Traveling teachers in Europe: Gouvernanten, governesses, and gouvernantes
by Gunilla Budde

For some, the governesses of the 19th century were supposedly melancholic and prim wallflowers. For others, they were a worldly generation of women with professional ambitions. Strict, grim-looking women emerge from childhood memories no less than women who were dynamic teachers and opened up new horizons – not only for their pupils, but also for themselves. The fact that their paths not only took them to foreign households, but increasingly to foreign lands – i.e. that they were more and more part of a pan-European labor market – is especially evident towards the end of the 19th century. How did the widely travelled governesses cope with the women’s ideal of their time? Why did they increasingly aspire to go abroad? Did they stimulate international relational history (Beziehungsgeschichte) and thus contribute to cultural transfer? How did the interplay between international openness and nationalistic constraints evolve in the course of the 19th century? What led to the decline of the governesses career at the beginning of the 20th century? This article examines these questions by looking at young women's personal testimonies as well as other contemporary publications, with an emphasis on German, English and French variants.

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Wie erschrak die Gouvernante.
Als sie die Gefahr erkannte.
Ängstlich ruft sie: "O mon dieu!"
C’est un homme, fermez les yeux!"

Introduction

Governesses opened up new horizons – for themselves and their pupils. The English composer Ethel Smyth (1858–1944) (Media Link #ac) for example, recalls in her memoirs how central one of her tutors was for her choice of career:

The whole course of my life was determined ... by one of these governesses. When I was twelve a new victim arrived who had studied music at the Leipzig Conservatorium .... For the first time I heard classical music and a new world opened up before me ... And then and there conceived the plan, carried out seven years later, of studying at Leipzig and giving up my life to music.
The life of the playwright Arthur Schnitzler (1862–1931) was also decidedly influenced by his German governess Bertha Lehmann, who permitted her pupil to invest his pocket money in Reclam chapbooks.

Governesses, however, not only promoted the careers of artists, they also inspired poets. In the countless novels and stories in which governesses made an appearance, a rather striking picture emerged. The women were variously depicted as melancholic and prim wallflowers and education-hungry and adventurous trailblazers. Since many of them, at least from the middle of the 19th century, came from foreign European countries their introduction into families often meant their first contact with a different language and culture – a new world. Depending on the type of relationship with the governesses, this encounter had a more or less positive connotation that prevailed in people’s minds and accordingly influenced the image of the governess’s nation of origin.

In governess research, the assessments of the teachers differ widely. While the field has mainly flourished in Great Britain since the 1970s, and came into its own in Germany a decade later, so far it has received little notice in France (these disparities are also consistent with the spread of the profession.). Some studies emphasize the material hardship, poor and arbitrary education, and the precarious social situation. Others, including more recent studies, stress the emancipative character of these young women's lives, who showed their contemporaries and peers new, self-determined life paths.

The fact that these routes led them not only to foreign households but also to foreign countries, i.e. that the governesses increasingly participated in a pan-European labor market, is especially evident in the 19th century. Unlike the nannies and bonnes, who were responsible for bringing up small children and who, like the maids, mainly moved around their place of origin in a confined regional area, the governesses reflected a highly mobile and increasingly internationally active professional group.

How did the well-travelled governesses cope with the female ideal of their time? Why did they increasingly aspire to go abroad in the 19th century? Conversely, what did the employers expect from the foreigners they allowed into their homes? Did they help to soften entrenched national prejudices? Did they stimulate international relational history (Beziehungsgeschichte) and thus contribute to cultural transfer? How did the interplay between international openness and nationalistic constraints evolve in the course of the 19th century? What led to the decline of the governesses career at the beginning of the 20th century?

The female ideal and the governess’s reality – two divergent lifestyles

The dominant image of women, as it was conceived and propagated by bourgeois thinkers at the end of the 18th century and rapidly began to assert itself in the 19th century, is well-known: Women were thought to be limited to the family circle in accordance with their alleged gender character. They were considered predestined for their tasks as wife, housewife, and mother due to their generally passive, serene, and modest "nature". Women seemed incapable of standing on their own two feet, not to mention of being unable to travel the world alone by coach, ship, or train.

The fact that a growing group of bourgeois women certainly did so warrants explanation. Where in previous centuries, governesses mainly belonged to the servants in ruling and aristocratic houses, the governesses' clientele became increasingly bourgeois from the end of the 18th century. Especially in early industrialized Great Britain, large parts of the upper middle class had achieved great affluence. Germany and France caught up around a hundred years later, although it concerned a smaller segment of society. In each case, from the middle of the 19th century at the latest, the daughters no longer needed to have domestic skills due to the servants' staff. What is more: throughout Europe, it was considered a sign of the saturated bourgeoisie that the female family members only had to move their hands for playing the piano or handicrafts. This made it all the more important that these young women could shine and
move nimbly on the social stage. As proud burgthers enamored of education, they ignored the verdict of nobility that they had to be born a gentleman or a lady. On the contrary, the bourgeoisie were convinced that their offspring could approximate this ideal just as well through a solid upbringing and education.

While parents sent their sons to public schools in Great Britain at an early age and to grammar schools in Germany and France, it was an unwritten law that the daughters were to be brought up at home. The family, after all, was to continue to be the inherent domain of the female progeny. Their training at home thus corresponded with their later duties. It was important to avoid releasing them from the protective womb of the home at all costs. There was consensus throughout Europe on this point, but the implementation was not always consistent. In Great Britain, throughout the whole of the 19th century, the exclusive education of daughters by governesses was much more widespread in the 19th century than in Germany and France. One reason was that these countries offered few appealing alternatives. The so-called dame schools (comparable to the privately operated Klippschulen in Germany), which were usually run by older women and men of disparate qualifications and motivation, were only attended in Great Britain by the children of the lower classes and the lower middle class. Public primary schools did not come into existence until after the Education Act of 1870 and were slow to gain acceptance. The few girls' schools that emerged after the middle of the century were often far removed from the urban suburbs, where the majority of the English bourgeoisie lived. Secondly, Great Britain was regarded for a long time as a bastion of governesses. Large numbers of bourgeoisie had earlier achieved great prosperity and become the main employer for governesses alongside the high nobility and the gentry. The national census of 1861 estimated there were 24,770 governesses in England and Wales and the trend was growing. In Germany and France, there were rather few bourgeois families who could afford or who wanted to hire governesses. But even here, despite an increasing number of public girls' schools, there were many supporters of private education. At the end of the 19th century, the view still predominated that "female public schools" were a contradiction in terms, being both "unnatural and impracticable".

