

Routledge Studies in Radical History and Politics

# A POLITICAL FAMILY



THE KUCZYNSKIS, FASCISM, ESPIONAGE AND THE COLD WAR

John Green

ROUTLEDGE

John Green provides a wonderfully rich account of this family of intellectuals, social activists and fighters against fascism. He also offers new insights into what it meant to be on the pro-Soviet left during the twentieth century's 'age of extremes'.

*Matthew Stibbe, Professor of Modern European History,  
Sheffield Hallam University, UK*

This captivating account of the Kuczynski is far more than a family saga. John Green has produced a personalised history of the turbulent lives of left German Jews from the 1930s till after the Cold War on both sides of the Iron Curtain. A provoking book that brilliantly challenges readers to rethink the past.

*Stephan Lieske, Lecturer, English Department,  
Humboldt University Berlin, Germany*

This book is the story of a German-Jewish family, the Kuczynskis whose members, many of whom were remarkable, refused to become victims of fascist terror, joining the communist movement instead and dedicating their lives to fighting fascism and to building a socialist society. This family biography encapsulates the essence of twentieth century Europe – war, exile, hope and commitment.

*Mary Davis, Emeritus Professor of Labour History,  
Royal Holloway, University of London, UK*

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# A POLITICAL FAMILY

The Kuczynskis were a German-Jewish family of active anti-fascists who worked assiduously to combat the rise of Nazism before and during the course of the Second World War. This book focuses on the family of Robert and his wife Berta – both born two decades before the end of the nineteenth century – and their six children, five of whom became communists and one who worked as a Soviet agent. The parents, and later their children, rejected and rebelled against their comfortable bourgeois heritage and devoted their lives to the overthrow of privilege and class society. They chose to do this in a Germany that was rapidly moving in the opposite direction.

With the rise of German nationalism and then Hitler fascism, the family was confronted with stark choices and, as a result of making these choices, suffered persecution and exile. Revealing how these experiences shaped their outlook and perception of events, this book documents the story of the Kuczynskis for the first time in the English language and is a fascinating biographical portrait of a unique and radical family.

**John Green** is a journalist and author who has written several political biographies. His particular area of interest is the history of East Germany.

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# A POLITICAL FAMILY

The Kuczynskis, Fascism,  
Espionage and the Cold War

*John Green*

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This final version of the text, however, is my own and I have to take responsibility for any weaknesses, mistakes or inaccuracies, although I hope there will not be many.

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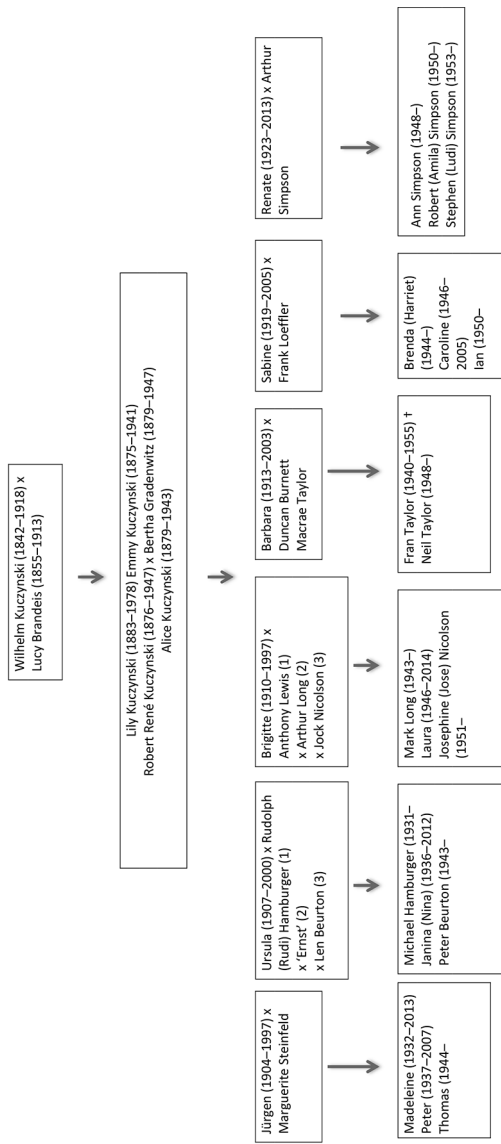


FIGURE 1.1 The Kuczynski family tree

# 1

## INTRODUCTION

### Who are the Kuczynskis?

It is bitter to have to recognise that the imagined world will always be better than the one we actually create.

*Ilya Ehrenburg*<sup>1</sup>

The story of the Kuczynski family stands apart from the many other biographies of German-Jewish families who were caught up in the turbulence and vicissitudes of the twentieth century. There have been numerous ones written about the impact of Hitler fascism on Jewish families and individuals, both novels and biographies; there have been films, plays and academic studies. The overwhelming majority of these have been conceived from the point of view of the victims: the discrimination, suffering, displacement and consequent trauma, followed perhaps by transcendence. Where the Kuczynski family story differs markedly from such models is that all members of the family, from very early on, rejected allotted roles as passive extras on the stage of history, and decided instead to become protagonists in the historical process. Almost everything they did throughout their lives was dedicated to changing society and bringing about one with more justice and equality. In that sense their story as related here runs counter to the mainstream narratives of Nazi victims.

