von Suttner, who was briefly Nobel’s secretary but is better known today as an activist for pacifism. She carried on a correspondence with Nobel from 1883 to his death and was the first woman to receive the Nobel Prize for Peace in 1905.<sup>26</sup>

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21 For the history of Branobel see Robert W. Tolf, *The Russian Rockefellers: The Saga of the Nobel Family and the Russian Oil Industry* (Stanford, 1976).

22 His youngest brother, Emil, was killed at the age of twenty-one in an explosion at the Nobel factory in Heleneborg near Stockholm.

23 Quoted in Bergengren, *Alfred Nobel*, p. 160.

24 See Letters 148, 165, 171.

25 Bergengren, *Alfred Nobel*, p. 161.

26 For their correspondence see Edelgard Biedermann, *Der Briefwechsel zwischen Alfred Nobel and Bertha von Suttner* (Hildesheim, 2001).



Nobel often complained that he was lonely and friendless, and in later years tried to blame Sofie Hess for his isolation: "You have so tarnished my name that I, who do nothing but work and help others, am discredited and must live an isolated life."<sup>27</sup> It seems, however, that he was solitary by nature. Bertha Suttner described him as a man "who did not receive many visitors and rarely went out into the world. He was a hard worker but somewhat shy of people. He hated all small talk."<sup>28</sup> Similarly, Sofie Hess countered his complaint about being left alone with the statement that he "was able to live alone and be content and happy."<sup>29</sup> In fact, Nobel was frequently unhappy and constitutionally depressed – plagued by the "spirits of Niflheim," as he termed his condition in a letter to his brother Ludvig.<sup>30</sup> Nobel had great affection for his mother, but apart from her, Sofie Hess was the only woman who could claim to have a close personal relationship with him.

Sofie Hess (1851–1919) was of Jewish parentage. She was the oldest child of Heinrich Hess, a dealer in timber from Celje (Slovenia) and his wife Amalie. Nobel met Sofie Hess in 1876 in Baden (near Vienna), where she worked in a flower shop.<sup>31</sup> She followed Nobel to Paris and lived first at 1 Rue Newton and, from 1880 on, at 10 Avenue d'Eylau, in apartments Nobel rented for her.<sup>32</sup> Sofie Hess was twenty-six when she made Nobel's acquaintance, but he was under the impression that she was much younger and made her sign a note indicating that he had counselled her to return to her parents: "I acknowledge that Mr. Nobel has [tried to] persuade me to return to my father in Celje, and that it is not his fault if I don't do it."<sup>33</sup>

For the next fourteen years the pair lived together after a fashion. Sofie Hess called it "living together" at any rate, although she was

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27 Letter 157; see also Letter 111.

28 Suttner, "Erinnerungen an Alfred Nobel," published in *Neue Freie Presse*, 12 January 1897, p. 1.

29 See Letter 157.

30 Quoted in Fant, *Alfred Nobel*, p. 197. In Norse mythology "Niflheim" is the land of mist.

31 By that time her mother was dead and her father had remarried. According to Heinrich Hess, Sofie left home because of strained relations with her stepmother. See Appendix, p. 275.

32 The lease of 1880 shows that the apartment in the Rue d'Eylau consisted of an antechamber, a dining room, a large and a small salon, three bedrooms, a kitchen and office, toilets and bathrooms, and servants' quarters.

33 Dated Vienna, 10 September 1877 (quoted in Sjöman, *Mitt hjärtebarn*, p. 26).

rarely resident in Paris.<sup>34</sup> Nobel disapproved of her constant travelling, her “gallivanting around” fashionable spas all over Europe.<sup>35</sup> He himself joined her at those spas, however, in the vain hope of curing his rheumatism. Almost every letter he wrote contains complaints about his poor health. Apart from rheumatism, he suffered from scurvy, migraines, a nervous stomach, and in the last years of his life from what he termed “heart spasms.”<sup>36</sup>

Taking the waters had been an aristocratic pastime at first, but in the nineteenth century the practice was imitated by wealthy bourgeois.<sup>37</sup> Thus John Murray, the author of a *Handbook for Travellers to the Continent*, writes in 1840 that “an excursion to a watering place in the summer is essential to life, and the necessity of such a visit is confined to no one class in particular.”<sup>38</sup> Indeed the resorts attracted not only the nobility and the middle class but also the demi-monde<sup>39</sup> and, as Francis Palmer pointedly noted in 1903, “Even the ubiquitous Jew is not wanting ... although [in Carlsbad] they have to take the waters in the early morning, an hour or two before the regular opening for the fashionable visitors.”<sup>40</sup>

It is clear from the correspondence that Sofie Hess was combining therapy with amusement. After all, her ailment (anemia?) wasn’t entirely physiological. She often complained of low spirits. Nobel encouraged

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34 SH 20; see also her father’s letter to Nobel after their break-up: “At least try to live together with her for a little while longer” (HH 16 in Arkiv ÖI-5, undated).