To safeguard the ideal of rearing girls at home, it had to be violated at the same time: The young women who came to the family's home blatantly embodied a concept that contradicted the bourgeois female ideal. Single and childless, they did not correspond to the maternal role glorified in countless writings (➔ Media Link #ag) throughout Europe since the beginning of the 19th century as the only true female way of life. In addition, their occupation challenged the notion that the mother was the children's natural teacher and that the responsibility for their upbringing could not be offset monetarily. The abundance of guidebooks – where the role of the governess is discussed in detail and, above all, problematized – shows that the contemporaries were well aware of the inherent tightrope act when employing governesses. They exhorted the young teachers to be humble, willing to sacrifice, and to be modest – qualities which were already considered to be among the most valued female traits. The appeal to the women to be aware of their "subordinate" (botmäßig) position in the company of their employers was constant.

But what was their position? This question presented fewer problems as long as governesses came from the lower, impoverished aristocratic families or families that fled from the revolutionary turmoil in France. As these governesses predominantly moved into houses of higher nobility, the hierarchy was already in place. However, as it became customary in the 19th century for members of the bourgeoisie, the middle class, and the bourgeoisie to encounter each another as teachers, students, and employers, boundaries were necessary – despite or precisely because of the distinct value systems. On the one hand, the young women from "good" but financially less well-off families made an effort to maintain their class status and to distinguish themselves from the rest of their servants. From the middle of the century, letters to the editor of the English Times accumulated from governesses. They alternatively complained about their low salaries and stressed their dilemma as "daughters of gentlemen, well-educated" who were obliged to maintain their propriety. Maids, who hardly earned any less, would not have been expected to meet such expectations. On the other hand, the governesses' employers had to be careful not to allow the proximity to their own social class become too obvious. This contained the danger that their daughters would be exposed to an attractive young female bourgeoisie role model, who presented an alternative to the female progeny. Their training at home thus corresponded with their later duties. It was important to avoid releasing them from the protective womb of the home at all costs. There was consensus throughout Europe on this point, but the implementation was not always consistent. In Great Britain, throughout the whole of the 19th century, the exclusive education of daughters by governesses was much more widespread in the 19th century than in Germany and France. One reason was that these countries offered few appealing alternatives. The so-called dame schools (comparable to the privately operated Klippschulen in Germany), which were usually run by older women and men of disparate qualifications and motivation, were only attended in Great Britain by the children of the lower classes and the lower middle class. Public primary schools did not come into existence until after the Education Act of 1870 and were slow to gain acceptance. The few girls' schools that emerged after the middle of the century were often far removed from the urban suburbs, where the majority of the English bourgeoisie lived. Secondly, Great Britain was regarded for a long time as a bastion of governesses. Large numbers of bourgeoisie had earlier achieved great prosperity and become the main employer for governesses alongside the high nobility and the gentry. The national census of 1861 estimated there were 24,770 governesses in England and Wales and the trend was growing. In Germany and France, there were rather few bourgeois families who could afford or who wanted to hire governesses. But even here, despite an increasing number of public girls' schools, there were many supporters of private education. At the end of the 19th century, the view still predominated that "female public schools" were a contradiction in terms, being both "unnatural and impracticable".

To prevent this, the authors never tired of portraying the position of governess as an unwelcome exception and born of necessity: "It is a platform on which middle and upper classes meet, the one struggling up, the other drifting down." As one guidebook opined in 1858, if a family for whatever reason was in financial distress ("a father dies, or a bank breaks, or a husband is killed – if brothers require a college education"), the only acceptable last resort was to commit the daughter of the house to the grim existence of a governess. Contemporary publications chiefly instructed readers about the profession's dark side. The emphasis was placed on the rather precarious relationship between the governesses and the families of their pupils, not least with the aim of persuading the young
teacher to conceal their equal social footing. The general attitude regarding the "interloper" (Eindringling) among the much-vaunted intimacy of the nuclear family and its "home, sweet home" was that a delicate balance needed to be maintained between intimacy and distance.

The degree to which either side was willing or able to grant the other a certain proximity varied. German governesses in particular expected a "familial connection", which was also often promised in the job advertisements. This meant that they were also close to the family in their leisure time, taking part in festivities, visiting operas and museums, and being invited and introduced to social circles. Countess Bertha Kinsky (1843–1914) describes her role at Suttner's house as a friend and "playmate" of her pupils. In her case, though, the proximity went too far: The betrothal of the household's youngest son to the seven-year-older governess was by no means welcomed by family and resulted in his disinheritance and renunciation. Instances like these were the exception not the rule, however. Contrary to the promises of colportage novels, which always ended before the wedding altar, the Germans guidebooks also warned governesses against viewing themselves as having the same social standing as their employers:

A proper governess, however, is not some dazzling figure; she does not have a major part to play before the world, nor does she want to ... Furthermore, she is aware that she is a servant in the house; the more she realizes this, the less she will be required to feel it. It is a fact that the less one expects to be distinguished as a member of the family, the more one has a chance of being so.