## 2 Introduction: who are the Kuczynskis?

The first aspect that sets them apart is that they were all active anti-fascists and worked assiduously to combat the rise of Nazism before and during the course of the war. This biographical portrait focuses on the family of Robert and his wife Berta – both born two decades before the end of the nineteenth century – and their six children, five of whom became communists. Jürgen, the eldest, was recruited as a member of the US army during the war and worked alongside the Canadian-born US economist Kenneth Galbraith in the American Strategic Bombing Survey office in London. He also co-operated closely with the Russians, became an economist and statistician of world renown and, after the war, an advisor to East Germany's two leaders. He would become probably the GDR's most celebrated intellectual and a first port of call for any Western journalist looking for unofficial comment from someone close to government. He was a tall and imposing figure with an avuncular disposition but, given his erudition, could appear quite intimidating to lesser mortals.

His sister, Ursula, became one of the most successful secret agents of Soviet military intelligence (GRU), with the codename 'Sonya'. She was active as part of the so-called Red Orchestra counter-intelligence ring and while in Britain became the contact and courier for the atomic spy Klaus Fuchs. Ursula's other four siblings remained in Britain after arriving as refugees in the 1930s; three of them joined the British Communist Party and chose male partners who were also communists.

Ursula's first husband, Rudolf Hamburger, after working as a secret agent for the Russians, spent ten years of his life languishing in the Soviet Union's GULAGs under horrendous conditions, mistakenly accused of being a Western spy, but surviving to return to East Germany in the 1950s where he became a leading architect. All members of the family, during their time in Britain, were kept under continued surveillance by MI5. In the National Archives there are ninety-four large files on the family.

The family history of rebellion, political dissidence and intellectual accomplishment goes back five generations to the eighteenth century. However, it is the twentieth-century generation that encapsulates that aspect most forcefully and lends vibrance to this family saga. This narrative only covers in detail the family of Robert Kuczynski, who was born in 1876. He became a world-renowned demographer, who

mixed with Bolshevik leaders as well as leading German revolutionaries and intellectuals of the time, including Albert Einstein who became a close friend. In each generation of the family there have always been members who were forced into political exile because of their rebelliousness and principled attitudes. Members of three generations have experienced terms in prison, labour and concentration camps.

That generation of the Kuczynski family represented in the first instance by Robert and Berta (née Gradenwitz) would reject and rebel against their comfortable bourgeois heritage and devote their lives to the overthrow of privilege and class society. They chose to do this in a Germany that was rapidly moving in the opposite direction. All their children would follow in their footsteps, taking an even more radical stance. Why they chose this route is a fascinating conundrum, and there is no straightforward answer, but in examining their lives I have attempted to offer clues. I have also tried to unravel some of the historical circumstances that have significantly determined individual trajectories. The lives of the Kuczynski family members portrayed here poignantly reflect historical developments in twentieth-century Europe. Overlapping several generations, there were always individual family members who were involved in fighting for a more just society, to defeating fascism and helping build a post-war socialist alternative in East Germany as well as supporting the Communist Party in Britain.

The fact that the family emerges from a long East European Jewish tradition is perhaps also hardly incidental to the trajectories of their subsequent lives and actions. It is not only that they were protagonists in the historical process taking place in several countries or that they attained political and academic prominence or celebrity status, but that they actively engaged with the political and ideological struggles of the era.

Robert would become a leading demographer of his age and pioneered the use of statistics in framing social policy as well as demonstrating the impact of slavery on the development of British colonies. He led campaigns in Germany for better housing, against the powerful Junker class and for peace in Europe. His children – Ursula, Jürgen, Brigitte, Barbara, Sabine and Renate – were exposed to the notions of rebellion and political dissidence early on in life. This is undoubtedly a key to why two of them became world-renowned for delivering highly

#### 4 Introduction: who are the Kuczynskis?

sensitive information to the Soviet Union during the war. The family's full story has never been told in the English-speaking world, and it can only be properly understood against the background of the politics of the twentieth century.

With the rise of German nationalism and then Hitler fascism, the family was confronted with stark choices and, as a result of making the choices they did, suffered persecution and exile. They lived through and contributed to what Eric Hobsbawm characterised as 'The Age of Extremes'.

The biographer, of course, is always faced with choices in terms of what to select, what is relevant, what best helps explain what happened and why these particular lives took the courses they did. The historian E. H. Carr famously wrote that the status of an event as a historical fact will depend on how it is interpreted by historians, and that the element of interpretation will enter into every fact of history. Choosing which facts to include in a historical narrative, what weight such facts are given and how they are to be interpreted will, in the end, determine how history is written and handed down. These factors are just as relevant when writing about the lives of the Kuczynski family as with any other, broader aspect of history or biography. Here I have made every effort to be scrupulous with the facts and have avoided speculation unless I felt it could aid understanding, but the weighting given to the facts I have chosen to write about and my interpretations of them will differ, often markedly, from those of other writers. That is largely a consequence of my own necessarily subjective understanding of history and of political processes. I hope, though, that this biography will be read as an honest attempt to portray an extraordinary family and that it will be given credence on that basis.