35 E.g., Letters 66, 72. Hoping perhaps for more permanence, he bought a villa in Ischl, a fashionable watering place in Austria.

36 Letter 127. Sofie’s ailments remain undefined during the years she lived with Nobel and travelled to spas with him or on her own. In 1892 she wrote that she suffered from “congestion, vertigo, and anemia” (SH Letter 15); in 1895 she complained of bronchitis (SH Letters 27, 36) and wrote that she had suffered an “embolism” (SH Letter 35). In 1888 her father told Nobel that she was ill with peritonitis (in a letter dated 17 October = HH 9 in Arkiv ÖI-5).

37 On spa culture in nineteenth-century Europe see, for example, Jill Steward, “The Role of Inland Spas as Sites of Transnational Cultural Exchanges, 1750–1870,” in *Leisure Cultures in Urban Europe, c. 1700–1870: A Transnational Perspective*, ed. Peter Borsay and J.H. Furnée (Manchester, 2015), 234–59.

38 John Murray, *Handbook for Travellers to the Continent* (London, 1840), p. 217.

39 Jill Steward, “The Spa Towns of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the Growth of Tourist Culture: 1860–1914,” in *New Directions in Urban History: Aspects of European Art, Health, Tourism and Leisure since the Enlightenment*, ed. Günther Hirschfelder et al. (Münster, 2000), 87–126. For the increase in the number of “tainted ladies” at Carlsbad, Marienbad, and Meran, see pp. 110–11.

40 Francis Palmer, *Austro-Hungarian Life in Town and Country* (London, 1903), p. 432.

her to seek out company and enjoy herself.<sup>41</sup> Most spa visitors did just that. They mingled with fashionable society, went on outings, and attended dances and theatrical performances in addition to taking the prescribed treatments. Thus Francis Palmer commented that Carlsbad had turned into a centre of recreational tourism: "It is not supposed to be a pleasure resort. The object of all visitors is, at least ostensibly, the restoration of health that has broken down under the stress of society functions, or political life, overwork or study, or the cares and worries inseparable from the existence of great financiers."<sup>42</sup>

Each spa town had its distinct character. Ischl, where Nobel bought a villa in 1879, was a quiet town. It is described in 1880 as "simple and decorous ... Ischl does not gamble or riot, or conduct herself madly in any way; she is a little old fashioned still in a courtly way; she has a little rusticity still in her elegant manners; she is homely whilst she is so visibly of the *fine fleur*."<sup>43</sup> The Austrian-Hungarian spas, moreover, were tightly regulated. Only licensed physicians were permitted to dispense medication. Nobel, who understood the effects of the chemicals present in the water,<sup>44</sup> perhaps also appreciated the scientific approach of the Austrian practitioners. They considered the quantity and temperature of the water and controlled the time patients spent submerged in baths, while spas in England, for example, allowed unlimited drinking and bathing.<sup>45</sup>

The subject of travel is prominent in Nobel's letters, but it is only one of many aspects of life on which he touches in the correspondence. He refers to his readings and his literary tastes, his social engagements, his domestic arrangements in Paris and his laboratory at Sevrans, his business affairs in Germany, Scotland, Belgium, and Russia, and his extended family in Sweden and Russia. Most of all, the letters offer intimate glimpses of his relationship with Hess. They show the trajectory of their liaison, which began as a love affair and ended in a fitful patriarchal relationship.

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41 Letters 8, 36, 70.

42 Palmer, *Austro-Hungarian Life*, p. 127. See also Douglas P. Mackaman, "The Tactics of Retreat: Spa Vacations and Bourgeois Identity in Nineteenth-Century France," in *Being Elsewhere: Tourism, Consumer Culture, and Identity in Modern Europe and North America*, ed. Shelley Baranowski and Ellen Furlough (Ann Arbor, 2004), 35–62. Spas in the nineteenth century changed from "outposts of aristocratic sociability and doctoring to become centerpieces of the modern vacation industry" (p. 36).