In Great Britain, on the other hand, as German guidebooks and governess accounts liked to lament, the prospect of social recognition was rather minute anyway. A German pedagogue bemoaned, for instance, that a governess was never asked to attend social gatherings since she was not presentable at table ("nicht dinnerfähig"). The image of the lonely governess, who, homesick and banished to her sparse living quarters, wistfully listens to the family hustle and bustle from a distance, was not only depicted in novels. The stereotype was also seized by painters and writers dispensing advice. One encyclopedia article remarks that if the governess sporadically appears in the salon "she remains stuck between the roles of guest and beggar ... she is neither fish nor frog, and onerous to the family which condemns her to this position as a foreign element." In retrospect, though, it is difficult to determine whether families in Great Britain actually maintained an unambiguous distance to their governesses. Generally speaking, there were more possibilities for doing so in England than in Germany and France. The vertical floor structure of English houses in the suburbs allowed the servants to be placed in the basement and the governesses in the attic. Whenever this was not possible, the employers sought alternatives. "Unlike our cousins, we had daily governesses; they did not live in, chiefly because my mother thought it would be a bore to have them in the house", recalled a daughter of a professor at Cambridge. In Germany, where wealthy middle-class families usually lived in elegant city flats, contact with the governesses was less avoidable. Unlike the maids, they could not be accommodated in the loft space originally intended for storage. This, too, may have contributed to the fact that governesses were rarer is such settings, whereas their presence helped in suburban villas to raise a family's prestige as sign of bourgeois gentility. In the Great Britain, on the other hand, the governess was a familiar phenomenon, even in petty-bourgeois households of more modest reputation. Their relatively large number around the middle of the century gave rise to the "Governess Question" or, as it was translated in German, to the "Gouvernanten-Elend" (governess plight). The supply of domestic governesses exceeded demand, not least because of often better-trained governesses from abroad.

In Germany, however, the status of the governesses began to improve over the course of the 19th century. Thelma Trinks (1831–1900), who began her career as a governess in the 1850s, thus recalls how her own family adamantly kept her decision a secret:

Such a step at that time was so fantastic and strange that I did not dare to discuss the matter with any of my friends and no one in our family circle was informed of my intention.

To the chagrin of pedagogue Adolf Diesterweg (1790–1866), the situation changed about ten years later: While in the past the announcement of an adolescent girl that she wanted to become a governess would provoke a shaking of heads, a shrugging of shoulders, and silent pity, now it has become a "fashionable thing to do" and "almost a kind of triumph" if a "household's daughter...becomes a governess and, after passing the exam, is given carte blanche to enter into related services in the East and West".
Clearly, in the second half of the century an increasing number of women followed the example of the lawyer's daughter Thekla Trinks. They chose this career path not out of material need but an aversion to the classical female role and out of pedagogical and academic interest. Previously, this profession frequently did not in fact appear to be a voluntary choice. Quickly acquired wealth was a fragile commodity, particularly in the period of nascent Industrialization, before the ills of capitalism were offset by a welfare system or corporate social responsibility. Its loss could force a family's daughters to have to provide for their own livelihood.

Moreover, the European bourgeoisie was extremely heterogeneous as a "class", especially with regard to material means. It not only included the magnate of Manchester, but also the lawyer from Paris and the priest from Oldenburg. Family budgets likewise were also variously endowed. Some governesses were thus recruited from daughters who could no longer count on their father's wealth. The majority, however, came from civil servant and pastor families. "Thus, the difference between... the governess and her female pupils seems to be less one of rank and social position than of pecuniary circumstances", stated the former governess Meta Wellmer (1832–1889).

Even if they often could not choose whether or not to work outside the family, some governesses regarded and welcomed their profession as an opportunity for greater independence and broadening their horizons. The English writer Anne Brontë (1820–1849) put words into the mouth of her fictional heroine Agnes Grey that would have rung true to many governesses: "How delightful it would be to be a governess! To go out into the world; to enter upon a new life; to act for myself; to exercise my unused faculties; to try my unknown powers; to earn my own maintenance..."

At the time, such desires belonged to the purview of men. It is therefore hardly surprising that it was above all the governesses themselves who, in their memoirs or autobiographical governess novels, praised their careers as a liberation from the constricting roles of women. Consequently, some proud, highly educated, and well-traveled governesses even developed feelings of superiority to their employers. For example, the later doctor and pioneer for women's studies wrote Franziska Tiburtius (1843–1927) writes ironically about the narrow-mindedness of a Pomeranian aristocratic family she worked for in the 1860s: "They travelled little and thus had no opportunity to draw any comparisons; in their sphere, on their estates, they experienced virtually no limitations and felt themselves to be the center of the world."

The danger that the family's daughters might expose a governess's affectation as narrow-minded hubris was not small. Bourgeois daughters longed more and more for role models other their mothers, not to mention their unmarried, old-maidish aunts. This was especially true in the second half of the 19th century, when representatives of the European women's movement questioned the role of wife and mother as the only redeeming alternatives and lamented the professional opportunities for women in general. The young, increasingly self-confident governesses thus presented a striking contrast. When a former governess wrote down her experiences in 1877, she outlined the modern type of the polyglot governess, who typified the job description in the second half of the century:

[She] encounters the wider world, resides in a select society; she receives a salary that allows her to dress tastefully, support her family, and put something aside....How astonished the bourgeoise woman of a German imperial city would be to gaze up her great-, great-, great-granddaughter in the present day – seeing her return by train alone from afar on a holiday trip to her parents' house and hearing her relate in foreign tongues of her career as a governess and of her woes, her joys, and her education.

High demand for young foreign women – expectations and evaluations

To mitigate the risk of the governess setting an example, many families often placed their advertisements for governesses in foreign newspapers. Of the approximately 25,000 governesses counted in England in 1861, 1,408 came from other European countries. By hiring a "foreigner", the families perhaps hoped to be able to conceal any obvious similarities between the teacher's upbringing and
that of her pupils. More important, however, was the promise that the daughters could perfect their foreign language skills through a native speaker. This ideal had top priority in the daughters' education plans, which for a long time were scarcely standardized. Literary knowledge that went beyond the respective national classics permitted the young ladies to shine in social circles, especially if they were then able to enunciate the foreign quotations accent free. In an increasingly global (Media Link #aq) mercantile community, business partners from other European countries were often invited to evening parties. The hosts could secure the goodwill of their guests through linguistically talented daughters serving as dinner partners. In the second half of the century, when Germany and France became global players after Great Britain, the English language slowly gained the upper hand.