The circumstances that brought about the family's political and social engagement, as well as the historical circumstances that helped determine their life-long commitments are examined. Their motivations are questioned and what they actually achieved – both intellectually and politically – in the context of the struggle against fascism and during the Cold War confrontation, is evaluated.

What is it that makes members of a well-to-do German-Jewish family become committed to social change, to helping the less fortunate and engaging in radical politics during inclement times? There are, of

course, rarely, if ever, simple answers to such questions. Why do any of us behave and act as we do? It is, nevertheless, intriguing to try and understand why a whole generation of this family took up the same radical politics as if they were virtually one person. Here, the unique historical circumstances of that period undoubtedly played a central role.

I have attempted to place the pieces of the family's lives into a coherent narrative and also avoid that retrospective 'wisdom' betrayed by a number of historians and writers about this period, who can be patronising about those who threw in their lot with communism, accusing them of not condemning Stalin early enough and of remaining loyal to a discredited ideology. From the luxury of their ivory towers, some writers are only too ready to condemn others who at the time perhaps did allow their idealism and their fears of a fascist Europe to cloud their judgement about Soviet communism.

Anyone who consults the indexes of books dealing with espionage and intelligence work during the twentieth century will invariably come across the name Kuczynski. Many academic papers and books have been written about the family and their involvement in this area, but their lives and achievements represent much more than a link to intelligence work and spying. It is unfortunate that the family is today most widely known in the West for its association with espionage, and emphasis on this aspect has done a disservice to the family's overall achievements and the contribution it has made to our humanistic legacy.

The lives of the Kuczynskis are fascinating for anyone seeking a deeper understanding of the motivations of those who remained active, after the end of the Second World War, at the front, between the opposing forces in the new Cold War. Living in today's Europe does not demand the sort of stark choices, of taking sides, which those living during the 1930s and 1940s faced. At that time, remaining aloof meant abdicating the most basic instincts of human compassion and solidarity.

The Berlin-based Kuczynskis, during the early twentieth century, became a secular Jewish family who threw themselves into the progressive struggles of that time. Several family members became prominent in the business and banking worlds; the new generation would make pioneering contributions in the fields of economics and social

## 6 Introduction: who are the Kuczynskis?

statistics. The family felt itself to be thoroughly German, but the turbulence and mayhem of the first half of the twentieth century in Europe – First World War, revolution, inflation, poverty and the rise of fascism – would drive Robert, Berta and their children from their German homeland.

After fleeing Berlin once Hitler had come to power in the 1930s, the family found exile in Britain. Two family members – Ursula and Jürgen – returned to East Germany with their spouses after the war, while the other four sisters married and settled in Britain. Despite their geographical separation, on different sides of the Cold War divide, the family remained largely united and close both on a political as well as on a personal level.

Both the father, Robert, and his son Jürgen, wrote important academic works; the latter was one of the most prolific academics of his generation, authoring over 4,000 books and articles. He completed four volumes of autobiography and a biography of his father. His sister Ursula also wrote her reminiscences, as well as several works of fiction and non-fiction under her pen-name, Ruth Werner. However, most of this literary output has been published in German only, although there have been English translations of Ursula Kuczynski's memoirs (*Sonya's Report*) and a recent biography, *Wall Flower*,<sup>2</sup> by Rita Kuczynski, who was married to Jürgen's son Thomas. The latter is the first quasi-portrait in English of Jürgen's family, albeit an idiosyncratic one.

The family's intriguing development throws a unique light on the history and politics of pre-fascist Germany, the struggle against Hitler and the aftermath of the Second World War. Through the memoirs of Jürgen, who was closely associated with the post-war East German leadership, we are also given a unique insight into how the German Democratic Republic was run; the other siblings provide an equally interesting perspective on post-war life in Britain at the height of the Cold War, through their activities on the ground as British communists. The trajectories of the family members' lives give us new insights into the political upheavals of the period and the struggles between the communist and capitalist worlds.

In writing this biography I am indebted to Jürgen Kuczynski's own memoirs for a substantial amount of information relating to the family, on which I have been able to draw extensively, as well as to his sister

Ursula's reminiscences in *Sonya's Report*, in which she talks about her work as an officer in the Soviet Army's counter-espionage service.

Throughout his life Jürgen kept a detailed diary which provides a unique and contemporaneous insight into the times through which he lived, his own life and that of the extended family. His perceptive understanding of history, culture and politics as well as his wry sense of humour have been invaluable in coming to grips with the narrative of this unusual family. He was, though, a quintessentially rational man, almost monastic in his daily routines, and his memoirs are characterised by being heavily self-centred. He ignored or was largely unaware of emotional factors, being quite parsimonious when dealing with feelings and personal relationships.

When he wrote an epilogue to his own memoirs on the relevance or use of biographies, Jürgen quoted Thomas Carlyle's aphorism that history is the essence of innumerable biographies. He suggests that many (auto)biographies are connected with a need for justification which can lead to conscious or unconscious falsification, and in this sense is very much aware of his own fallible memory. His is a dialectical approach, he maintained, and wrote that his own memoirs are primarily there in order to reveal how he experienced the period through which he lived; he was not writing history, he said, but describing 'the political development of J.K. under the influence of events'. This view is echoed by Ehrenburg, when reflecting on his own experience of that same period.