43 Ouida (M.L. de La Ramé), quoted in Jill Steward, "The Spa Towns," p. 87.

44 See Letters 17, 19, 21.

45 Steward, "The Spa Towns," pp. 91–2.

In the first two years of their acquaintance, Nobel wrote to Sofie almost daily while away on business. His letters are full of endearments and expressions of longing, but already in 1879 we find the first intimations of jealousy, annoyance, and exasperation. Nobel suspected Sofie of an indiscretion with his nephew Emmanuel. The young man (nineteen at the time) called it a misunderstanding, and Sofie's father likewise protested the allegations, but Sofie's sister Amalie remarked that she "betrayed Nobel with every waiter."<sup>46</sup> By 1881 the couple appeared to be fully reconciled. Over the next years, however, there was a gradual shift in their relations. Nobel increasingly tried to make himself out as Sofie's protector and a father figure rather than a lover. Looking back on their relationship in 1887, he claimed that he "adopted [her], so to speak."<sup>47</sup> There can be no doubt, however, that the couple's relationship was sexual to begin with. There are frequent references in Nobel's letters to Sofie's menses, and Sofie herself refers to the difficulty of finding a husband after having been Nobel's mistress (*Mätresse*) for so many years.<sup>48</sup>

Initially Nobel may have had intentions to marry Hess – he made plans to introduce her to his mother<sup>49</sup> – but he soon came to the conclusion that their relationship had no future and made it clear that they were incompatible. He was searching for someone with whom he could share his life, he wrote, but "that someone cannot be a woman ... whose outlook on life and whose intellectual interests have little or nothing in common with mine" (Letter 24). He complained about Sofie's lack of culture and her idleness: "You neither work, nor write, nor read, nor think" (Letter 35). Yet he did not end their relationship. It seems that he was simultaneously repelled and attracted by Sofie's frivolity and thoughtlessness: "That's the nice thing about you – the complete absence of reason" (Letter 94). Playing Pygmalion, he attempted, without much success, to improve Sofie's education and to prompt her to learn

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46 See Emmanuel Nobel's letters to Sofie, dated 16 and 28 January 1879 (quoted in Sjöman, *Mitt hjärtebarn*, pp. 77–8) and Amalie Brunner's remark (quoted in Sjöman, p. 66). Heinrich Hess defends his daughter: Sofie was much afflicted by this suspicion and is still willing "to justify herself in the presence of your nephew" (Appendix, p. 275).

47 Letter 115.

48 For references to her menses see Letters 24, 33, 65, 78. She refers to her years as Nobel's *Mätresse* at SH 20.

49 Letter 10. He also introduced her to his brothers. See, e.g., Letters 60, 70, 72, 77.

French.<sup>50</sup> In later years he referred contemptuously to her “microscopic brain” (Letter 197) and blamed her for his own intellectual decline. It was the result of associating with her, he wrote: “I have sacrificed [to you] my intellectual life, my reputation which always rests on our association with others, my whole interaction with the cultured world” (Letter 43).

In line with the patriarchal role he assumed, Nobel frequently referred to himself as Sofie’s “old uncle.”<sup>51</sup> This was a common euphemism to characterize relations between older men and their young lovers, but also seems to reflect a genuine weariness and the realization that he was growing old. Other ways of signing off on his letters, such as “Brummbär” (grouchy-bear) and “Grübler” (ruminator, melancholic), acknowledged in an apologetic manner his morose and gloomy nature.<sup>52</sup>

Nobel rarely used Hess’s given name in the first years of their correspondence. He addressed her as his dear “little child” or “little toad” or used diminutives of her name (“Sofferl,” “Soffiecherl”). Sofie reciprocated by calling him occasionally “Bubi” (little boy). He in turn called himself her “boy,” though usually in a slightly ironic tone.<sup>53</sup>

Around 1884 their relationship began to unravel. He began to complain about Sofie’s use of his name<sup>54</sup> – unauthorized, he claimed, although he himself addressed letters to her as “Madame Nobel.”<sup>55</sup> He also allowed sarcasm to creep into his letters<sup>56</sup> and made anti-Semitic remarks about the Hess family, now living in Vienna.<sup>57</sup> These aspersions reflect the prevailing climate in Europe. In Paris anti-Semitism had become virulent by the time Edouard Drumont published his racist best-seller *Le France Juive* (1886) and proclaimed his theory that a Jewish conspiracy was afoot: “They want to bring about a violent change in

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50 See, e.g., Letter 9 in which Nobel corrects Sofie’s French. He also alludes to his educational efforts in a letter to Alarik Lindbeck. Expressing himself in unvarnished terms, he writes: “Women are interesting, but even when you are no longer able to stop their hole, you gladly stop their ignorance – the brain stands up longer than the prick” (quoted in Slöman, *Mitt hjärtebarn*, p. 51).

