

Dear Anna,

I wanted to write to you today. I'm currently sitting in the old synagogue in Hégenheim, which is not too far from the Swiss border, with other artists. I also wanted to tell you that your story has deeply moved me.

Living as a woman in your time was certainly not easy: you were young and intellectual, and you shared your life with another prominent woman who, like you, came from a completely different cultural background. Yes, it was a different world back then. Different conventions.

I can well imagine how difficult it must have been for you to leave your family. Even though you were looking forward to your studies. You had no choice but to emigrate and follow your dream. At the age of 17, you took the plunge and came to Switzerland alone to study, despite being very young.

Your strictly Jewish family certainly had a profound influence on you and gave you a sense of security. I admire you for taking that step, even though it must have been hard. It shows how strong you were, and how much you longed for an intellectual life. Most importantly, your family, especially your religious father, allowed you to go to Europe and study in Bern.

I can understand you very well.

I can only imagine how courageous that must have been at a time when it was so hard for women to establish themselves in academia. How did you feel back then? Were there moments when you felt particularly brave, or even insecure? What was your first impression of Switzerland and its people? Are there any particular encounters or experiences that have stayed with you?

You come from a Russian-Jewish merchant family. How did this influence your decision to go to Europe after school? Were there any expectations or pressure from your family, or did you actively choose not to? I'm curious to know how you made that decision and what motivated you.

As a young woman at a time when women were scarcely represented in academia, what motivated you to study philosophy and conduct research? Were there any role models or specific events that inspired you? How did you manage to make your mark in academia despite the challenges women faced back then? Did you have any supporters? I know you were exceptionally intelligent and talented!

You were also interested in art and women's rights. How did these interests influence your life? Were there moments when you felt you could make a difference through your work? Your dedication to education, art,

and women's rights is a great inspiration to me. It shows just how much you championed a better society.

For you, migration was the only way to pursue your dreams, as women weren't allowed to attend university at that time. Of all places, it was Switzerland and Bern – countries that granted women the right to vote relatively late – that offered you a position as a professor.

Leaving my family wasn't easy for me. I lived in a border town surrounded by volcanoes and the Pacific Ocean, and I grew up in a family that always supported me. It was a time of learning, receiving and experiencing love and security.

Nevertheless, I felt the desire to explore the world, discover new things, and forge my own path. As there was no faculty of political science in my hometown, I decided to study at the University of Mexico City. There, I experienced the diversity, energy and challenges of this vast metropolis.

However, it was not an easy decision for me because I knew it would mean saying goodbye to familiar faces, friends who had gone their separate ways after the general qualification for university entrance, and my familiar surroundings. Even before I left, I longed for the sea.

Sometimes, however, it is necessary to break new ground in order to find oneself and grow as a person. I kept telling myself this to help me cope with the big city. I went from the sunny, tropical south to the other extreme: grey, cold, rainy and chaotic. The streets were a hopeless mess. Lots of noise. Air pollution. Everything was new and unfamiliar.

That was the big city. It was often cold and smoggy, and felt somehow sad. That's how I felt. I was used to living in a place of tropical warmth, dense vegetation and untamed nature. The landscape was vibrant and full of life, and the culture was characterised by colour, music, and a deep connection to nature. And what about your part of the world, Anna? I imagine your childhood was full of snow, with you dancing and playing in the flat, marshy countryside.

After a few years, and following my studies in Mexico City, I ended up in Switzerland rather by chance. It was a completely different world: cold, quiet and structured. The transition wasn't always easy, but I learnt a great deal: about myself, other cultures, and the power of adaptability.

I now feel at home here, just as you did back then. Unlike your family, who all died for their faith, my family is still alive.

After all, we grew up in very different historical contexts. Mine was easier than yours, which makes your achievement all the more admirable! You've almost reached the same age as my mum – you're 74 and she's just under 73. This February, you would have celebrated your 150<sup>(th)</sup> birthday. She would have only been 83.

It's not easy to find the right words. However, I hope that you can feel my admiration, wherever you are.

I wish for all the women in the world who, for whatever reason, have to leave their homeland, to find a place where they can make a home for themselves and their families.

Maricruz Peñaloza, letter to Anna Tumarkin.  
Anna Turmarkin, born 16 February 1875  
in Dubrowno, Russian Empire (now Belarus) –  
died 7 August 1951 in Gümligen, Switzerland.



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