Until the middle of the 19th century, however, French was still regarded as a particularly elegant language whose mastery was a proof of distinction. Therefore, governesses from France and the French-speaking Switzerland were mainly employed at first in Great Britain and Germany. In France itself, parents preferred girls' boarding schools to domestic instruction. Many governesses thus sought employment elsewhere. One contemporary observer attributed the rare appearance of governesses in France to "the large number of boarding schools and institutions". On the other hand, French women dominated the governess market abroad. So much so that it had become common in Germany to use the term "Französin" (Frenchwoman) synonymously with "Gouvernante". Their longstanding popularity in noble and upper middle-class families also stemmed from the expectation that they were especially well versed in the noble etiquette originally developed at the French court – the conduits – and could transmit it to the daughters. Despite the criticism of the aristocracy articulated by the bourgeoisie during its constitutive phase, it was part of a good upbringing when even youngest daughters could converse flawlessly in French.

At the same time, the decision to employ a French governess can also be attributed to bourgeoisie's "discovery of childhood" and their high regard for an adequate education. Finally, France was recognized as the cradle of female education not least because of the 1678 publication Traité de l'éducation des filles (1687) (Media Link #ar) by the famous philosopher François de Fénelon (1651–1715) (Media Link #as). Fénelon's treatise was translated into German and English, which nurtured the idea throughout Europe that young French women possessed special pedagogical skill.

Beyond their linguistic and supposedly educational competencies or gentility, long-standing prejudices and national stereotypes also figured into the family's choice of a governess. The governesses and employers alike were convinced they knew what national peculiarities were to be expected:

But a German woman must wholly brace herself when she goes to England....Although we are more closely related than other nations in Europe, the English are infinitely different in relation to the atmosphere that predominates in the house. The language of coming and going, receiving and saying goodbye, etc. is quite distinct. They often appear cold and stiff to us, although they are warm at heart – not for everyone, but only for those who have been scrutinized and passed muster. Especially at the beginning, they keep foreigners at arm's length. Even the English governesses often have a hard time accepting the fact that no one cares much about their feelings. The peculiar English etiquette is vastly different from the kind but often unfaithful courtesy of the French.

Much like the growing number of tourists (Media Link #at) who, thanks to road construction and railways, set off on regular trips abroad with the Baedekers in hand and surveyed and reenacted what the booming travel literature dictated, it was believed that even the governesses always exhibited qualities associated with their nationality. Many childhood memories echo similar refrains: Stiff and purse-lipped, English women always aimed at toughening up their pupils with cold baths and open windows; the charming French women liked to flirt, placed great value on their appearance and little on a solid education; German governesses appeared reserved, were disciplined and strict and, of course, invariably highly musical. Families that could afford it employed several governesses from different countries in the house at once in order to profit from their attributed national characteristics. In the home of a wealthy English businessman and father of five daughters and two sons, there was an almost annual rotation of governesses with different nationalities in the 1870s and 1880s. As a result, at least one of the daughters recalls that the sisters learned German nursery rhymes and "disciplin", Irish prayers and French chansons as well as rehearsed and performed English royal dramas.
For their part, the young governesses headed abroad with no fewer prejudices. In her memoirs, Thekla Trinks, who obtained her first position in the late 1850s in Ireland, is repeatedly entangled in contradictions. In short, her experiences did not exactly coincide with her expectations. Arriving at her destination after an arduous journey, it seemed to her "as if all culture, all civilization had pretty much stopped after Killarney". But then, in virtually the same pen stroke, she admiringly portrays her employers' house as filled with precious furniture, pictures, books, and musical instruments. Although she herself experienced the exact opposite in her Irish and English families, Thekla Trinks affirmed the writings of her time that governesses in Anglo-Saxon households were involuntarily isolated. We thus read that Trinks was also not integrated into family life. At the same time, she also describes family life in a quite different way – with herself right in the midst of it:

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I still see before me the vast room called the drawing room, where there were places to sit throughout the whole room. Marion, playing a Beethoven sonata, sits at the open Erard piano, whose tones sound at once powerful and charming. Not far away, at a small chess table, we see Sir Edward and Florence, his usual partner; he supports his noble brow in his hand and looks over the ivory figures, contemplative and outwardly motionless. Sitting behind a silver urn, Lady St. John is busy making the tea. John busily carries the filled cups to those who took part in the dinner. Emma, a spirited Irishwoman who diligently studies the history and fates of her country, has several volumes in front of her which she reads with rapt attention. Lucy and Bella play dominos; I sit at the same table, a book in my hand; but it fails to captivate me: again and again, I survey the scene before me, this colorful, festive, and lively picture. How very different from the evenings I spent in my lonely little chamber in Wesel.

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Significantly, she sees herself as a spectator in this genre scene. At the same time, she soon extracts herself from it by withdrawing to her room (much to the surprise of her superiors). It is hard to escape the impression that she is anxious to preserve her entrenched world view. When she disappoints, as a German woman, with her awkward piano playing, she is astonished by employer's friendly and polite response. Instead of resenting her, she notes how they offered to help her with music lessons. These experiences, however, did not convince her to revise her preconceptions. On the contrary, like many other governesses, her memoirs helped her to solidify her biased point of view.

