An Eventful Life
Ruth Sorel was born a century ago

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In April 1933, a rupture occurred in the young life of the dancer Ruth Elly Abramowitz. Right at the beginning of her career, she was fired from the Berlin Municipal Opera because she was a member in a communist ‘Red Cell’. In addition, she had the ‘wrong’ father. The family roots of Aron Abramowitz lie in the area of Kraków, and his mother had also sung lullabies to him in Polish. In his family’s tradition, one of his ancestors in the nineteenth century had been a rabbi in Vladivostok. But Aron Abramowitz’s life was closely connected with the town of Halle an der Saale. There he established a family, had four sons and three daughters: Alice, Lea and Ruth. Politically they had leanings toward the KPD, the German Communist Party. Alice even emigrated to the Soviet Union. There she fell under the wheels of Stalin’s terror, barely survived and returned in the mid-1950s to East Berlin.

Ruth, the youngest of the three daughters, was born on 18 June 1907. She completed training as a dancer in Dresden, and was a member for three years of the famous dance ensemble of Mary Wigman. Her career as a soloist began in 1926 with the Essen Opera Ballet. From 1928 on, she was active as a soloist in Berlin, where in 1931 she gained fame as a dancer in the ‘Legend of Joseph’. Together with her life companion and fellow dancer Georg Groke, she also appeared in several evening programs that were ‘tinged with social militancy’, which raised particular ‘suspicions’ about her politics. Fellow dancers and acquaintances turned away from her in the spring of 1933, ‘behaving as if under orders’, as Ruth had to painfully experience. Ruth and Georg Groke decided to leave National Socialist Germany.

Only her sister Lea, married to a non-Jew, remained on in Halle, and managed to care for her father, who became a widower in 1933. In 1941, at the age of 65, he was sent forcibly to the Jewish home for the aged and isolated there; he was later deported on 11 January 1944 via the Jewish Hospital in Berlin to Theresienstadt, and died there a month later. Today he is remembered in Halle by a commemorative ‘stumbling stone’.

After 1933, Ruth apparently did not ever see her father again. She traveled together with Groke in June 1933 to an international competition for artistic dance in Warsaw, where she won first prize for solo dance with a performance of the ‘Dance of the Seven Veils’ from Richard Strauss’s opera Salome. Later that year she went on tour

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1 I would like to thank Markus Hawlik-Abramowitz, Berlin, the son of the nephew of Ruth Sorel, for useful information. The original German version of this article was published in Tribüne 46 (2007) 182:78-84 for the centenary of Ruth Sorel’s birth.

2 Hedwig Müller, Patricia Stöckemann, „… jeder Mensch ist ein Tänzer!” Ausdruckstanz in Deutschland zwischen 1900 und 1945, Gießen 1993, pp. 208ff.

3 The spelling of the name varies between different family members; stress is on [o].


5 Müller/Stöckemann, p. 209.

6 Ruth Sorel-Choromańska, Pierwsze kroki w Michale [The first steps with Michał], ed. Krzysztofa Grabowska and Marek Soltysik, in: Życie Literackie, 1979, No. 35 (1440).

7 See Stolpersteine in Halle, URL: http://bit.ly/Jnbfz (accessed 25 April 2012). The stone before the house at Große Berliner 8, where the Jewish home for the aged was formerly located, bears the inscription: HIER WOHNTE / ARON ABRAMOWITZ / JG. 1876 / DEPORTIERT / THERESIENSTADT / TOT 7.2.1944 [HERE LIVED / ARON ABRAMOWITZ / BORN 1876 / DEPORTED / THERESIENSTADT / DIED 7 FEB. 1944]. I wish to thank Heidi Bohley and the association Verein Zeitgeschichte(n), Halle/Saale, for this information.
through several Polish cities. With the aid of the dancer Ziuta Buczyńska, Ruth and Groke then settled down for the longer term in Warsaw. She adopted the stage name of Ruth Sorel.

Most refugees did not consider Poland a country of refuge at that time, and only few chose it as a place for permanent residence, such as Alexander Granach, who performed for a time at the Jewish Theater in Kraków. Yet from 1933 to 1939, Poland was to serve some 10,000 refugees from Germany and Austria fleeing the Nazi regime as a ‘short-term transit station,’ as the Danzig-based Germanist Marek Andrzejewski has noted. It was comparatively easy to cross the border in Upper Silesia into Poland. However, aside from the linguistic problems that almost all such refugees encountered, and the disparities in mentality, antisemitism was a major problem, since this was widespread in the Second Polish Republic. Moreover, the official policy of the Polish government was to seek good relations with the Nazi regime. It can be assumed that communists could hardly feel at ease in a country where the Polish Communist Party had (in 1938) been banned as illegal and gone underground.