An early note of warning written around 1947 by Ursula Kuczynski to her brother Jürgen in response to his idea of writing a family history is not exactly an ideal form of encouragement for any would-be biographer, but I decided to see it more as a useful spur than hindrance in my approach:

Your idea of writing a family history seems completely crazy. But perhaps my views will soften if you can give me some more details. Apart from father and you, we have no one in the family we can boast about. Our grandfather was a rich banker and the other gambled away half his worldly goods. One great-grandfather sold shoe laces from a barrow in Galicia and the other, I suppose, was something of a free-thinker? But perhaps you intend to make it a bit more of a social and historical document?<sup>3</sup>

## 8 Introduction: who are the Kuczynskis?

Each historical epoch is gestated by preceding ones and its genetic makeup laid down in their wombs. In this sense, twentieth-century Germany can only be comprehended by examining the factors that governed its emergence from the nineteenth century.

The latter part of the nineteenth century in Germany was characterised by political instability as well as the country's rapid industrialisation and urbanisation. Heavy industry – especially coal and steel – became an important aspect of manufacturing. These processes led to the creation of a large and powerful class of proletarians, especially in the big cities, that began to challenge traditional social hierarchies and social inequalities. The political expression of this was the associated rise of the Socialist Workers' Party (later known as the Social Democratic Party of Germany or SPD), which was strongly influenced by Marxist ideas, and whose aim was to establish, by peaceful means, a new socialist order through the transformation of existing political and social conditions. During the early part of the twentieth century, in the wake of the calamitous First World War, the Bolshevik Revolution and the attempt to set up Soviets in Germany itself, the country became a volatile cocktail of contradictory forces.

The old Prussian feudal order was crumbling and the burgeoning proletariat was flexing its muscles and demanding social justice. Politically, the traditional nationalist and monarchist forces felt themselves besieged and the left, in the form of a large social democratic party and newly founded Communist Party, was gaining ground.

Artists and intellectuals found themselves involved in a great ferment of ideas and faced challenges that demanded new forms of artistic expression. A clash of class forces and ideologies became unavoidable and those who were at all interested in politics and ideas were obliged to choose sides. The Kuczynskis did too; they chose the side of socialism, later allying themselves with the Communist Party.

The rapid rise of this social democratic movement created fear and panic among the bourgeoisie. In 1878, Bismarck had moved to suppress it by introducing the notorious Anti-Socialist Laws, outlawing the Social Democratic Party (SPD), its assemblies and most of its newspapers. However, when the party was eventually allowed to run candidates, it emerged stronger than ever and by the 1890s it was the largest European socialist party.

Added to this, the always present anti-semitism, often just below the surface, was to erupt in horrendous fashion during the Nazi period of the 1930s and 1940s, and would compound the Kuczynski family's political stance. Like many other German families of Jewish background, its members who grew up in Germany, becoming successful in business, thought of themselves first and foremost as Germans, with Jewish self-identity playing only a minimal role. Although the family had been a secular one for generations, its background was East European Jewish and this heritage was impossible to divest in an increasingly anti-semitic atmosphere.

To understand how a whole generation of this family came to reject their privileged background and commit themselves to socialism, it is instructive to delve back into history for a moment and look at some of the family's antecedents. Wilhelm Kuczynski was born in 1842, and was the first member of the family to move to Berlin from Posen in East Prussia (today *Poznańska* in Poland). He was the son of a merchant, Abraham Kuczynski, and his wife Emilie Cohn. They were among the first of around 3,000 Jews in the district of Posen to receive naturalisation certificates in the wake of the Kaiser's emancipatory edict of 1812.

The family, Jürgen said, can boast 'six generations of intellectuals who have been of the "Left", on the side of the people and of progress, against reaction'.

The first generation to demonstrate such commitment was that of Robert's great-great uncle, Hirschmann Brandeis. Already as a student, he had immersed himself in progressive German philosophy, and become an ardent advocate of Kant's ideas and strong supporter of the enlightenment. It was he, living in Königsberg (today Kaliningrad in Russia) in 1790, who began collecting books which would form the core of the family's famous library, which Robert and then Jürgen would inherit. He was included in every serious encyclopaedia and lexicon of his era, as a famous doctor and medical historian but also Court Counsellor to the Russian Tsar. One of the books contained in his library was a copy of Fichte's *Versuch eine Kritik alle Offenbarung* (An Attempt at a Critique of All Revelation), dated Königsberg 1792. Fichte had to publish it anonymously in order to escape certain opprobrium and persecution.

When Hirschmann Brandeis became seriously ill in 1839 he moved to Paris and began translating Pushkin's *History of the Pugachov Rebellion* into German. While he found fulfilment in translating rebellion, his nephew Samuel Brandeis, grandfather of Robert, became the real rebel. Robert called him the family's first 'white raven', the founder of the family tradition of struggle against reaction and for progress. It was Samuel Brandeis who would also be the greatest political influence on Robert's own son Jürgen. He set the tone of progressive rebellion for all future generations of the family and fought unremittingly against reactionary positions, whether from a Prussian prison or from exile. In 1847 Hirschmann Brandeis provided a vivid picture of his forced exile from Prussia in *Meine Ausweisung aus Preussen* (My Expulsion from Prussia) which was published by Biedermann in Volume 5 of the series *Unsere Gegenwart und Zukunft* (Our Present and Future).