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The persistence of prejudices may have played a role here, or a need to cling to certain well-established truths in an increasingly diverse society. It may even be evidence of a common pattern in – mostly male – memoirs in which the author portrays a hardscrabble career so that it appears all the more heroic. Regardless of contrary experiences, the idea persisted that young women would have a particularly rough go of it as governesses in Great Britain. It is therefore all the more surprising that Great Britain remained extremely popular as a place of employment with German governesses. Among other things, the comparatively good pay, which permitted some women to save, as well as the increased desire for speak better English prompted veritable armies of young German and Frenchwomen to look past the more foreboding scenarios.

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By the same token, British families were extremely receptive to young Germans women. A reverend's daughter from Hanover was partly responsible for this: Louise Lehzen (1784–1870) helped to establish the good repute of German governesses. Moreover, the fact that they now even increasingly carried testimonies from teacher training seminars in their pockets made them all the more welcome. At the same time, the reputation of French governesses, who were often less well-trained, began to wane throughout Europe. Their educational maxims were now considered superficial, and the stereotype of the vain, arrogant, finery-obsessed Frenchwoman gained the upper hand. The standing of the German governesses accordingly rose.

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They also brought further added value: As music in the home was an indispensable part of the evening ritual in British upper-class families, the often musically proficient German women were especially prized. Franziska Tiburtius affirmative answer to the question "Do you play Thalberg?" – indeed, she could play the fashionable composer's light salon pieces reasonably well – drove up her salary from an English reverend's family by several pounds. Conversely, Germany cultivated the cliché of the non-musical Englishmen, the "land without music", in an encyclopedia article on "governesses", which remarked: "A musical evening in an English soiree, where dilettantish women sing, is, of course, often extremely offensive to German ears and difficult to bear."
The question of musical talent aside, the more German governesses and English employers found a common wave length, the more sharply the French governesses were criticized. Already at the beginning of the 19th century, German commentators insulted them as "milliners of the spirit". In 1906, the women's rights activist Gertrud Bäumer (1873–1954) joined in the harsh criticism of the governesses:

Whereas French women were primarily chosen for these posts, the corrupting role they played in the development of women at that time was widely depicted in novels, pedagogical writings, comedies, and articles in moral weeklies.

Similar grievances were voiced in Great Britain. With the "evangelical revival", which had been closely linked to a specific family ideal since the middle of the century, the French governesses' Catholic denomination was now seen as a problem.

In general, nationalist undertones increasingly intermingled with national debates on governesses. Chauvinist attitudes towards the "East" were evident in all three countries throughout the century, especially when it came to assessing the situation for governesses in Russia. As one German pedagogue scoffed, "French, English, German governesses are better paid (there) than German full professors!" Moreover, demand was high and growing. Soon, Russia gained the reputation of an "Eldorado" for governesses who "can speak perfect French and play the piano well". In St. Petersburg and the surrounding area, around 1,500 governesses were counted from Western Europe. However, commentators warned that the "young ladies" who regularly "emerged from the ships with broken veils and mussed hair are are still pale from seasickness" first had to endure a culture shock before they could assiduously "kindle and maintain the cultural flame in Russia".

In the second half of the century, these pretensions toward the "uncultured" foreigners were reinforced, especially in Great Britain and Germany, by voices that generally condemned the upbringing of foreign women and disparaged foreign governesses: "Incidentally, we were a little bitten with the Victorian attitude towards 'foreigners'. Anything not purely British in the way of a governess was sure to be a disadvantage." The danger of neglecting one's own language, history, and literature was advanced as an argument:

For my own part I much prefer English to foreign governesses. The absence of unity in doctrine seems to me a heavy price to pay for slightly better pronunciation of the language …. It is not right to condemn a whole nation, but it is notorious that the French standard of truth is very unlike the English, especially in Roman Catholics. Of course there are many excellent foreign governesses, but on the whole, it seems to me that the character has much greater chance of being formed by a fellow-countrywoman and Churchwoman.

What applied to the pupils also applied to the governesses themselves. An English governess, who worked in Russia for a long time, felt increasingly drawn into the culture of the country, but was at the same time plagued by the fear of neglecting her own language and culture. She tried to counter this danger by intensively reading English literature. German commentators, who harbored similar concerns, were sympathetic:

Who would blame the English if they finally gave preference to an English governess? The time will come when German governesses are no longer needed in England. We also don't need any English governesses in Germany.

Any means were justified for demystifying the fashionableness of the foreign governess post. The cold-hearted atmosphere in British households was and remained a popular topos, especially in German commentary. For their part, British authors continued to take aim at France. The Times repeatedly painted horror scenarios of governess life in France. For instance, in a letter to the editor in 1857, an English chaplain wrote of the dire straits of a young English woman of excellent upbringing. After her illness had long been ignored by her Parisian employers, she was put on a train more dead than alive. By the time she arrived in London, she had already lost consciousness and died shortly thereafter.
In the German Empire, which after the late founding of the nation state in 1871 still had to complete the inner state building process (innere Staatenbildung), writings were especially common which praised the strengths of German educational principles. Rather than relativizing the cultural differences abroad, it underscored them. In her autobiographical governess novel Gertrude's Wanderjahre (1890), the author accompanies Brigitte Augusti (1839–1930) a young pastor's daughter on her way through Spain and France and then back home. Gertrud Stein sets off "into the wide world" full of fear of the other. It is emphasized that she seeks to fill her superficial school knowledge with "blood and life" through direct experience.50 Her openness to the unfamiliar and extraordinary eloquence causes her self-confidence to grow.51 She impresses with her assured manner and ability to adapt to her surroundings. "How could I know what country you come from?" flatters one of her admirers. "I heard you speak in every tongue, Spanish, English, French; to me, you seem cosmopolitan." In fact, Gertrud Stein's supposed "cosmopolitanism" is more illusion than reality. Her apparent worldliness by no means corresponds with an internalized open-mindedness. Early on, the pious Protestant woman is "horrified" to end up in a Catholic-dominated household, although the master of the house is of German origin. He, in turn, fears that his ultra-Catholic mother-in-law might regard the German governess as a "heretic", who instantly has visions of the Spanish Inquisition.52 Gertrud Stein observes the ostentatious religious processions with revulsion and also causes her Catholic pupils to view them critically. She is then gratified to notice her positive influence on her charges: Through her gentle piano playing, she tames the wild youngest daughter, always referred to as a "gypsy child". When it turns out that the oldest daughter has an eye disease, but that her condition is hidden from the father and the grandmother simply prays to St. Lucia, the enlightened Protestant seizes the initiative: She goes to find a specialist.53 After her Spanish episode, she moves to Paris to perfect her French. Almost en passant, she skillfully and spiritedly manages to whip the wretched household back into shape. Now, she expresses the message of the novel, which could already be distinctly read between the lines:

Why did she remain abroad as long as she did? Why did she not return to her simple, healthy way of life back home? She had experienced and learned a lot; she greatly expanded her knowledge and opinions. Of course, she did not amass any riches.55

The fact that her views were not exactly marked by tolerance and that her international educational journey is portrayed as a redemptive and purifying path back "to her home country" is further underlined at the end of the novel. Back in Germany, at her wedding ceremony with a German ophthalmologist, whom she had met in Spain, she enthusiastically joins in with the cheers for Emperor and Fatherland.56

From job to vocation: Towards a professionalization of the governess system

While such writings make clear that the wanderlust and linguistic talent of governesses did not necessarily go hand in hand with cosmopolitanism, this should not be interpreted as an indication of growing nationalism and increased xenophobia. Indeed, the surge of critical voices against foreign governesses and their employment began was also a reaction to an increasingly large contingent of young women who considered it appealing to leave the domestic realm. Advertisements like the following from the 1854 Kölnische Zeitung were published more and more towards the end of the 19th century:

A young German woman, evang. denomination, able to give thorough instruction in all academic subjects, as well as in music, French and the rudiments of English, is looking for a job as a governess at home or abroad, with preference for the latter.57

Advertisements like this one, which set clear priorities, are an indication of a growing tendency towards professionalization. This was evident, on the one hand, in a more sophisticated and increasingly professionalized placement practice. The need here was all the greater when it came to posts abroad. Usually, there was no opportunity for employers and governesses to get to know each other in advance, making both sides all the more dependent on reliable expertise. For a long time, it had been the local clergy who acted as mediators by way of contacts with fellow ministers abroad. The teacher’s daughter Dorette Mittendorf (1826–1909), who sought her first position in London in the 1840s, also needed a letter of recommendation from a pastor.58 This proved to be particularly important in the case of an initial employment, as other evidence of the governesses' qualities was generally lacking. Until the 1860s, since education was not standardized, it was uncommon everywhere for governesses to hold educational credentials. To get an impression,
a family was dependent on the references of previous employers. These were trusted first and foremost when they came from relatives or acquaintances. This process worked particularly well among the widely networked nobility, who in the extended family shared tried and tested governesses. The emerging bourgeoisie had to use other channels. Not infrequently, respected dignitaries acted as mediators. This included the priests mentioned earlier, and above all compatriots on site in the case of foreign governesses. In Brandenburg, for example, Jean Henri Samuel Formey (1711–1797) (Media Link #az) son of French Huguenots (Media Link #bo), theologian, writer, educator, and member of the Royal Prussian Academy of Sciences, successfully fulfilled this function. On the one hand, he supported and was committed to improving girls' education and, on the other, he had a far-reaching European network.

But such fortuitous arrangements were few and far between. Instead, it became common practice (Media Link #b1) to utilize professional placement agencies, whose reliability was, however, often rightly questioned. To get an impression of the potential governess, some families invited her home for a day. As Franziska Tiburtius wrote about the repeated invitations to lunch: "I was inclined to accept this as a great kindness until it became clear to me that it was also intended as a kind of trial! They wanted to see if my manners complied with English notions, and whether I knew how to handle knives and forks according to the orthodox English custom!"

She saw the fact that the "manners" of many of her compatriots in her time – the late 1860s – left much to be desired as an indication of a lack of preparation and an indifference to customs abroad. Other experienced colleagues emphasized that there was a lot of catching up to do in this regard, suggesting the need for institutionalization. In Great Britain, where the appointment of governesses was more common, institutions were established at an early stage to channel and guide governesses. The Governesses' Benevolent Institution (GBI) was established in 1843 and its Board of Management regularly published reports on professional development. This relatively early institution was a mixture of charity and professional association. Foreign governesses also began to organize themselves in order to strengthen their status in their host countries and to help their compatriots cope with challenges. In 1877, the international association "Freundinnen junger Mädchen" was founded, which assisted female teachers in their search for work abroad. Former governesses served here as valuable contacts. In 1885, donations were collected in the German Reich for a home in Paris where German governesses and maids could stay during their search for a job and their holidays. Crown princess Cecilie (1886–1954) (Media Link #b2) took over the patronage for the facility. The home in Paris opened its doors in 1886, albeit with separate entrances for governesses and maids. In 1890, the Association of German Teachers in France established its own home, which was mainly used for job placement and language instruction.

Writings that now appeared on the governess profession changed from moral-Christian teachings, such as Useful Hints, to pragmatic and professional guidebooks, whose chief point of departure was the pedagogical environment for teachers and pupils. Here, experienced and successful governesses found a platform. Family magazines also generously granted them space: Helene Adelmann (1841–1915) (Media Link #b3), a former governess who ran an agency in London, was allowed to regularly advertise her institution in one-page ads in Gartenlaube.