51 E.g., Letters 39, 52.

52 E.g., Letters 11, 20, 16, 24.

53 Hess in SH 4; Nobel in Letters 45, 60, 77.

54 E.g., Letters 177, 181, 184.

55 E.g., Letter 32.

56 Letters 79, 80, 81, 123, 146, 202.

57 E.g., Letters 126, 146, 177, 181, 193.

ideas, manners, and traditional beliefs in this country ... I am but a modest messenger of things to come."<sup>58</sup>

In Vienna, Jews fleeing the Russian pogroms in the 1880s swelled the Jewish population, doubling it between 1870 and 1890. This influx of refugees caused resentment among workers, who saw them as competitors in the job market. Lead articles in rightist papers promulgated a conspiracy theory much like Drumont's, declaring that the Jews would soon be dominating the world. "In a few decades, perhaps, they will become the exclusive lords of our financial markets. The first step to the throne has been taken ... How will we be saved from the claws of the usurers? ... We are looking at complete enslavement."<sup>59</sup> The conspiracy theory is also reflected in the speeches of the politician Georg von Schönerer, the founder of the extremist Pan-German Party and chief representative of anti-Semitism in Austria. He was unapologetic about his racism: "Anti-Semitism should not be seen as a regrettable or shameful symptom, but rather as a pillar of national thought and chiefly as a demand for true ethnic sentiment."<sup>60</sup> He enjoyed wide support among the lower middle class and the student fraternities. In 1881 he led a band of hooligans to ransack the offices of the liberal newspaper *Neues Wiener Tagesblatt*, which he labelled a "shameful Jewish rag."<sup>61</sup> In response to these criminal excesses, liberal thinkers in Vienna formed an association to combat racism: the Verein zur Abwehr des Antisemitismus, founded in 1891.

It should be noted that the founder of the Verein was Arthur Suttner, the husband of Bertha Suttner, who had kept up a correspondence with Nobel and visited him, together with Arthur, in 1887 and 1892. It is not surprising that Nobel refrained from disparaging remarks about Jews in letters to her. Sofie Hess's failure to respond to his anti-Semitic diatribes is surprising, however. Far from protesting against his cutting remarks, she used abusive language against Jews herself and, in 1894,

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58 Edouard Drumont, *Le France Juive: Histoire Contemporaine* (Paris 1886), p. 85.

59 *Österreichischer Volksfreund*, 19 February 1881, p. 2.

60 Speech quoted in Lisa Kienzl, *Nation, Identität und Antisemitismus: Der deutschsprachige Raum der Donaumonarchie 1866–1914* (Graz, 2014), p. 122.

61 Reacting to Schönerer's provocations, the liberal paper *Neue Freie Presse* labelled his anti-Semitism a political move: "The Jew is merely a means of turning the masses against liberalism" (6 April 1882). For a general account of the position of Jews in Vienna at the time, see Robert Wistrich, *The Jews of Vienna in the Age of Franz Joseph* (New York, 1989).

converted to Protestantism – a move she naively expected to bring her closer to Nobel.<sup>62</sup> Although it may be difficult for us today to understand her attitude, which amounts to self-hatred, it is a well-documented phenomenon among converts and perhaps akin to the Stockholm syndrome. In an effort to be assimilated into the dominant Christian society, Jews suppressed their roots, as the Viennese merchant Sigmund Mayer acknowledged in his memoirs: “I had quite forgotten that I was a Jew until I made this unpleasant discovery, prompted by anti-Semitism.”<sup>63</sup> This “forgetfulness” was a first step towards identification with the dominant and often hostile gentile population. Whether assimilation was forced or not, it turned into a “spiral that drove Jews further into self-denial ... and at the end of that path we often find undisguised Jewish self-hatred.”<sup>64</sup>