Samuel Brandeis refused to wait until the turbulent year of 1848 in order to become a revolutionary, and was imprisoned by the Prussian state for 'left' political activities already in 1846, and then in 1848 he too was driven into exile to Paris, where, for a few pennies, he bought a copy of the first edition of the *Communist Manifesto* written by two other exiles from the aftermath of the 1848 Revolution – Marx and Engels. It remained in the Kuczynski library until Jürgen's death. After his expulsion from Prussia Samuel Brandeis remained in Paris until he was, ironically, as a nominally Prussian citizen, once again expelled in 1870 at the beginning of the Franco-Prussian War.

Samuel had been a leader of progressive students in Königsberg and fled to France after his imprisonment by the Prussians to escape the tyranny. His grandmother, who was French, moved in the circles of those opposed to the autocracy of Emperor Napoleon III and conspired with prominent German exiles who had fled to France after the collapse of the 1848 Revolution. How far the activities and political views of these ancestors was known to Robert at the time or whether they influenced him in a significant way is difficult to establish, but it seems plausible.

Before his expulsion and while still living in Königsberg, Samuel had been denounced by the prominent editor Gustav Pflugk, with the remark that:

Student B. is a member of an association, Germania, that holds its meetings in a beer hall in the Polish Prediger Strasse, and whose aim is, through the reading of banned books by its members, to promote a higher political education than would be possible to achieve though a reading of the permitted books ...

Brandeis was president of the association at the time, and was imprisoned before being expelled in 1846 while still a student.

Members of the Germania association read books like Püttmann's *Deutsches Bürgerbuch* which would later be referred to by Engels in a letter to Marx, in which he wrote, 'We will see from Püttmanns *Bürgerbuch* how far we are allowed to go, before we are hounded or arrested.'<sup>4</sup> The formulation of Pflugk's denunciation, writes Jürgen, 'is an exemplary and clear formulation of the anti-democratic and anti-bourgeois character of the Prussian government before the revolution of 1848'.<sup>5</sup> Such banning by the state of the reading of particular books even by bourgeois intellectuals would have more contemporary resonances for later generations, just as the spying on and denunciation of one's peers would.

It was through the family's French connections that Jürgen was introduced to the works of the French utopian socialists alongside the classical works of German socialists. Lucy Brandeis, Samuel's daughter who would become Robert's mother, maintained the family tradition as a progressive thinker. She was born in exile in France, had an excellent education and grew up among French and exiled German intellectuals in Paris. But then, in Jürgen's words, 'for incomprehensible reasons she married Wilhelm Kuczynski, a very average man, but in his specific area, a successful banker', who became very wealthy. He was considered a 'black sheep' of the family, alongside the other 'black sheep', the property developer Adolf Gradenwitz (father of Robert's wife Berta). Those were the ones who did not sit easily on the proud family tree of progressive, left-wing activists.

Lucy Brandeis married Wilhelm in 1873 and in June 1875 their first child, Emmy, was born, followed by Robert in August 1876 and two other daughters, Alice and Lily (Alice and her husband, the gynaecologist Georg Dorpalen, would die in Theresienstadt under the Nazis). Their son Robert became engaged to Berta Gradenwitz in October 1903 and they married on 1 December.<sup>6</sup> She was a lively and

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intelligent woman, who had learned Latin and Greek at school and was a talented artist. She also had a keen interest in politics and was well informed, which, it can be assumed, was a prerequisite for the marriage she was entering into.

Wealthy Jewish families tended very much to marry within a circle of those from the same ethnicity and a similar class background. The Kuczynskis and Gradenwitzes were no exception, at least until the mid-twentieth century when the mould was very much broken by all of Robert's children.

Robert's father, Wilhelm Kuczynski, was, apart from being a very successful banker, a great believer in charitable activity. He was involved in the *Kinderschutz Verein* (Child Protection Association) and gave generously to other charities, even setting up his own Wilhelm Kuczynski charitable institution. Whether he saw this activity as a means of salving his conscience or did it out of genuine philanthropic motivation is not really relevant here, but this side of his character would have had an impact on the attitudes and outlook of his children.

In Siegmund Kaznelson's collected biographies of Jews in German cultural life (*Biographisches Handbuch zum deutschen Judentum*) Wilhelm was also praised as an 'outstanding member of the board of the Berlin Stock Exchange' of which he became senior president in 1905. He was one of the 'Elders of the Berlin Merchant Federation' and a co-founder of the *Handelshochschule* (College of Business) which represents the beginning of the Kuczynskis' connection with Berlin universities over five generations. In 1938, long after Wilhelm's death, the Kuczynski bank was 'Aryanised' by the Nazis and its Jewish owners ousted.

Wilhelm's son Robert was sent to the French Gymnasium in Berlin where he learned French as well as German. He was apparently an average student, but passed his *Abitur* before going on to university. Despite his relatively privileged background, he would very soon rebel against his father's views and class position in society.