These magazines also became much more self-confident in their style of writing: The pieces were not composed by timid pastors' daughters, but experienced teachers who insisted on their professional ethics and sought and used forums for exchanging experiences. Adelmann, for example, vigorously refuted the notion that no previous education was necessary for finding a post as a governess in England. She tells of young German women who step onto the ship in naive arrogance on one side of the canal and are then left stranded in England without employment. She rightly refers to the markedly higher employment standards since the middle of the century. The women who put their experiences to paper had known their vocation for years. Now, they aimed to stress the importance of their educational task with reference to their own achievements. It was therefore very much in their interest to select exactly those whom they found worthy of this profession.
In the past, the main thrust of a large part of the English agencies was to lure young inexperienced teachers into jobs that were either poorly paid or not at all. Our foreign associations in conjunction with the Allgemeinen Deutschen Lehrerinnenverein presented a considerable obstacle to this activity. All 49 German teachers' associations at home and abroad work closely together through the central administration of the placement agency in Leipzig, Pfaffendorfer Strasse 1. Anyone who wants to go somewhere abroad is best advised to accept the decision of the central administration in Leipzig. However, only actual teachers and governesses are placed in any of the associations. For those who lack the necessary training, such a placement is not possible. The fact that only experts (teachers) direct the placement service is of course a great advantage.

The "expertise" referred to here was no longer limited to just country-specific knowledge, but increasingly also to the proficiencies and educational content expected of governesses. For a long time, it was difficult to predict and also not critically reflected upon what competencies the governesses would bring with them besides their language skills. At least until the middle of the 19th century, the consensus among the families – as one former governess described it – was that "good manners, good breeding" coupled with the "accomplishments of a lady: water colours, drawing, music" were the most important prerequisites. We know from the memoirs, which gratefully paid tribute to the female educators (Pädagoginnen) from home and abroad, that many of the young teachers carried with them and passed on a wide range of knowledge. Depending on aptitude and inclination, it was up to the respective governesses to determine the core areas of instruction. What is more (recalling Ethel Smyth quoted at the outset), harmonious teacher-pupil relationships that were not beholden to a strict curriculum often allowed daughters to receive special attention tailored to their interests and talents. Thus many pupils may have been taught in disciplines that did not even appear in the standard curriculum of the slowly emerging girls' schools.

Nonetheless, the lack of educational institutions also meant that teachers, at least in the first decades of the 19th century, primarily had to autodidactically train themselves and to independently take advantage of whatever courses were on offer. The availability of such offerings changed rapidly. Where Dorette Mittendorf, born in Hanover in 1826, was only able attend a girl's secondary school (Töchterpensionat) for two and a half years in Einbeck, the education of Thekla Trinks about two decades later was much more multi-faceted. In her own words, she first visited "the best institution in town" and, after finishing her schooling, received private lessons in music, French, and English. "At the time, a systematic, state-regulated teacher training was not known in Thuringia." In contrast, the first teacher seminars had already been established in Prussia. In 1869, German state already had 39 teacher training centers. For the ambitious Thekla, this meant packing her bags: Starting in October 1851, she attended an 18-month-long teacher training seminar in Droyssig in the district of Merseburg. There, she describes benefitting from "a highly original educational course of study", especially at the hand of the institution's director. "He inspired everything, but we had to make our own contribution to developing his ideas." Furthermore, the institution took advantage of the presence of students from different nations with only one specific language being spoken each week. The training was concluded with a two-day examination in Düsseldorf.

Trink's curiosity and eagerness to learn was by no means exhausted, however. In 1855, she went to Exposition Universelle in Paris to put the finishing touches to her French. She left her first post with a high-ranking Irish family because she had come no closer to perfecting her English there. At odds with this particular goal was the requirement that she speak German with her students in and outside of class and French. With her second family in England, she was much more challenged and encouraged. Together with her sixteen-year-old student, she translated German and French texts into English. But that was not all:

Since I was also entrusted with teaching English history and literature, this was an extremely valuable opportunity for my further education in English. To give these lessons, I had to properly prepare myself. We read some classical works together – namely, Milton and Shakespeare; I discussed the content with Lucy (her pupil), and then we each wrote a summary of the content.

The German teacher thus gained greater confidence in both the language and the culture of the country in which she worked.
In this case, the German teacher mainly took knowledge of the country with her and pined not least for culinary delights such as the "wonderful Devonshire cream". Others, however, passed on German customs to their English employers. The two German governesses who taught in the Walford family were also quite popular with their pupils because of their German baking recipes. In the end, however, they were prized above all because of their obvious musical talent, which captivated the entire family. "Fräulein Lindemann" and "Fräulein Müller", who joined the family of seven in the 1850s, were both trained singers, able to splendidly harmonize, and performed every evening, accompanied by the lady of the house on the grand piano. The fact that they preferred to play "sweet songs of the Vaterland" did not meet with the family's disapproval. As daughter Lucy Walford recalled, the two Germans generally took charge in the children's room of the five sisters. They were supported by their children's parents, who had a keen interest in pedagogical issues, and cherished by the children.

Some governesses developed and passed on didactic skills in the course of their employment. The English governess who looked after two little Russian girls in Moscow regularly visited the Hermitage with her pupils, not however without having previously studied the works of art exhibited there. She then shared this knowledge with the children on-site. Thekla Trinks practiced the concept of "research-developing teaching" with her English pupils. Already in the 1830s, Louise Lehzen was aware of the pedagogical benefits of visualization. Together with the little Princess Viktoria, she made 132 dolls of historical personalities, giving memorable faces to the history she sought to relate to the future queen.

Queen Victoria repaid the empathy of her "sweet Lehzen" with lifelong friendship. Her governess is responsible for the fact that we are relatively well informed today about the queen's inner life. Indeed, she encouraged her pupil, who was hardly able to write, to keep up a regular diary. While the success that Lehzen and legions of other governesses had in setting the right tone may have come naturally, this ability was nevertheless highlighted as key quality of a good governess, especially when working abroad. A topos that also found its way into the official guide literature was the fact that the governesses' lessons were all the more fruitful when they created a pleasant atmosphere, treated each other cordially, respected the family customs, and, above all, radiated enthusiasm for the task at hand. "Recall the state in which you began the morning's work!", admonished a governess in 1860. "Were you well? And cheerful? And ready to see everything in the pleasantest light in which it could truthfully be seen?"