In spite of Hess’s odious remarks about fellow Jews, she always remained loyal to her own family and was open-handed in supporting them financially. If this close relationship was an irritant to Nobel, her spending habits were another bone of contention. Nobel called Hess his “great devourer of banknotes.”<sup>65</sup> Although it was he who introduced Sofie to a life of luxury, her excesses certainly justified his complaints. She was unable to control her spending and pawned her jewellery or contracted debts whenever she ran short of money. In 1894, she was formally placed under the *Kuratel* (trusteeship) of Julius Heidner, a director of Nobel’s company in Vienna, where she lived at the time. Her dependence on Heidner, who doled out her annuity in monthly instalments, frustrated Sofie and led to some remarkably ill-natured and racist comments about Nobel’s legal representatives in Vienna.<sup>66</sup>

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62 SH 20: “so that we are now closer to each other than ever.”

63 Sigmund Mayer, *Ein jüdische Kaufmann 1831–1911* (Vienna, 1988), p. 381 (my translation; quoted in the original by Michael Ley, *Abschied von Kakanien: Antisemitismus und Nationalismus im Wiener Fin de siècle* [Vienna 2001], p. 195).

64 Adolf Gaisbauer, *Davidstern und Doppeladler: Zionismus und jüdischer Nationalismus in Österreich 1882–1918* (Cologne, 1988), p. 23, my translation

65 Letter 118. For other complaints about her spending habits see, e.g., Letters 158, 170, 197. In Letter 158 he mentions the figure of 48,267 francs spent by Hess in six months. Compare this, however, with the sums spent by her contemporary, the notorious Cora Pearl: “In just two weeks at Vichy her household expenses topped thirty thousand francs (56,000 pounds)” (Hickman, *Courtesans*, p. 132).

66 An official notice of the trusteeship appeared in the *Central-Anzeiger für Handel und Gewerbe* on 10 July 1894. For Sofie’s spiteful remarks on Nobel’s legal representatives see, e.g., SH 22, 20 (“that red Jew be damned ... and Philip protects him because he too is a baptized Jew”).

From 1882 on Nobel counselled Sofie, first covertly and then openly, to find a husband<sup>67</sup> and seemed to be willing to make financial arrangements to further this goal.<sup>68</sup> The situation has a curious parallel in Dostoevsky's *Idiot* (1868), in which the wealthy aristocrat Totsky supplies his mistress Nastassya Filippovna with a dowry of seventy-five thousand rubles when he wants to end their relationship. His desire to arrange a marriage for his lover no doubt reflects actual practices at the time and is not entirely irrelevant to Nobel's situation, given his ties to Russia and his interest in Russian literature.<sup>69</sup>

Nor is the role that Sofie's father played in this affair without precedent. Heinrich Hess freely discussed Sofie's financial settlement with Nobel. In 1887 he asked for a personal meeting to review the matter and asserted his daughter's right to financial support. Nobel could not simply discard her "after an intimate relationship of ten years," he said.<sup>70</sup> He negotiated with Nobel about the amount of money to be invested on Sofie's behalf and the form the settlement should take – a pension for life or life insurance. On Nobel's request, he also reported on the conditions offered by diverse insurance companies in Vienna.<sup>71</sup> Although Heinrich Hess adopted a polite, not to say ingratiating, tone in his letters, it is clear that he thought of the settlement in terms of a legal and moral obligation on Nobel's part. The idea that a man must compensate a woman for the loss of virginity if he is unable or unwilling to marry her has a long history. Anchored in the Old Testament, it was taken over into secular law and kept on the books in Germany and Austria up to the twentieth century.<sup>72</sup> Sofie's father thus considered himself an honest broker between his daughter and her ex-lover, whereas Nobel apparently

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67 Letters 90, 110a note, 164.

68 He bought her a villa in Döbling near Vienna in 1888 (see Letters 129, 139).

69 See, for example, Letter 74. Glenn T. Seaborg lists Gogol, Turgenev, Dostoevsky, and Tolstoy among Russian writers of interest to Nobel (*The Scientist Speaks Out* [Singapore, 1996], p. 133). Ake Erlandsson (*Alfred Nobels bibliotek: En bibliografi* [Stockholm 2002]), however, shows that Nobel's private library contained works by Gogol, Pushkin, Tolstoy, and Turgenev but not Dostoevsky. For a complete list of the books in Nobel's library see [http://www.nobelprize.org/alfred\\_nobel/library/fiction-ru.html](http://www.nobelprize.org/alfred_nobel/library/fiction-ru.html).