Both the Kuczynski and Gradenwitz families – the antecedents on the paternal and maternal side of the family portrayed here – were bankers and property developers who, in succeeding generations, diversified into textile manufacturing, mechanical engineering, electrical motor production, dental chemistry and other fields. This kind of development was typical of many emancipated, bourgeois Jewish families of the period.



**FIGURE 1.2** Portrait of Lucy Kuczynski (née Brandeis) by Ottmar Begas (1905)

*Source:* Kuczynski family archive.

Paul Kuczynski, the son of banker Louis Kuczynski, came from a side branch of the family on which we focus in the following pages. However, this branch also came from Posen, and made the move to Berlin towards the middle of the nineteenth century. Paul is of interest because he would become a close friend and supporter of Richard Wagner, which is surprising, considering how anti-semitic the latter became. Following his father's wishes, Paul studied economics and jurisprudence, but his chief love was music. His uncle was a violinist in the Royal Opera House orchestra and introduced him to Hans von Bülow, the great conductor and composer, who gave him piano lessons. Through Bülow's then wife, Cosima – Franz Liszt's daughter who would become Wagner's wife – he met Wagner, becoming an ardent admirer. He socialised in both financial and music circles with ease and became a member of Wagner's circle and a patron of the Bayreuth Festival; he was present in 1872 when the foundation stone for the Bayreuth Festival Theatre was laid. He also played a significant role in helping to counter the prevalent anti-Wagner atmosphere within Berlin cultural circles. Paul was, to boot, a competent composer and musician in his own right. He was a representative par excellence of that self perception of many successful German Jews who could be just as proudly nationalist and Teutonic as their non-Jewish compatriots.

Due to the dearth of accurate genealogical records going back far enough, there is a lack of definitive evidence for a relationship between the Paul Kuczynski branch of the family and that of Wilhelm, but I have included him here because his family's common migratory route and involvement in banking would almost certainly have meant that the trajectories of the two branches crossed.<sup>7</sup>

On Berta's side of the family, her uncle, Eduard Gradenwitz, married Rosa Feige, from a well-known Silesian family. Their daughter Else married the textile manufacturer Max Hamburger in 1900. One of Else and Max's three sons, Rudolf, would later marry Robert's daughter, Ursula Kuczynski. The Gradenwitz family was very affluent, but it was also characterised by a mix of commercial and intellectual pursuit. Berta's father Adolph Gradenwitz became a successful property developer and estate agent, and was one of the leading developers of the up-market villa quarter in the suburb of Berlin-Zehlendorf. This area soon

became a popular residential area for businessmen, but also for artists and intellectuals.

Robert was of the same generation as Max and Else Hamburger and, after marrying Berta, her cousin Else became known as 'Tante Else' in the Kuczynski household. Else, Berta and Robert had a very amicable relationship and son Jürgen, in his turn, became a close friend of the Hamburger sons Rudolf and Otto.

Robert, in the twentieth century, was the one who would make the first radical break from the family's banking and commercial tradition. He rebelled against his father's banking mentality and his social milieu, deciding instead to enter the world of academia and the struggle for social justice. During the first half of that century he became, alongside Einstein, the only bourgeois German scholar of international repute who allied himself with the working class, and through this association was able to provide working people and society as a whole with a not insignificant service in terms of the advancement of social science. He was an outspoken reformer and political critic who often raised his voice to highlight social problems such as the acute housing or food shortages. He campaigned together with high-profile Social Democrats like Albert Südekum and counted them among his friends who were invited to dinner and became almost part of the family.

The year following Jürgen's birth ushered in Russia's 1905 Revolution, and a wave of mass political and social unrest that spread throughout the Russian Empire. This unrest included workers' strikes, peasant rebellions and military mutinies. It had resonances far beyond Russia's own borders, throughout Europe, and alarmed ruling elites everywhere. In Russia, it led to the establishment of a constitutional monarchy, the setting up of a state Duma and a multi-party political system, culminating in the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917.

Germany was also about to undergo a ferment of political and social change of its own. The November Revolution in 1918, during the end phase of the war, led to the abolition of the monarchy and the establishment of parliamentary democracy. Inspired very much by the Bolshevik Revolution a year earlier and led by the Independent Social Democratic Party (USPD) and the left-wing Spartacist (Marxist) group, it involved soldiers, sailors and workers. In Kiel a revolt in the navy spread rapidly and led to the setting up of Workers and Soldiers

Councils (Soviets) in many big cities, including Munich and Berlin which declared short-lived Soviet republics. The movement also led, on 1 January 1919, to the formation of the German Communist Party (KPD) under the leadership of the Spartacists Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht. Only a fortnight later both were to be murdered by right-wing military officers. Surprisingly, though, these cataclysmic events receive hardly a mention in either Robert's or Jürgen's writings, but they must have had a profound impact on the family in terms of developing their ideas and allegiances.