But for Ruth, her own artistic design for living had priority over any politics. She was already then a key representative of that expressive mode of dance in which Expressionist originality combined with the precision of traditional ballet, fusing into a new ‘theatrical dance.’ From 1934, she worked in the ‘School for Eurythmics and Fine Art’ of Janina Mieczyńska, and in 1937, though a foreigner, she even obtained a special permit from the ministry of culture to establish her own ‘Ruth Sorel Private School for Artistic Dance and Rhythmical Gymnastics.’ There she was active as an educator, choreographer and soloist. Mieczysław Wallis publicly welcomed her engaged participation in the dance scene in the Polish capital at the time:

Ruth Sorel has not only brought along her grace and charm, but also her exceptional talent, her culture, ideas and experience. Let us gain something useful from this in order to refine dance culture here in Poland, and awaken interest in the noble art of the dance among broad strata of the intelligentsia.

In April 1939, Ruth organized a ‘Grand Festival of Art’ with her school. Sorel and Groke, at the time world famous, spent much times touring through cities in Poland and abroad; these tours led them to Palestine, and in April 1935 to the U.S. The JTA noted:

Two of the most popular dancers of Europe, Ruth Sorel Abramovitch and George Groke, make their American debut this (Sunday) evening at the Majestic. They are both exiles from Nazi Germany. Miss Abramovitch, blonde and blue-eyed, told reporters Friday that five months spent in Palestine had made a deep impression on her and Groke. […] Reports which preceded them are that their style is spectacular, vigorous and intensely personal. Groke is renowned for facile elevation, while his partner is famous abroad for daring interpretations of Potiphar’s wife and Salome.

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8 See the exhibition ‘Heimat und Exil. Emigration der deutschen Juden nach 1933,’ which initially was shown in the Jewish Museum Berlin and will soon be exhibited in the Haus der Geschichte der Bundesrepublik Deutschland in Bonn and later on in Leipzig.
12 Arndt, Ruth Abramowitsch-Sorel, p. 29.
After separating from Ruth, Groke returned in 1939 to Berlin and the Deutsche Tanzbühne.\(^\text{14}\)

In 1935, Ruth met the successful Polish writer Michał Choromański, and these two outstanding artists became ever closer as years past.\(^\text{15}\) For her first ballet, ‘Circus of the Seven Sins’, Choromański wrote the libretto.\(^\text{16}\) When Warsaw was under bombardment and being destroyed by the German Luftwaffe, Ruth was not alone. She rather spontaneously decided to marry her longtime friend, and this offered her a certain modicum of protection: they exchanged vows in the Protestant Church on Kredytowa Street on 6 September 1939 during a pause in the aerial attacks. At the last minute during these fateful final days of the Second Polish Republic, she claimed the right to be considered a Pole. After the German forces occupied the city, they showed themselves as little as possible outside their residence in a hotel. In the meantime, Choromański arranged for them to flee ‘legally.’

Both for Michał and Ruth, the Second Polish Republic was their second home. Michał Choromański was born to Polish parents in Yelisavetgrad (today Kirovohrad) in the central Ukraine, and did not relocate to Poland from the Soviet Union with his mother and sister and settle there until 1924. In many respects, however, they were an unmatched couple. Choromański was a master of the literary word, and had become known beyond Poland by his early novel Zazdrość i medycyna (1933), already translated into German one year later as Eifersucht und Medizin.\(^\text{17}\) However, he too had to learn a great deal after settling in Poland, since he had his debut writing in Russian, but he quickly was able to learn and adjust. Yet Ruth was never able to master Polish and speak correctly.\(^\text{18}\) In the wake of / Owing to their forced exile in Brazil and Canada, the couple wrote letters to each other in English after their return to postwar Warsaw.\(^\text{19}\) As a dancer, Sorel made constant use of an intensive expressivity of the body. Choromański had since his youth been ill with tuberculosis, had lost a leg to the disease, and for years spent time in innumerable spas where he was able to recuperate. Since the years in exile, he suffered in addition from an incurable nervous ailment associated with a tormenting form of insomnia.