70 Letter of 28 July 1887, Appendix, p. 278.

71 In letters of 13 April and 14 May 1890.

72 Termed *Kranzgeld*, the compensation was reserved in modern law for demonstrable financial damage rather than loss of honour. The law was abolished only in 1998. See <http://austria-forum.org/af/AustriaWiki/Verl%C3%B6bnis>.



suspected him of engaging in sharp practices. Heinrich Hess protested such insinuations: "I am not trying to profit from this affair, whatever you may think about me – my conscience is clear, I swear."<sup>73</sup>

At the beginning of 1891 Nobel heard rumours that Sofie was pregnant by another man. She confessed to her infidelity and in July gave birth to a daughter, Margarethe. Nobel declared that their "relationship was at an end" (Letter 161a), but this turned out not to be the case. They continued meeting<sup>74</sup> and corresponding, although their letters now focused almost exclusively on financial affairs – requests for money on Hess's part and protestations on Nobel's part that his generosity and unselfishness were not being sufficiently recognized.<sup>75</sup> His complaints seem specious in view of Hess's abject groveling. In one letter she describes herself as "stupid, naïve, and mindless"; in another as "lacking all reason, idiotic, and a great ass." Conversely she praises Nobel to the skies: "Ah, there is no man like you, and as long as the world lasts, there will be no other man like you. Apart from your noble mind and your benevolence, there is no one who is as gentle and sensitive toward a woman as you are."<sup>76</sup> Rather absurdly, she asks Nobel to approve her marriage to Nikolaus Kapy, the father of her child, and later on even claims that Nobel "obliged" her to marry him.<sup>77</sup> In Sofie Hess's view, she had given Nobel her unconditional love: "You know best how devoted I was to you, how I respected you, obeyed you. Your wish was my command, always ... I love you genuinely, with my whole soul."<sup>78</sup>

The relationship between Nobel and Hess will strike readers as dysfunctional and worthy of a Freudian analysis. Modern sensitivities are offended as much by Nobel's chauvinism and bigotry as by Hess's continual self-abasement. One cannot help feeling troubled by the manipulative nature of their letters. Nobel clearly wanted to make his lover feel guilty and unworthy of his "noble actions." She in turn fawned on

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73 Letter dated 1 December [1889] (= Letter 15 in Arkiv ÖI-5).

74 See Letter 215.

75 See Letters 195, 198, 205, 211.

76 SH 17, 18, 19.

77 SH 39 of 1895. See SH 13: "Kapy wants to marry me ... Do I have your approval? You are everything to me in this world. Therefore I beg you to give me your opinion and tell me how you want me to proceed." Compare SH 27 ("I found out that you have no objection to my marrying Captain Kapy") and SH 30 ("I do not know what your plans are concerning my marriage to Kapy").

78 SH16.

him in order to extract money and in later years harassed him with endless begging letters. The domineering language in Nobel's late correspondence with Sofie Hess is in striking contrast to the respectful tone he adopts in letters to Bertha von Suttner. The discrepancy in Nobel's tone and attitude towards the two women does not imply that he was posing, but is situational and shows, moreover, that they appealed to different facets of his personality. Suttner called forth the idealist in Nobel; Hess spoke to the authoritarian in him. The two sides of Nobel are perhaps best characterized by Suttner in "Memories of Alfred Nobel," published a few weeks after his death in a Viennese newspaper: "His great love for the abstract ideal human being was mixed with a great deal of loathing, bitterness, and suspicion for real people."<sup>79</sup> Nobel himself acknowledged that he was "the greatest misanthrope ... but also a boundless idealist."<sup>80</sup>

Ragnar Sohlman, who was close to Nobel in the last few years of his life and later became his executor, lamented the fact "that in the public estimation [Nobel] should have figured so much as a rich and remarkable man, and so little as a human being."<sup>81</sup> It is hoped that this edition of Nobel's private correspondence will serve as the missing link and give a human dimension to the public image of Nobel as inventor, businessman, and philanthropist.

