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To cite this article: Valentina Freimane (2000) Remembering Paul Schiemann (1876–1944), , 31:4, 432-437, DOI: [10.1080/01629770000000191](https://doi.org/10.1080/01629770000000191)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01629770000000191>



Published online: 28 Feb 2007.



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REMEMBERING PAUL SCHIEMANN (1876-1944)

Valentina Freimane, Riga

We called him *Herr Doktor*, an academic title which he had earned in his law studies. A member of the Latvian Parliament (*Saeima*) and editor of the *Rigasche Rundschau* (1919-1933), Paul Schiemann (in Latvian: Pauls Šīmanis) was more than just an important figure in my life. I do not think of him only as a remarkable politician, publicist, democrat, anti-fascist and anti-communist. I remember him primarily as a unique individual, as a human being -- as a person, without whom, perhaps, I would not be here today.

In 1985, at the beginnings of the “Gorbachev era”, Professor Peteris Krupnikovs -- who in those days was already able to travel to West Germany (I myself was still invariably relegated to the ranks of “the non-travelers”, the category of so-called “nevjezdnije”) -- brought back a book from there and placed it in front of me. This book consisted of the memoirs of Paul Schiemann, entitled *Zwischen zwei Zeitaltern (Between Two Eras)*. It had been published in 1978, but had not been accessible to those of us behind the Iron Curtain. Upon examination of this work -- published by the Carl Schirren Society in Lüneburg -- I felt something similar to an electric shock. Here they were, the unfinished memoirs of Schiemann he had dictated to me in the days when he had taken me into his home, thereby saving me from certain death and bringing his own life and that of his wife into grave danger for “hiding a Jew” (recall, the *Endlösung [Holocaust]* meant the physical extermination of all Hebrews). During the time that I lived underground with the Schiemann family (he was seriously ill and weary -- but quite remarkably brisk mentally), he dictated his memoirs to me. After Schiemann died on the eve of Midsummer (St. John’s Day) 1944, his wife Charlotte Schiemann returned to her native home in Bavaria, taking the manuscript with her.

Hence, the content of the publication was quite familiar to me. I opened the book to the preface. It mentions that the manuscript had been given by Charlotte Schiemann to the publisher several years ago and that she had stated that the author had dictated it to a young Jewish girl who had been hidden by them in their home. I think that Mrs. Lotte did not mention my name, knowing that in the Soviet Union this could have dire consequences.

My situation in Soviet Latvia being more than unpleasant, I had not tried to locate Mrs. Lotte or -- as Schiemann prior to his death had told me to do -- to introduce myself to Paul Wegener in Berlin (I do not know whether they were close friends, but Dr Schiemann relied upon the famous actor as a confidant). Only in 1989, when I was first “permitted” into the West, could

I telephone the editors in Lüneburg and tell them: "Hello, the anonymous girl, that's me." The warm response and interest were quite moving, but that is another story. While he dictated and analyzed the earlier stages of his life, I could clearly see how his political principles had evolved and developed, and, speaking about the happenings of 1918 and 1919 (our sessions were interrupted then by his death), took the shape of an well-argued idea he so successfully promoted at the League of Nations. His aim was a democratic Latvia with a thriving Latvian national life the people had been deprived of in the past by German and Russian oppression, a multicultural Latvia, at the same time, with a population of loyal citizens -- Latvian, German, Russian, Jewish, Polish etc.

Reading his articles and speeches opened my eyes to the tragedy of this outstanding personality. For him, everything he had worked for, was destroyed -- already since the "repatriation" of the Baltic Germans in 1939. Everything -- except his integrity and beliefs. But Latvia would never be this model of multicultural democracy, including a German Baltic minority, he and his friends had begun to build up. In the era of the German "repatriation" in 1939, the population of Latvia, was approximately seventy-six percent Latvian, 3.5 percent German, five percent Jewish, twelve Russian (including Ukrainian and Belorussian), three percent Polish, one percent Lithuanian and a small number of other nationalities. The German minority had already diminished from (after the First World War) approximately ten to eleven percent.

