

Ans Samama



A MUSICAL LIFE IN MOTION

Colophon accompanying the first edition

The first Dutch edition of 'A Musical Life in Motion' was published in an edition of 100 numbered copies. It was done on 21 May 2014 on the occasion of Ans Samama's 90th birthday.

In the making of the book, Els van Es and Marguerite Samama have been invaluable.

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Colophon accompanying the second edition

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Foreword to the second edition

My mother, Ans Samama-Polak, died on 2 April 2023, almost a decade after she had recorded her memoirs. After her cremation, several people asked if there were any copies left. None! So in the course of 2023, I decided to read the text again carefully and make some minute additions where necessary. Additional photos from the family archives were also added. The result is before you.

When the memoirs were published, my mother was 90 years old. According to her wishes, that milestone would be celebrated with a big party, indeed at an estate in the village where my eldest sister lives, in Beetsterzwaag. In the company of the children with their partners, the grandchildren also with their partners and the great-grandchildren, games were played, football was played, songs were sung, food was eaten, and swimming was enjoyed. And for the great-grandchildren, my mother became "grootje" ...



*Grootje Ans surrounded by her children, grandchildren
and great-grandchildren*

Shortly after her 90th birthday, my mother decided to slowly scale down her activities. This mostly meant fewer patients, but not fewer pursuits. She remained closely involved with her colleagues, her former patients, and her students. In particular, Vera Baadjou's PhD project in Maastricht was followed closely and finally concluded successfully in 2018. She also continued to play the cello and experienced great pleasure when her musical friends came to visit. In 2017, she gave another extensive interview for the Jewish Homes Foundation about the war time. Finally, the 2014 celebration was followed by an equally grand celebration in 2019, when she turned 95. Entirely according to the tried and tested recipe. Again, in Beetsterzwaag, with games, songs, food, swimming and, above all, an even more extensive bevy of family members with now great-grandchildren.



Grootje Ans, 95 years, in Beetsterzwaag

During these same years, however, my mother's physical abilities became increasingly limited and home help had become a strict necessity, especially when she expressed that she did not want to be in a care home. When the pandemic struck in 2020, we children were happy that we could still visit her, that we were together with the

lovely ladies of Wilhelmina, who never missed a day and could take care of her. Thus, in the last years of her life, she slowly drifted away into a grey twilight with unexpected moments of great clarity and active awareness.

We had an internal joke all these years to keep her spirits up, because many a time she complained, rightly so, that there was nothing left to do: "You know what happens when you turn 100, don't you?" And after some thought, a smile appeared on her face: "Then the mayor comes to visit." But she did not live to see that. A stroke struck her at the end of March 2023 and when she was back home after four days, a quiet but also slow farewell began for all of us.

Anyone reading the following memoirs will realise how intensely my mother lived, how very aware she was of the unique opportunities she had because of her background and upbringing, and how much this brought a sense of 'noblesse oblige' for her - as much as for her mother and for children. She has lived by this to the full. In her memories, she bears memorable testimony to this.

Leo Samama, late 2023



Ans Samama, 2019

Our family

I was born on 21 May 1924 in Amsterdam. I was the youngest of three daughters of lively, talented parents: Leo and Jet Polak. Bettina, my eldest sister, was born on 23 March 1919, Jetteke on 10 October 1921. I was called Ansje, in full Annie Leontine Willy Polak. If I had been a boy - I'm sure that was what was fervently hoped for after two girls - I would have been called Abraham. Then I would have been named after my father's late father. When my father told my sisters that their baby sister had been born, two-and-a-half-year-old Jetteke said, "Let her come in the sandbox!"

At the time of my birth, my mother was 30 years old. My father, full name Leonard Polak, was 44 and a lecturer in philosophy at the University of Amsterdam. He had been born on 6 January 1880 in Steenwijk and had a brother, Willy, who was three years younger. His father, Abraham Polak (1837-1924), was a merchant and manufacturer of brushes. His mother, Henriette Cohen (1855-1950), was from Anholt in Germany, where her father was a businessman. She was 19 years younger than her husband, whom she had married in 1877. Until 1912, the Polak family lived at Kornputsingel 16 in Steenwijk.