### About This Edition

I have arranged my translation in two sections: Part 1 contains Alfred Nobel's letters and Part 2 Sofie Hess's letters. It would of course be preferable to interweave the letters of the two correspondents to produce a continuous narrative, but this is not feasible because Hess's first dated letter is from 1891, that is, the series of her letters begins just as Nobel's letters taper off. By 1895 the numerical ratio is completely lopsided: one letter from Nobel to sixteen letters from Hess. That year Nobel informed his lawyer that he no longer wished to communicate with Hess<sup>82</sup> because he found her begging letters importunate and disturbing to his peace of mind.

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79 *Neue Freie Presse*, 12 January 1897, p. 1.

80 Quoted in Fritz Vögtle, *Alfred Nobel* (Hamburg, 1983), p. 95.

81 Sohlman, *Legacy*, p. 42.

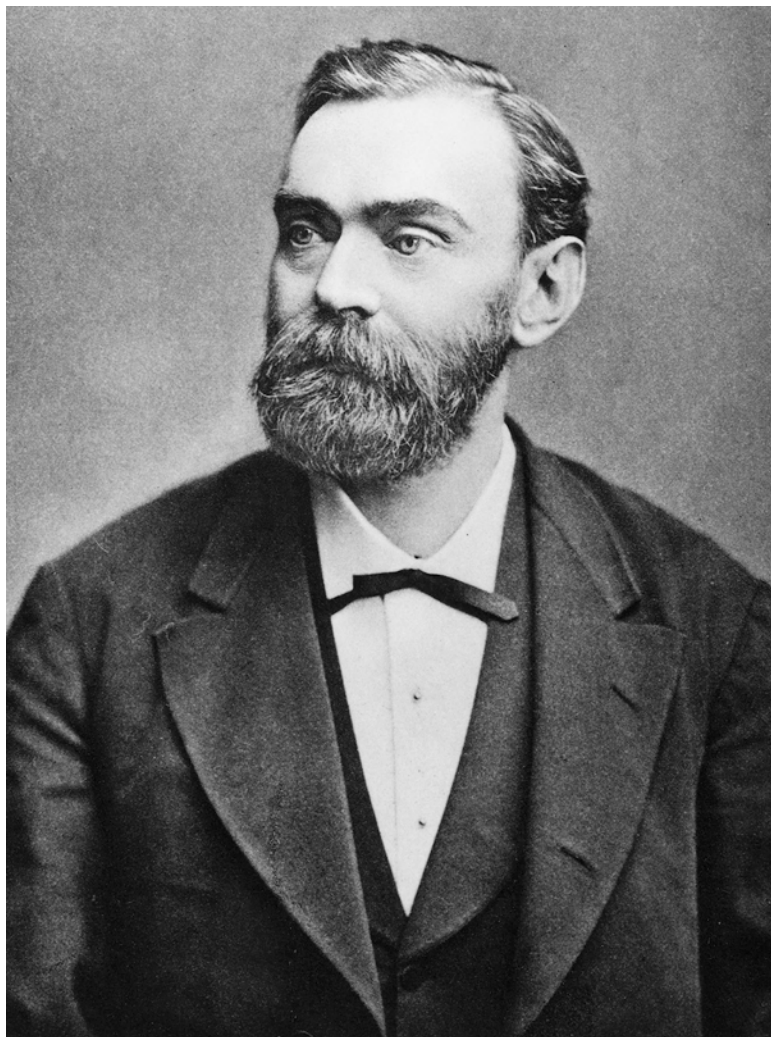
82 See SH39 and note.

The dating of some letters in the correspondence is problematic. In the first part I largely follow the sequence and numbering in Arkiv ÖI-5. The most obvious inconsistencies have been corrected by Vilgot Sjöman in his Swedish translation of Nobel's letters.<sup>83</sup> I have adopted his corrections and added some of my own. The dating of Sofie Hess's letters presents even greater difficulties. Sjöman included about half of them in his translation, slotting them according to their relevance to Nobel's letters, but without assigning them numbers. I have significantly changed the sequence of Hess's letters as they appear in Arkiv ÖI-5 and renumbered them to present a more cogent chronological order.<sup>84</sup>

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83 Sjöman, *Mitt hjärtebarn*.

84 For an overview and comparison of the old and new arrangements see pp. 227–8.



Alfred Nobel, 1883 (© Nobel Foundation)



A young Sofie Hess, date unknown (Vilgot Sjöman, *Mitt hjärtebarn*)



An older Sofie Hess, date unknown (Vilgot Sjöman,  
*Mitt hjärtebarn*)