Indeed, these short remarks should not be viewed as a full and complete account of the past. There are simply too many "other stories" which remain unwritten. Immersing oneself into a past such as mine (and only for the period of German occupation, when I was fortunate enough to meet Paul Schiemann) is quite painful, requiring more strength and concentration than I have at the moment. True recollections develop slowly, in rare moments of quiet retrospection. During this period -- 1942-1944, I was a twenty-year old widow. My whole family, including parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles and their families, had already been killed during the "liquidation" of the Riga ghetto (November 1941), my young husband, owner of "Aryan" papers, was imprisoned for saving me, his Jewish wife, and disappeared. The surprising mutual understanding between a young girl and an elderly intellectual politician dying from an incurable sickness, can be understood only if one is familiar with my own experience and the unique multicultural intellectual milieu of my youth. It was this cultural background which enabled me not only to reply in thankfulness which can not be expressed in words, but also to become a discussion partner and assistant. That, understandably, filled me with enormous satisfaction. I was somewhat useful to a man, whom I respected as a great personality -- if only for the reason that nothing could bend his mind, neither political forces, nor illness.

I used to sit at the desk, writing his narration, while Dr Schiemann dictated sitting in the lounge chair or lying on the sofa. These hours are among the most precious memories in my turbulent life. Now and then, the author interrupted his narrative in order to check what I had written. From the dictated memoirs of Paul Schiemann, I comprehended that he supported the Latvian state with all his conviction and always regarded his position as the only correct one, in contrast to those Baltic German political circles who refused to recognize the Latvian Republic proclaimed on November 18, 1918. In this regard, Paul Schiemann as a Baltic German understood the Latvian reality. With the high political culture characteristic of Paul Schiemann, as I well learned from his memoirs, he had, since 1918, striven to persuade those Baltic German circles, who stubbornly persisted in holding on to their earlier privileges, who hoped for help from various armies to save their former status and who did not accurately apprehend the new reality. Paul Schiemann regarded Latvia as his homeland and wanted to protect it. He categorically rejected the May 15, 1934 takeover of power by Kārlis Ulmanis. He called it a “putsch” (coup d’etat) which he regarded as an unlawful violation of the Latvian Constitution and as state subversion against democracy. Paul Schiemann was a true democrat and liberal in his views. Still, he was not a social democrat politically, as he several times emphasized to me.

I started living with the Schiemanns some time around New Year’s Eve, 1942-1943, but no longer recall the exact date. Not far from Schiemann, on Zalenieku Street, lived Mrs. Maria Melnikov, the widow of Pyotr Ivanovitch Melnikov, director of the Latvian Opera, close friend of Fyodor Shalyapin, and her daughter, with whom I found a ready shelter when Schiemann had guests or visiting relatives. Not only did Schiemann choose to hide me, but he also was in a position to do so, for two reasons. Paul Schiemann was a *persona non grata* for the German Nazis, a thorn in their eyes, but his illness and the quiet immobile life which was tied to it, was a guarantee for the Germans that he could be easily watched. He himself told me that his correspondence was checked the entire time. Moreover, there was another fortuitous circumstance. One of his wife’s relatives had taken a high position in the occupation administration, and not desiring any problems among his relatives, as Schiemann states, “kept a protective hand like an umbrella over the house on Atgazes Street.”

Coming to the Schiemann home, after having for months changed from one insecure short-lived hideout to another, was to me as if I had arrived in paradise. It was not only that I met good, selfless people, who put their own lives in danger to help others, out of their ethical imperative, charity and indignation against inhumanity. I had also arrived in a familiar atmosphere, which reminded me of home.

This intellectual environment, ethical microclimate, strengthened the

ideas I had already brought along from my own upbringing. I was confirmed in my belief that it is possible to retain self-esteem, honour (in the chivalrous, even “quixotic” sense) and inner freedom, even in the most extreme circumstances. A person such as Paul Schiemann could only be exterminated. It was not possible to take away his freedom, to make him a slave, a hypocritical compliant servant, or to get him to collaborate. This conviction of mind and this model of virtue I have adopted in my own later life. It was a gift of fate at a moment when everything else had been lost!

It was characteristic that neither *Herr Doktor* nor Frau Lotte ever hinted at or gave cause to observe that my presence in their home was anything other than a normal, enjoyable visit. If one’s heart was heavy, or if one was depressed by the past and anxious about the future, each of us resolved these problems alone in seclusion. The Gestapo and the threat of death were real, and we had to be careful. But taking precautions is not the same as fear nor is it anything degrading.

The creation of a stimulating cultural environment had great meaning for Charlotte Schiemann or, as I called her, Frau Lotte, a former actress. This vital and high-spirited woman was wanting neither in common sense, humour nor resourcefulness, which meant quite a lot to both Schiemann and me.