But back to 1940. Thanks to the corruptibility of the German occupation officials, and with the assistance of a writer colleague who was in the PEN Club, Choromański managed to arrange the official permit for a train trip through the Reich. The literary critic Eugeniusz Szermentowski, who like Choromański had been a friend of the poet Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, wrote in his diary on 1 October 1945:

> They’ve accepted me into the association of former political prisoners. The Pawiak prison sure wasn’t Auschwitz, but having spent half a year there also means something. What did they lock me up for? For participation in rescuing Jews. We worked together with other travel agencies in this activity. Customs officials whom we had bribed closed both eyes when they encountered a false bottom in a suitcase. This is the way I rescued my friend Michał Choromański and the charming Ruth Sorel.\(^\text{20}\)

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\(^{14}\) Roman Arndt, Georg Groke. Ein Lebenslauf, in: Tanzdrama, 1998, No. 3 (42), p. 35. Groke, born in 1904, was later in the army, then a POW in Soviet detention. After his release, he began a second career in the GDR. He died a very old man in 1999.

\(^{15}\) Soltysik, pp. 209-214.

\(^{16}\) Arndt, Ruth Abramowitsch-Sorel, p. 29.

\(^{17}\) It was reprinted several times after World War II. The novel Jealousy & Medicine appeared in English translation by Eileen Arthurton-Barker at Willow Press in London in 1946.

\(^{18}\) Soltysik, pp. 210, 233.

\(^{19}\) Soltysik, p. 284.

Ruth wrote that the departure had proved a success in March 1940, after Choromański, with the help of Szermentowski, who was considered an ethnic German, had given the responsible occupation official some money and had obtained the desired permit. Before they fled, they passed on a portion of their private archive to their friend, the writer Zofia Nałkowska, for safekeeping. Ruth and her husband traveled initially to Vienna. Thanks to contact with a Viennese woman, they obtained the necessary funds there to be able to arrange a connecting trip to Italy. As a result of Ruth’s presence of mind and art of dissimulation, they were able, already on the train to Rome, to get past a risky control check. They remained lucky in this way right down to the conclusion of their venture to escape.

The following years turned out to be difficult as well. The couple traveled through France to Great Britain. But during their six-week stay in London, Michał Choromański quarreled with the local circles of exiles. Their views and actions seemed to him, a man who had just escaped the hell of Nazi-occupied Warsaw, to be totally inappropriate.

The couple made use of a visa to Brazil, where they landed on 15 September 1940 and were to remain three years. They lived in various different places in the country, becoming acquainted with Stefan Zweig, who was deeply pessimistic about the course of the war in Europe, and with his wife. However, Ruth had no luck in setting up a new dance school. Choromański suffered almost round the clock from the tropical climate and the suffocating, intrigue-ridden atmosphere in the Polish exile milieu in Brazil. Because of Ruth’s origin as a German, they were unable to obtain a visa to the United States. Their marriage went through its first crisis. However, backing from others made it possible for them to endure the time of greatest calamity.

Finally their trip to Canada was approved. In 1943, they settled in Montreal. Ruth’s urge to create, long blocked by circumstance, now found a fruitful area of activity. She immediately established three ballet studios, and soon took part in festivals with the group ‘Les Ballets Ruth Sorel’ and ‘The Ruth Sorel Modern Dance Group.’ She also had one more performance in New York. With her ‘intensely theatrical German dance style, her literary inspiration, and the emotion, musicality and precision of her execution,’ she made a major contribution to the further artistic development of ballet in her new adoptive home.

In 1949, she had a major success in Montreal with “La Gaspésienne”, the first choreography with Québécois content. The ballet was also performed in Toronto, New York City, and elsewhere. As in Brazil earlier, Michał Choromański took notes for his future works, but here too was unable to write. Now and then, he had a literary role in contributing to Ruth’s ballets, but at times all he did was to accompany Ruth’s practicing dancers at the piano. While Ruth, through her various enterprises, was extremely busy and always able to demonstrate ever greater success, he was oppressed by deep and profound loneliness. He had become addicted to drugs as a result of many years of treatment with medications, and he believed his sole means to survive was to return to Poland, where he hoped he would experience a new beginning in his creative work.

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22 Soltysik, p. 250.
23 Soltysik, pp. 254-261.
24 Soltysik, pp. 231, 249f., 273f.
25 In June 1941, the State Department issued a regulation forbidding the granting of a visa to anyone who had relatives in Axis occupied territory; from December 1941, refugees with "close relatives" were denied entry to the U.S., ostensibly out of fear that they could be blackmailed into working as agents for Germany; see: http://www.ushmm.org/museum/exhibit/online/stlouis/teach/supread.htm.
26 Soltysik, pp. 232f., 238f., 260.
29 Soltysik, p. 276.
The decision to leave Canada must have been very difficult for Ruth. She feared that such a step would mean the end of her artistic activity, and this was not a mistaken assessment, as it turned out. The relocation to Warsaw was definitely a disadvantage for her, because the city, still in the process of reconstruction, was unable to offer her the customary possibilities for work available in wealthy North America. But she emigrated again, for the sake of her husband Michał. Within a few short days, she packed up, and in the fall of 1957 they returned to Poland.