On 10 November 1918 Kaiser Wilhelm II fled to the Netherlands in exile and on the 28th of the same month signed his abdication. Of these momentous events, Hitler wrote later:

Kaiser Wilhelm II was the first German Kaiser to offer the leaders of Marxism his hand in reconciliation without suspecting that these villains have no honour. While they held the Kaiser's hand in their own, their other hand reached for the dagger – there can be no pact-making with the Jews, but only an either or – that's when I decided to become a politician.<sup>8</sup>

This early pronouncement by Hitler is an ominous pointer to his future career and political ideology and the impact that it would have on the lives of the Kuczynskis, who would be deemed doubly 'culpable' as Jews and communists.

The establishment of the Weimar Republic in 1918, after the unsuccessful revolution of that same year and the writing of a new constitution, ushered in a fifteen-year period of liberal democracy which, however, failed to address the fundamental problems the country was facing, thus helping pave the way for the Nazi takeover in 1933. Robert and Berta were very much involved in that ferment and in the associated political and social struggles.

As historian Ian Kershaw puts it in his book, *To Hell and Back*, Germany during the twentieth century was:

the pivotal centre of the continent ... more crucial than any other country to Europe's destiny. German governments and their foreign policy effectively determined the behaviour and choices, as

well as the lives, or more accurately the deaths, of many of Europe's peoples. At one key juncture after another, its leaders and mobilised people created the conditions to which other countries could only react.<sup>9</sup>

This was the crucible in which the Kuczynski family was forged. Its antecedents emerged during the nineteenth century from a mixture of Eastern, Central European and Jewish cultures, and it established itself firmly in Germany as an integral part of that country's bourgeoisie. Like many others of similar heritage, its members had gradually become secularised and fully integrated into German and then, in exile, into English society, shedding any vestiges of religious belief or Jewish self-identity. Berta and Robert let their nominal membership of Berlin's Jewish religious community lapse in 1920 and 1930 respectively.<sup>10</sup>

## Notes

- 1 Ilya Ehrenburg, *Menschen Jahre Leben. Memoiren*, Volk und Welt, 1990.
- 2 Rita Kuczynski, *Mauerblume: Ein Leben auf der Grenze*, Claassen 1999; *Wall Flower: A Life on the German Border*, University of Toronto Press, 2015.
- 3 Ruth Werner, *Sonya's Report*, Chatto & Windus, 1991, p. 284.
- 4 Karl Marx, *K. Marx und Fr. Engels, Briefwechsel*, Berlin, Band I, 1949, p. 13.
- 5 Jürgen Kuczynski, *René Kuczynski: Ein fortschrittlicher Wissenschaftler in der ersten Hälfte des 20. Jahrhundert*, Berlin, Aufbau Verlag, 1957, p. 9.
- 6 Hans Lembke, *Die Schwarzen Schafe bei den Gradenwitz und Kuczynski – zwei Berliner Familien im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*, Berlin, Trafo Verlagsgruppe, 2008, p. 55.
- 7 In this connection it is of interest to note that Pedro Pablo Kuczynski, who became president of Peru in 2016, is also, like all the other Kuczynskis mentioned here, descended from a Posen-based Jewish family. His father, Maxime 'Max' Hans, was a pathologist whose family moved from what was then East Prussia to Berlin towards the end of the nineteenth century, and where he later became Professor of Pathology at the city's university. He was forced to flee the Nazis in 1933, and invited to Peru to help set up a public health service there. His son Pedro studied economics and worked for both the World Bank and IMF before becoming prime minister, then president, of Peru. His brother, Miguel Jorge, also an economist, is a fellow of Pembroke College, Cambridge.

Some years before Jürgen's death Pedro Kuczynski wrote to him suggesting that they were related but Jürgen rejected the suggestion. Perhaps, like Paul Kuczynski, the family was only distantly related.

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In the Peruvian newspaper *El País Semanal* of 28 July 2016, the journalist Luis Esteban G. Manrique, in his article, 'Confidencias Audaces: la Gran Familia Kuczynski', gives a portrait of the new president's family. He writes that 'Robert Kuczynski and his three children – Ruth, Brigitte and Jürgen, cousins of Max – where the richest in the German capital and convinced communists'. In this article he also reveals that soon after the end of the First World War, Berlin's Humboldt University sent Max to the Soviet Union to help establish faculties of medicine in Minsk and Omsk ... of 'different branches of the family'.

- 8 Christian Graf von Krockow, *Die Deutschen in Ihrem Jahrhundert 1890–1990*, Rowohlt, 1990.
- 9 Ian Kershaw, *To Hell and Back: Europe, 1914–1949*, Allen Lane, 2015.
- 10 Ute Frevert, 'Jewish Hearts and Minds? Feelings of Belonging and Political Choices among East German Intellectuals', *Leo Baeck Institute Year Book*, 2011.