As a child, my father went through the 'French School'. After that, he received the then highly regarded private education of A.J. Bijl, a liberal preacher. He graduated from the Latin school in Zwolle, having completed the highest grades there. He then went to Amsterdam to study law.

The girl my father fell in love with, Henriette Antoinette Schwarz, was born on 7 November 1893 in Zutphen, the eldest child of Leopold (Levi) Schwarz (1864-1920) and Rebecca (Betsy) Vles (1868-1944). Of Levi's parents we know that they were called Nathan

Schwarz (1827-1895) and Jetje Frölich (1836-1910) and came from Westphalia. They were registered in Zutphen in 1860,

Henriette was usually called Jet. After her, Sam, Sara and Ella would also be born. When my mother was three, the Schwarz family moved to Amsterdam. Meanwhile, her father's factory had moved from Zutphen to Zaandam. This thriving company was called Polak & Schwarz Essence-Fabrieken. The name Polak refers to Joseph Polak, a brother-in-law of my grandfather Leopold Schwarz. Although this brother-in-law had left the company due to a conflict, the name Polak & Schwarz remained.

A few years later, the Schwarz family moved to Zaandam, from where my mother travelled daily by train to Amsterdam to attend school. In 1911, she graduated from the five-year HBS for girls as the youngest student in the class. She then went to the School for Social Work in Amsterdam. However, when she finished that course she was not allowed to work as a social worker: she had to be 23 to do so.

Thus my mother applied for a job to Lo Wolff, the husband of my father's cousin Hens Polak. He was a professor of bacteriology at Utrecht University and needed an assistant. Hens Polak was undoubtedly one of the links in the chain of 'coincidences' through which the future lovers, my parents, met. My father's brother Willy and his wife Gien van Gelder probably also did their bit. In any case, my father fell madly in love with my mother. She was 14 years younger and very impressed by his track record and the fame he enjoyed as a philosopher of law even then already.

My mother Henriëtte was not only quite a distinguished girl and a good match, she was also strikingly beautiful: statuesque, strong, with big, intelligent eyes and an intensely proud look. You couldn't ignore her. Her luscious bosom was something all Vles girls were lavishly endowed with, including Grandma Betsy. For this, they wore specially tailored corsets that were meant to carry the breasts and make them a little less conspicuous to the eye.

Betsy Vles was the daughter of a successful Rotterdam rag and metal merchant, Samuel Vles, who was a member of the church council of the Orthodox Jewish community of Rotterdam. She had once been engaged to playwright and theatre man Herman Heijermans, but she had broken off this engagement when his business in household goods almost went bankrupt. After all, that would have brought shame on her family! The bankruptcy was averted, by the way.



Betsy Schwarz-Vles

I mainly remember my grandmother Betsy Vles as a strict woman. She was not unkind, but she was immensely aware of 'how things should be'. That was what she radiated. She was typically an emancipated Jewess: she had abandoned religion, but she considered herself to be from some kind of elite. She headed an enlightened, industrial family and lived through the rise of socialism. It was the time of Herman Gorter, Henriëtte Roland Holst, Ferdinand Domela Nieuwenhuis and Henri Polak. People had great faith in the future and in progress. No doubt her daughter, the self-confident, well-educated Henriëtte, also breathed the atmosphere of home. One of my young paternal cousins, the publisher Johan Polak, would later write

about my mother that she 'must have been animated by many ideals even as a girl'.

A much-told anecdote from my parents' courtship days is the following: One time, my father had brought my mother home in Zaandam. Late at night, he arrived on the platform to take the train back to Amsterdam. The conductor already knew him and shouted, "Hurry up, Polak, otherwise you won't catch that last train! But... what do you keep doing in Zaandam anyway?" "Well," said my father, "In Zaandam lives a girl I particularly like!" The conductor had immediately been interested to know who this girl might be. "Henriette Schwarz," my father said. "So," cried the conductor, "That girl from the Polak and Schwarz factories? That's not a crazy lot!"



*Leo and Jet Polak-Schwarz, Willy and Gien Polak-van Gelder
and daughter Hans, c.1917*

Anyway, on 16 July 1917, my parents got married. It was a civil marriage. At that time, my father was a private lecturer in philosophical epistemology at the University of Amsterdam. They also went to live in that city, at Keizersgracht 687. We were born there.