Even though governesses aroused a wide range of emotions, many seemed nonetheless able to win over their pupils. The conditions for their success here were usually already in place: The governesses and their pupils spent many hours of the day together (often more time than the parents or other family members), shared experiences, celebrated common achievements, and quickly got to know each other. The officer's son and later writer Gerald Brenan (1894–1987) portrayed his childhood as "The Age of Governesses", thus emphasizing the great influence of these women.

As it was stressed time and again, the governesses who came from abroad had a special obligation – not only to themselves, but also as ambassadors for their country. They were in a position to establish a basis of mutual respect, especially among the young children. A sound education and upbringing were indispensable, as an experienced governess never tired of emphasizing:

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Today, only the German teacher who has had a solid upbringing is able to make progress abroad wherever she may go. Parents who let their daughters search abroad for employment that their country does not offer them here should bear in mind that they expose them to a more intense struggle for existence, and that they need spiritual and moral equipment that enables them to withstand every encounter and to honor the German name abroad.
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Over the course of the century, the expectations of the governesses also clearly increased along with the improved quality of teaching. The larger number of teacher training institutions, especially in the German Reich, resulted in a correspondingly higher number of governesses with a diploma or similar educational credential. Moreover, the bourgeois circles, who now frequently appear as employers, placed more value on a solid education for their children – which also increasingly applied to their daughters. The salary was also now more strongly tied to the level of a governess's training.
The end of the governess career

The governesses came to develop their own ambitions – ones which ultimately conflicted with the ideals of male writers who located the "happy ending" of a governess career in marriage. Yet, as Adolf Diesterweg lamented on behalf of many others, very few – namely only four to five percent, if one trusted the "statistics of teachers and governesses" (Statistik der Lehrerinnen und Gouvernanten) – could truly hope for a marriage. Despite the years of training, the fact that they had "nobler speech, finer behavior, [a] perhaps more developed spirit and pragmatic view, a sociable demeanor and a sense of beauty and tenderness" made little difference. "Where are 96 or 95 percent?" The answer was that a large number of these unmarried teachers found themselves in the now numerous private and public secondary schools for girls (Media Link #b6).

In the first half of the century, the life of a governess was considered liberating, especially when it took her abroad. The particularly successful ones now had their sights set on a further career step. They found it much more attractive to take a position at a public or private school:

At the end of 1866, I left the house that had become very dear to me ... In the meantime, I was probably past my prime for settling completely into the interests of a new house, and further in a dependent position, and feel satisfied in doing so. My goal at the time was to take over a school.  

The chances of this were much higher by the end of the century. A publication already remarked in 1862 that "the institutional and public education, which was gaining more and more ground", was "not favorable" to the governesses unless they changed from private to public education.

Many women, especially the more ambitious ones, now clearly preferred public education. The blemish of dependence, which was still clung to the governess's existence, was far less pronounced here. For Thekla Trinks, being a governess was finally only intended as an instructive interlude. Her professional goal had always been to be the "head of the institution". At an early stage, she had a particularly wealthy clientele in mind that she sought to strategically conquer one step at a time. "I had come to England", she explained, "because I considered the stay in this country as an essential prerequisite, as the actual foundation for the future establishment of a boarding school attended by English women."  

She gradually approached this goal by making the most of her abundant experience of England. With perfect diction and diplomatic skill, she corresponded with the parents of potential schoolgirls. She literally accommodated them by picking them up personally from home or sending a colleague to take them to the Meininger Institute. She reacted tolerantly to foreign fashions when a group of young English women with open hair and colorful dresses got off the train, and she rejoiced when her pupils performed "a series of vivid scenes from English history" for her birthday. Knowing that music was the main reason "the English women were drawn to Germany", she had purchased six pianos, which were only temporarily silent during a scarlet fever epidemic: "Only one who has ever run a boarding school knows what it means when the pianos go silent." The fact that she and her colleague "spoke English in a pure and familiar manner" helped give rise to a familiar atmosphere, and permitted her to spend "many a pleasant hour in serious conversation with individual pupils". Thanks to the method of teaching (already tried and tested in the governess period) of not only "committing the material to memory, but of also eliciting an understanding of it by connecting it to something similar in other subject areas", she managed to create a foundation "(for the girls') further education after they returned home ... This was confirmed to us by the letters of many dear pupils".

This acceptance and recognition of English proclivities and peculiarities had its limits, however. The notion of cultural superiority remained and aroused missionary zeal:
We mainly had to take account of the English character in our curriculum. Our primary aim had been to achieve a broadening of the mind, to bring about an interiorization the whole being as opposed to the superficiality and light-heartedness that showed itself in most of the newcomers.85

Thekla Trink's experiences abroad had rather strengthened her national pride. Other governesses may have utilized their wealth of experience differently, seeing and adopting the advantages of the respective "other" on their journeys. To concede this, however, especially in the nationalistic German Reich, seemed inopportune. The opponents of well-trained teachers repeatedly raised their voices, and the teachers' struggle for recognition met with fierce resistance.86 When the increasing institutionalization of girls' education was accompanied by a nationalization of the teaching staff, opportunities for demonstrating a cosmopolitan attitude decreased yet again. It had once again become a rarity for girl pupils to be taught by female foreigners or a female teachers with experience abroad.

The notion that the chances of cultural transfer accordingly dwindled would overstate the importance of the governesses for this process: In addition to the mutual prejudices, which were apparently hard to break, young women had to contend with three levels of foreignness: They were strangers to the country, sometimes strangers to the class, and strangers to the families. This is made it a particular challenge to act as cultural mediators or to accept different cultural values. But the more they could look to role models and have their own experiences, the more self-confident the young women appeared and the more they challenged the traditional ideal of femininity. More than a few governesses truly opened up new horizons for the young women that followed.

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Translated by: Christopher Reid
Editor: Ruth-Elisabeth Mohrmann
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