

## Notes and Sources

Emmy Noether, Hermann Weyl, and the Göttingen Academy  
A marginal noteNorbert Schappacher<sup>a,\*</sup>, Cordula Tollmien<sup>b</sup><sup>a</sup> IRMA, 7 rue René Descartes, 67084, Strasbourg cedex, France<sup>b</sup> Rehagen 7, 34346 Hann. Münden, Germany

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Abstract

A new document about Hermann Weyl's attempt to have Emmy Noether elected into the Göttingen Academy is presented.  
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It is well-known [Becker et al., 1998, p. 42] that the only time Emmy Noether, the mother of modern algebra, was treated by a German authority just as her distinguished male colleagues, and not according to her inferior hierarchical position, occurred when the Nazi government put her on leave, forbidding her to teach at the mathematics institute of Göttingen University, by way of a telegram dated 25 April 1933. The reason given there was to “await final decision” in view of the racist and politically repressive *Gesetz zur Wiederherstellung des Berufsbeamtentums*—i.e., *Law for the restoration of the professional civil service*, as it was called—of 7 April 1933. Indeed, Emmy Noether never held a position in the civil service; she was a *nichtbeamteter außerordentlicher Professor* and was therefore not formally concerned by the cited law at the time.<sup>1</sup>

Cordula Tollmien has documented in detail [Tollmien, 1990, 1991] the formidable opposition that Noether's supporters, and in particular David Hilbert, had to fight within the *Philosophische Fakultät* of Göttingen University in order to finally—after unsuccessful attempts in 1915 and 1917—get her accepted for *Habilitation* in June 1919, thus giving her the right to teach courses, and subsequently to secure at least

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\* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [schappacher@math.unistra.fr](mailto:schappacher@math.unistra.fr) (N. Schappacher).

URLs: <http://www-irma.u-strasbg.fr/~schappa/NSch/Home.html> (N. Schappacher), <http://www.tollmien.com> (C. Tollmien).

<sup>1</sup> Even though it is true that this law was later, on 6 May 1933, extended by decree also to certain non-civil-servants like Emmy Noether.

the meagre position which the Nazis would then dismiss her from. Since the strongest resistance in the *Fakultät* came from the *Historisch-Philologische Abteilung*, i.e., the representatives of the humanities, the battle for Emmy Noether would be one of the driving factors which finally, in 1922, led to the creation of a separate *Mathematisch-Naturwissenschaftliche Fakultät* at Göttingen, leaving the humanities to themselves in what remained of the *Philosophische Fakultät*.

In this note we present a newly discovered document which highlights, and allows to date, a peculiar silent echo of these past fights. The echo occurred after David Hilbert had been succeeded on his chair by Hermann Weyl in 1930, and it happened not at the university but within the Academy of Sciences at Göttingen, which at the time was still called *Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften zu Göttingen*. The folder *Pers 25* in the archives of the Academy holds (sheet 154) the following letter written on 4 December 1932 by Hermann Weyl to the then secretary of the Göttingen *Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften*, the zoologist Alfred R.W. Kühn, in which Weyl reports on his contact with the president of the philological-historical class of the Academy, the classical archeologist and former rector of Göttingen University Hermann Thiersch<sup>2</sup>:

Lieber Herr Kühn,

Herr Thiersch teilt mir mit, daß nach seiner Umfrage von seiten der philologisch-historischen Klasse mit einer fast einmütigen Ablehnung des Antrags gerechnet werden müsse, Fr. Noether zum Mitglied der Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften zu machen. Da ich an nutzlosen Demonstrationen kein Interesse habe, ziehe ich daher diesen Antrag zurück – so sehr ich es im Interesse unserer Gesellschaft bedaure, daß sie auf die Mitwirkung einer so starken produktiven Kraft verzichtet aus Gründen, die mir nebensächlich und nicht stichhaltig erscheinen.

Mit herzlichem Gruß Ihr H. Weyl

That is: “Herr Thiersch tells me that, according to his inquiries, one has to expect a nearly unanimous refusal by the philological-historical class [of the Academy] of the proposal to elect Miss Noether as member of the *Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften*. Since I have no interest in useless demonstrations, I therefore retract this proposal – as much as I regret in the interest of our *Gesellschaft* that it prefers to forgo the collaboration of such a strong productive force for reasons which seem to me to be besides the point and not cogent.”

By the time of the letter, Noether’s ‘productive force’ had already left its traces in many places, in particular also in the Academy’s *Göttinger Nachrichten*; the well-known *Noether theorems* in invariant theory were presented there—see [Noether, 1918a, 1918b, 1919, 1926]. Since she was not a member of the Academy, these notes had been presented by member colleagues: her early papers by Felix Klein, and the later one [Noether, 1926] by Richard Courant.

The ‘reasons’ for the opposition to Noether, which Weyl alludes to without spelling them out, were most certainly threefold, while their ranking probably varied between the various distinguished colleagues: Emmy Noether was a woman, she was Jewish, and she had clearly leftist political opinions. In 1932, Emmy Noether would have been the first woman full member (*ordentliches Mitglied*) of the Göttingen Academy. But the physicist Lise Meitner had been elected corresponding member in 1926. Since she was also Jewish, she was excluded from the Academy in 1938. In 1947, she graciously accepted the invitation to re-enter the Academy along with a majority of the Jewish members excluded in 1938, in spite of the fact that the re-invitation had been presented by Rudolf Smend in 1945 and 1946 in a particularly awkward letter—see [Schubert, 2000, pp. 119–121], see also [Schappacher, 2015, §2].

In two talks, in 1929 [Weyl, 1930, esp. p. 299] and particularly in 1931 [Weyl, 1932], Hermann Weyl had expressed doubts about abstract algebra, i.e., about Emmy Noether’s method, because it tended not to deal

<sup>2</sup> Weyl had been a corresponding member of the Göttingen Academy since 1920, and became full member (*ordentliches Mitglied*) in 1930 after he moved to Göttingen. He himself mentions in [Weyl, 1935/1970, p. 60] that he had tried to secure a better position for Emmy Noether and to get her elected into the Göttingen Academy.

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