In 1921 - Bettina was about two years old, my mother was expecting my sister Jetteke - my father received his PhD on the first

part of his judicial-philosophical study on the sense of punishment as retribution. He planned to do a PhD on the second part of this study too, but in philosophy. This proved unnecessary: a year later, my father received an honorary doctorate from the University of Groningen. The famous Groningen professor of psychology and philosophy Gerard Heymans had successfully applied for it! Moreover, six years later, in 1928, a next wish of Heymans was also fulfilled: my father was appointed professor of philosophy. Thus he became Heymans' successor. By the way, there were objections from the theological faculty: they feared 'the militant character of Polak's free-thinking and atheism'!

My father was an emancipated Jew: at the age of 14, he had told his mother that the prayer belts no longer meant anything to him. With that, he bid farewell to the Jewish community. To understand the objections of the theological faculty in Groningen in the completely compartmentalised Netherlands, I quote the following from the book *Zeer kundige professoren* (Very competent professors): "He had become a freethinker and indeed militant in the sense that he searched for the truth extraordinarily passionately and earnestly; so earnestly that, as long as it was a matter of formulating the truth, he was not prepared to compromise for the sake of peace, either with others or with himself. The latter should also be emphasised. Polak was not easy on himself. He placed such high demands on the pursuit of truth that his own sleep, his peace of mind and his self-confidence suffered painfully time and again. Polak was thus a militant freethinker and atheist. But the core of Polak's humanism does not lie in his aversion to religion."

At home, he himself told us the following anecdote from his adolescence: When he went to school as a grammar school student, he would pass by the butcher, and couldn't resist sticking his fingers out at the bacon and hams hanging on the street, fingers that he then immediately put in his mouth to taste that delicious flavour. The butcher then promptly came out and called after him, "Hey bacon Jew! You can't have that at all!". But my father didn't give a damn

about that.

I remember my father's words, for instance when I asked him to explain all the things he came up with for his work. I also remember the feelings I got from that. What I understood from what he said came roughly down to this: "Nothing started, nothing ends. Everything goes on". Something like that. I still taste those words. My father invariably sat working in his study and was not to be disturbed. But when as a little girl it was my birthday and I couldn't sleep at night, I was allowed to knock on the door. Then I was allowed to come in and eat a peppermint stick on his lap. Then I was so happy!

In the book quoted above, my father is described as someone who suffered from the high standards of his truth-telling. In my view, however, he was an exceptionally good-humoured person. He could be incredibly cheerful. Sometimes when he came home he would jump over the back of his chair at the dining table. Towards the age of 60, he even dared to learn to swim.

My father propagated his views in word, deed and writing. For instance, I remember him delivering a speech to the Freethinker Radio Broadcasting in March 1931 entitled 'Unity over division of religion'. It was crisis time in the compartmentalised Netherlands, there was unimaginable unemployment. Everyone was talking about the fact that there was no bread on the table for so many people. My father recognised that as a major social problem. At the same time, he pointed out to the listener that people not only want bread, but also "hunger and thirst for truth, for love and justice, not in an afterlife but here in this life on this earth".

People just keep looking for answers to their questions about the meaning of life and death, good and evil, truth and delusion, to which their various religions then provide the answers: different, conflicting answers. My father argued, "... each of those conflicting, contending answers of a thousand and one religions and sects demands faith, demands acceptance of certain dogmas, of the doctrines

of 'the true teaching', which for its supernatural origins as 'revelation' is called above criticism and reason. And each of these thousand and one forms of faith has its congregation, its own group, sometimes several hundred, sometimes hundreds of millions. (...) Each group's own faith is called 'holy' - and the holy faith of other groups, of many other millions, is called 'superstition', 'sacrilege', 'idolatry'. (...) Thus religion is the great divisive agent of culture, inciting people against people, gender against gender, village against village, family against family, husband against wife and brother against brother."



Leo Polak, 1920s

My father taught us that it was not a good thing that representatives of different religions are unable to see beyond their own divisions. If they were, they could discover and recognise in each other the common human. Therefore, he opposed these religions with their dogmas to the autonomy of human reason. By 'reason', he understood both the logical reasoning mind and the moral disposition. My father spoke of the simple and for all and always valid answer to our 'deepest, spiritual questions regarding the doctrine of world and life'. He therefore taught philosophy in general, not one of many

philosophies.

