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The intersection of personal and academic history: Lina Stern (1878–1968)

THIS PAPER IS PRESENTED as a work in progress and as part of a wider project looking at the scientific biography of Lina Stern, first female professor at Geneva University, Switzerland (1918) and first woman member of the Russian Academy of Sciences (1932). The life of the Russian-Jewish physiologist and biochemist spanned several major events of the twentieth-century European history: women's emancipation via access to higher education and professions, the Russian Revolution, first decades of Soviet era, World War II and Stalinist repressions.

In 1925, after some unsuccessful attempts to get promoted to the full professorship in Geneva, Lina Stern accepted a call to a chair and a position of head of laboratory at one of Moscow's main medical schools. Her scientific production during the late twenties and all of the thirties was valued both in the Soviet Union and abroad — she was elected a member of the German Leopoldina Academy of Sciences and able to secure funding from the Rockefeller Foundation. Scholars from various countries were coming to do experimental work under her direction. In 1932, she was elected to full membership of the Russian Academy of Sciences, a reward not bestowed to any women before. During World War II, Stern promoted new strategies of medical treatment for patients affected by neurological diseases, such as posttraumatic shock, tetanus, fibrillation of the heart and severe infections.

In 1943, she received a Staline Prize for these medical endeavours — in 1939 she had become a member of the communist party. Shortly after the German failed to conquer Stalingrad, several antifascist committees were set up by the Soviet authorities, and Lina Stern was asked to join the Jewish and the Women's ones.

Stern's family connections in the West allowed her to obtain at an early time following World War II the wonder drug Streptomycin, discovered in the USA, which she prescribed successfully to patients with cerebral tuberculosis. But, as is well known, the policy of Stalin towards the Jews, even those like Lina Stern — who were not religious, but had some cultural connections with Judaism — was to turn sour in the late forties. She became a victim of Stalinist trials. The first dealt with scientific issues, notably Stalin's fancy for the Russians Lyssenko and Pavlov. Following this trial, Stern was deprived of all positions she held in medicine and in science. The second one was a real, though secret, political trial, anti-Semitic in nature and fuelled by accusations of treason and terrorism launched against the members of the Soviet Jewish Antifascist Committee. Lina Stern was the only one to survive, the other 13 members being sentenced to death and executed. She spent nearly four years in prison and another in internal exile in Kazakhstan, before being allowed in 1953, shortly after Stalin's death, to return to Moscow, to pursue her scientific work, and finally to be rehabilitated in 1958.

In researching Stern's life and work, we shall consider the connections between biography, historical context and academic production: how do Lina Stern's life experiences and her scientific research intertwine? In the attempt to answer this question, we shall first present her student years at the medical faculty of Geneva University, where she was amongst the first female students enrolled and the influence of the scientific orientations and contacts established at that time on her further research. We shall then turn to Lina Stern's scientific career in Geneva, where after the promising doctoral dissertation, she was first promoted to privat-docent and later to associate professor.

In the latter part of the paper, we'll be turning to the Soviet period of her life (1924–1968), when she responded to the appeal the young Soviet government have addressed to the Russian scientists

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living abroad. Drawing on the testimonies of her colleagues, as well as Stern's correspondence and autobiographical writings, we shall consider the motivations behind this choice and her experience of the Soviet academic world which had undergone some profound changes from 1920's to 1950's. We shall conclude with a number of important questions which suggest themselves at the study of this biography. Indeed, while this paper highlights the experience of one of the first academic women both in Switzerland and in the Soviet Union and offers an argument centred upon her scholarly achievements, it appears that her gender and nationality had a profound impact on her career.