# 2

## ROBERT RENÉ, WORLD PIONEER OF SOCIAL STATISTICS (1876–1933)

Robert René Abraham Kuczynski, born in Berlin on 12 August 1876, would become a radical democrat, and win renown as a pioneering demographer and founder of modern population statistics. He was also a leader of the early twentieth-century campaign for peace and justice in Europe. He completed his *Abitur* at the French Gymnasium in Berlin, then studied economics and law in Freiburg, Strasbourg and Munich under such teachers as Lujo Brentano, Georg Friedrich Knapp and Paul Hensel. He would often spend evenings with Brentano listening to stories about the latter's uncle, Clemens and his aunt, Bettina, who was one of Goethe's close confidantes, as well as anecdotes about other leading personalities of the period. Brentano would have a considerable influence on Robert's thinking and encouraged his humanitarian views. He completed his doctorate under Brentano when only 20 years old in 1897. After a short period as a *voluntär* (what we would today call an 'intern') under Richard Böckh, the Director of Berlin's Statistical Office, he decided, as a 23-year-old, to leave for the United States to work as a research intern in the US Census Office, the world's most significant statistical establishment at the time, and would spend four years in America. After completing this internship he went on to work closely with Colonel Carroll D. Wright in the Central Bureau of

Labor Statistics in Washington, where he would write his second major work on the conditions of labour.

In their book about the conditions of the American working class, Eleanor Marx and Edward Aveling characterised them as being as bad as those in Britain, and they quoted from reports and conversations they had with the same Carroll Wright, then director of the Massachusetts statistical office, the first of its kind in the USA. Aveling and Marx described Wright as not only a significant statistician but, perceptively, as the educator of a whole generation of labour statisticians.

While in the United States and during his time in Europe, Robert certainly did not spend his time stuck behind an office desk, but carried out substantial field research. In the USA he was engaged above all in developing a system of collecting and evaluating labour statistics, which was a new field at the time.

Already at this time, his outlook on life was progressive and he identified very much with the struggles of working people. This led him to make contact with trade union leaders and left-wing political figures. In the USA he cultivated relationships with people like leading socialists and union leaders Eugene Debs and Daniel de Leon, and the union leader Samuel Gompers; and in Europe Marx's son-in-law Charles Longuet as well as the German socialist leaders August Bebel and Karl Liebknecht. Such individuals undoubtedly had considerable influence on his political and social development.

Robert spent four years abroad, both in the USA and travelling in a number of European countries. As becomes clear from his writing, while in the USA he learned a considerable amount about the way monopoly capital functioned. While travelling around the country he also witnessed first hand the crass inequalities that so marked the country, particularly the discrimination against black people. In one of the regular letters he wrote to his mother, in 1902, he describes the appalling way black prisoners were treated in the Southern states.<sup>1</sup> When back in Europe and after travelling through several countries, he wrote two reports about the influence of European trade unions on production for the Bureau in Washington.

Returning to Germany in 1903, he became engaged to, and then in the same year married Berta Gradenwitz on 1 December. The couple decided to take their honeymoon in Italy, but it turned out to be more



**FIGURE 2.1** Family portrait. Left to right, back row: Jürgen, Marguerite, Brigitte, Barbara, Rudolf Hamburger and Ursula; left to right, front row: Sabine, Berta, Robert with Renate on his knee

*Source:* Kuczynski family archive.

of a research expedition for him, than a romantic holiday for her. Berta described it thus:

First we went to Sicily where René investigated the conditions under which children were working in the sulphur mines. As he could not take me or his cigar into the mines, the two of us had to wait outside and so I became a specialist in mine entrances. When, after a fortnight I asked him when we would be going to Florence, he responded: ‘Do we really have to look at the pictures of Giotto the lazy?’

Not an ideal start to a marriage, perhaps, but it would remain a very happy one. Berta was highly educated, artistically talented, and came from a family that contained both intellectuals and bankers. Her uncle Otto Gradenwitz, for instance, was a well-known Egyptologist, and a pupil as well as colleague of the classical historian Theodor Mommsen at Heidelberg University. This background provided her with an intellectual curiosity but also a strong sense of being someone with her own interests, beyond those of her husband.

After their honeymoon Robert and his wife moved to Elberfeld in 1904 where, at the age of 27, he took up his first post as Director of the Statistical Office. It was in Elberfeld that same year, on 17 September, where their eldest and only son, Jürgen, was born. Elberfeld would later merge with Barmen, the birthplace of Friedrich Engels, and it was the town in which he mounted the barricades, joining the revolutionary uprising of 1848. Engels, indirectly, alongside Marx, would have a considerable influence on the Kuczynski family.

In 1906, Robert was very pleased to be offered a similar post with better pay, but this time in the capital. He could now leave the rather provincial and stuffy small town of Elberfeld for the vibrant city of Berlin. His new appointment was as Director of the Statistical Office of Berlin-Schöneberg, and he would be employed there for the following seventeen years. While in Berlin he would embark on a distinguished research career, focusing on financial-political issues, housing and nutritional questions. He became very committed to social progress and was involved in many campaigns for social justice. Together with the women's rights activist Helene Stöcker, he would also play a leading role in the campaign opposing the payment of compensation to the expropriated Prussian Junker class or landed aristocracy, as well as in the German section of the League for Human Rights.

In the wake of Germany's 1918 November Revolution, the question had arisen about what to do with the estates of the landed aristocracy. Their traditional and powerful influence in the country had been broken as a result of the revolution, yet there was a series of court cases in which individual aristocrats challenged the expropriation measures taken by several individual states within the German Reich, but overall their battle was lost. The highpoint of the dispute was the successful referendum in 1926 on expropriation without compensation.