In his second speech for the Freethinker Radio Broadcasting, delivered on 27 April 1932, my father went one step further. He set out what he believed underlies all evil: "All evil now, all wrongness of will or disposition, rests on this falsifying perspective of the self, the willingly biased, subjective preference for ourselves over others, that is the actual, morally reprehensible egotism – the root and essence of all evil -, while all virtue and nobility of will and character consists in the victory of exactly that, in being elevated above this biased and falsifying 'egocentricity', i.e. in that pure, honest, self-forgotten 'love' or 'righteousness', which gives as much weight to another's right to love and suffering as to its own, i.e. feels just as warmly for it, has just as much for it - who, in other words (after the ancient formulation of Jew and Christian, Chinese and Buddhist) loves another as himself."

These two examples illustrate how my father was in life and what he propagated in pre-war, church-like Holland! He could get excited by scientific discoveries: for instance, I vividly remember how very impressed he was by the concept of the atom, about which some properties had just become common knowledge. He explained to me how an atom was put together. I remember him saying something about "a cell that cannot be separated".



Jetteke, Ansjé and Bettina, 1924

When I was about eight years old, I went sometimes with my father and mother to the University of Groningen too. We visited the hall where my father usually gave his lectures. And then one time, I ran to the pulpit. There I climbed up and spoke, to my mother's dismay and my father's delight: "Ladies and gentlemen... apples and pears... plums and nuts... crazy idiots!" (In Dutch this rhymes quite nicely)

Sometimes I went with my father into the province of Groningen, when he gave a lecture somewhere, for workers for example. Then he would talk about philosophy, about the different ways you could look at things. At home, he taught me to talk about everything, but everything. I remember how I started to realise that other people could very well think about things differently than me. To be open to that idea, I would have to learn, know and understand a lot myself.

I grew up amidst constant intellectual, musical and artistic activity. For instance, my father played the piano very beautifully. During my childhood, he and some famous musicians would form a trio that regularly played music at our house. I would then love to sit at the top of the stairs to listen quietly. It gave me a blissful feeling.

Amsterdam

Before we moved to Helpman near Groningen in 1928, we lived on the Keizersgracht in Amsterdam. That was from the time I was born until I was four years old. Even though I was so small in those years, there are some things I still remember very well. I learned to skate on ice there, for instance. I had Frisian skates and would ride behind my own little chair. Like many other people, my mother put old rugs along the ice of the canal to sit on. What a feast of colours that must have been!

Another scene I remember vividly is Sinterklaas (Saint Nicholas) entering the house on December 5th: again, I was about three years old at the time. The room was deep, you got in via a nice, round staircase. So did Sinterklaas. But I was already down in the room when he stately descended from the bell floor. I particularly noticed his feet, to which I shouted, "Sinterklaas has feet as big as uncle Sam!" Not that I realised it was actually uncle Sam... I can still see him striding past with that staff. A little later I got to sit on his lap, still thinking he was just Sinterklaas. By the way, this big mansion - Keizersgracht 687 - is unrecognisable these days. The last time I passed by, the plaque that was placed on it after the war to commemorate my father was no longer there either...

Uncle Sam was my mother's brother. He had succeeded his and my mother's father as director of the Polak & Schwarz factories. As a child, I thought uncle Sam and aunt Elly were very posh. I remember aunt Elly as a classy Charleston woman, with straight-cut hair and dresses with low waists. They had three sons. It wasn't exactly cosy at their house: in fact, it was so unsociable that it literally made me cold. When the adults sat down to dinner, for instance, the children had to have already eaten, together with the nanny. Then, by the grace of God, they were allowed to say goodnight very briefly to their parents. Fortunately, the three sons, Leo, Paul and Dick, did get

along very well. After uncle Sam died unexpectedly of a pulmonary embolism in 1938, nephew Dolf Schwarz took over the factories of Polak & Schwarz.