The Warsaw of 1957 was of course a city different from the one the couple Choromański had left: there were different buildings, streets, public squares (or streets and squares had new names)—and much of the population now was from the provinces, relocated to the capital. They obtained a newly built 2-room apartment on Marszałkowska street, across from the Saxon Garden and not far from the just dedicated Palace of Culture, a gift of Stalin to the Poles. Ruth gave private lessons in German, and encountered considerable difficulty in trying to arrange to continue at least her work as a dance educator and teacher of eurhythmics. For years after their return, a journalist who visited the couple concluded that there was no place in Gomułka’s Poland for Ruth Sorel and her experience. She only appeared in a soloist evening performance one more time. Ruth was also unable to realize her dream of building up her own professional dance ensemble and to go once again on tour.

Choromański also felt forgotten in comparison with his popularity in the 1930s. But for Ruth’s husband, and Polish literature, things did work out, at least a bit. Thanks to the honorarium for the new edition of his bestseller in the 1930s, he had been able to pay for the trip back to Poland. Life back in Poland gave new wings to his creative powers. What followed was a highly intensive period of creativity. Between 1959 and 1971, he published 10 books, some of lasting value, including the novel Różowe krowy i szare scandalie (Red Cows and Gray Scandals, Poznań 1970, published in 1976 in East Germany as Rosa Kühe und graue Skandale). Even if he could not build on the old past success, his new books sold well, and the older ones were reprinted. For a time, his health also improved.

After all the years of crisis in Canada, the bonds of cohesion between Ruth and Michał grew stronger once again. Choromański was able to earn a decent living, and Ruth increasingly took on the role of an energetic caregiver and protector for her ever more distracted husband. When she was offered a job as choreographer at a Polish opera house in 1966, she decided to stay in Warsaw at the side of her husband. In addition, she had in the meantime become very involved in constant work with children and youth in an institutionalized framework. Since she was not far from her relatives in the German Democratic Republic, she was able to visit with them in East Berlin or Warsaw on a number of occasions.

Michał Choromański’s use of sleeping pills over many years led to serious cardiac problems. On 24 March 1972, he suddenly passed away while in a clinic in Konstancin near Warsaw. Ruth learned of his death the next morning when she went to visit him. She left a number of poems in Polish in which she had expressed her great sorrow. Otherwise, she now dedicated her time to writing her memoirs, composed in a very idiosyncratic and individual Polish. There she described her relationship with Michał Choromański and what they had experienced together from her perspective.

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30 Życie Warszawy, No. 282, 27 Nov. 1957.
31 Soltysik, p. 288.
34 In the 1970s and 1980s, the publisher Volk und Welt in East Berlin brought out some of the new works in German translation; so the GDR was a place where Choromański enjoyed popularity outside Poland.
magazine *Życie Literackie* published excerpts from this in 1979, and the writer Marek Sołtysik used them in his first biography of Choromański.  

Ruth Sorel died on 1 April 1974 at the age of 66. She was buried four days later in the Powązki Cemetery next to the last resting place of her husband. Today the dancer from Halle is remembered in three countries on two continents, but only in a small way. In Germany, remembrance, if at all, is of the young Ruth Abramowitsch, while her career after fleeing from Europe is lost in obscurity. There is only a single short article in German about Ruth’s artistry of the dance, which outlines her career over the years. In Poland, Ruth Sorel-Choromańska’s life has been included in the *National Biography*. But this entry contains a number of incorrect, incomplete and inaccurate statements, and is largely silent about Ruth’s work outside Poland. Ultimately, it is Québec and Canada which remember the choreographer and ballet director Sorel as a ‘pioneer of European expressionism in Québec,’ who helped make Montreal in the course of a few short years into a center for modern dance in North America.

The life trajectory of Ruth Sorel-Choromańska from Halle an der Saale, replete with turns, twists and meanders -- an artist who in an era of abysmal German-Polish-Jewish discord declared herself a Pole by choice -- should have deserved more attention for that reason alone. All the more so should her artistically, emotionally and politically so eventful life, marked by a number of new beginnings, interest us today, the centenary year of her birth.

*Translated from the German by Bill Templer*

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36 *Życie Literackie*, 1979, No. 35(1440)-37(1442).
37 Sołtysik, Świadomość to kamień.
38 Arndt, Ruth Abramowitsch-Sorel.
40 Valaskakis-Tembeck.