Polak & Schwarz's logo, before and after the war

When we moved to Helpman near Groningen in 1928, we often went with our parents to stay with our grandmothers, uncles and aunts in Amsterdam. We travelled by rail. Grandma Betsy, my mother's mother, lived at 50 Oranje Nassaulaan. I especially remember the parties she gave there, at Christmas in particular. Everyone was beautifully dressed up then. We children could be quite naughty. We – e.g. the 12 grandchildren – would sit at a separate children's table, far from the grown-ups who could then talk quietly, and we would be served tiny baby potatoes by the staff. My cousin Rob, aunt Sara's eldest son, cousin Leo, uncle Sam's eldest, Jetteke and I used our spoons to aim those tiny potatoes at those beautifully dressed, posh, grown-up people sitting further down the room at the big people's table. Then, to our great surprise, they suddenly paid attention to us: they got very angry!

My eldest sister, Bettina, did not participate. For naughty and adventurous things, she considered herself too mature and well-educated. I remember Fransje and Marianne, the eldest children of my mother's youngest sister, aunt Ella Bruske. Aunt Ella was a darling of a woman,

but married to a difficult man, a dentist. He really always knew everything better. Then he would put his glass down hard-handed and shout, to whoever wanted to hear or not, "The case is like this!", and took a firm stand against anything. "If only he doesn't treat his patients like that," we would say to each other. I was allowed to bath Betsy and Leontine, Ella's little twins, when I was about ten years old. I was also allowed to babysit them sometimes.



*Ans with her nieces Leontientje and Betsy
in Egmond, c.1936*

Uncle Willy Polak, my father's brother, lived in a huge house, at 144 Prins Hendrikkade. He was a general practitioner and his wife Gien an ophthalmologist. It was with them that I preferred to stay. They also had a nice daughter: Hans (Henriette). Aunt Gien van Gelder was a very witty and involved person. Gien and Willy both had their practices at home. Uncle Willy's was at the front, with a large waiting room and its own hall. If you walked through there, you came to the toilet and stairs going down and up. Behind those stairs was aunt Gien's ophthalmology practice room, with its own waiting room. If

you went down the steps there to the outside, you stood in a large, old-fashioned garden. The house was so big, it contained a huge, round hall in the middle, halfway up the first floor. It was a sort of intermediate space that could be reached by stairs and was so big that everyone automatically called it 'the hall'. The walls of this hall were covered with wallpaper depicting hunting scenes.

At Christmas, there was a giant Christmas tree in the hall and beautiful music sounded. We assimilated Jews also sang Christmas songs there: 'Silent night, holy night' or 'Oh, Christmas tree'.... The party that impressed me most there was New Year's Eve: that's when the most beautiful fireworks were set off over the IJ (Amsterdam harbour). From the Prins Hendrikkade, we could see it through the high windows of the hall. I also remember the presence of Gien's parents during the first years we stayed there overnight. They were very old. Whether they were very devout, I don't know, but aunt Gien's father always wore a kippah. Her mother was often in bed; she must have been ill.



Grandma 'Grootje' with her three granddaughters in the garden in Helpman, c. 1933

My paternal grandmother, Henriëtte Polak-Cohen, we called Grootje. She lived with uncle Willy and aunt Gien. Grootje was a very sweet woman who was widowed the year I was born. She even got on well with my mother, who was definitely not easy. In fact, my mother was quite distant. Grootje was always clear with her, just saying what she thought: "Jetje, you shouldn't do that like that, it's really not nice. Things like that. My mother accepted that, she really cared about what her mother-in-law said.

Only recently, I heard that my father and uncle Willy had another little brother, one who was born before them. His name was Julius; he had suffocated when he was a year old, sitting on Grootje's lap. He had an illness, something in his throat, croup perhaps. Grootje never mentioned him.

For us grandma was grandma Betsy, my mother's mother. She was very strict. She thought Grootje was far too sweet for us grandchildren. But Grootje was genuinely interested in us and she was sprightly. Like us, she would jump over fences as if they were obstacles of nothing and took us on her lap. Grandma and my mother didn't like that, children on their laps; I really didn't need to try that with my mother. I can still see my mother, later in Groningen. In her chair next to the large standing light, next to the panelling, with the tea table next to her. When I visited her, she would give me a cup of tea and we would talk, but I didn't have to try to crawl on her lap. She just didn't want that. She then referred me to my own little chair, a beautiful one that I still cherish. My strict, righteous mother was really not cold, but a warm woman, no, she certainly was not. We were even allowed to address our parents whom we called 'father' and 'mother', informally (in Dutch 'je' and 'jij' instead of 'u', that is 'thou').