Schiemann himself seldom ventured beyond the gates of his own backyard, a small well-kept garden. I can only recall a few instances when acquaintances took him by vehicle to the city to some institution or on an urgent visit. Even the physicians came to his home.

Toward the end of his life, Schiemann was not very talkative. If he mused occasionally, it was about literature, philosophy, art, ethics, politics or the war. Everything was clear and said about the Nazi regime. Only from short comments, seeds of thought, most often mentioned in the hours of our joint work, could I discern the tragic clarity, with which he viewed the present and the near future. The collapse of the League of Nations, the grinding of the Baltic between two totalitarian grindstones, the demolition of his own life’s work, clearly oppressed him deeply and wore on his already weak health. Still, I learned from him how to discipline oneself to view everything from an analytical, historical distance, even if at heart one wanted to grieve or cry to the heavens. At that time, I attempted to understand and resolve within myself his laconic comments. Here I will mention only a few episodes. Once, after a guest had left, a Latvian politician advocating the Latvian Legion as patriots fighting against Stalin for a free Latvia, *Herr Doktor*, muttering angrily, took the stairs to the second floor, where I sat at the typewriter, and ironically exclaimed about the incompetents who wanted to cure one evil with another (*den Teufel mit dem Beelzebub austreiben*, an ancient German saying), and about their inability and unwillingness to look facts in the eye and about how those boys were

misguided and betrayed, manipulated through illusions and absurd hopes, by their own Latvian “leaders.”

Another time, shortly before his death, a group of colleagues from the days of the Latvian Parliament visited him, people for whom he had maintained his respect, in spite of differences of opinion. I had, as always, taken refuge on the second floor and thus know only that Pauls Kalniņš, the leader of the Latvian Socialdemocrats (repressed by Ulmanis, the Soviets and the Nazis alike), was among them, and, I think, was also his colleague Cielens. They had brought a manifesto with a utopian project for autonomy, presuming support from Sweden and the West, etc. He had refused to sign these day-dreams, saying that once more the people would pay too high a price for the self-deception and illusions of politicians. I relate these happenings here as I perceived them then, without adding any later information.

In closing, I will share my thoughts about Paul Schiemann’s death. I am probably the last living person who was present in those sorrowful days. Paul Schiemann suffered from two chronic illnesses -- pulmonary tuberculosis and diabetes, which at that time were difficult to treat. It was clear that his time was nearing an end. Yet, his death came unexpectedly, with a strange precision only later appreciated by me; Paul Schiemann died at that moment, when, perhaps for the first time in his life, he was unable to decide what course to take.

In the preceding weeks (May 1944) it appeared that his condition had stabilized. He walked a bit in the garden, was mentally active, quick and ironical, kind and benevolent. I presumed that he was waiting for something, repeating that he would never go to Germany as long as the Hitler regime was in power. In the bottom of his heart he hoped, although his mind told him to hold back, that changes would occur in Germany, a successful overturn. Here he saw the only hope for the Baltic: an armistice -- the armies would stop including the Soviet army. Otherwise, an inevitable, grave and hopeless situation. There was no alternative. (A separate topic is Schiemann’s democratic, honest and objective analysis of the struggle of the Russian people for its homeland in this war against Hitler’s aggression.)

But there were no changes in Germany. Soviet forces were nearing. Only once did he shortly and clearly state his position to me. He wanted to remain true to his principles to the end, knowing how dearly he would have to pay for it. He had no illusions whatsoever about what to expect from the Soviet authorities once they had returned. In his aloof stoical manner, with a touch of sad irony, he stated: “Even if there were no Soviets, just Russians, after what has happened no one could expect them in those first weeks to reflect on who’s a ‘good’ German and who -- a ‘bad’ one.” As for me, anyone who drove out the “Hitlerites,” would be saving me from the previously resolved extermination. History had decided that this would be

the Soviet army, it was not possible to choose. But how about him? It was hard to observe Schiemann in this dilemma. He became more and more silent. Listening to the pragmatic voice of reason meant giving up himself.

Death freed him quite simply from this decision. I had a mystical feeling that, as a human being of high ethical strength, he saved his integrity, permitting his body, weakened by illness, to find its eternal peace. At the same time he freed his wife from the obligation to stay by his side. Understandably, I could not be at his funeral. I left the Schiemann home the day after his death. People started coming and going, preparing the funeral.

Mrs. Lotte intended to leave right after the burial. I said goodbye to her, as it later turned out, forever. Separated by the Iron Curtain, we did not seek or attempt to find each other and never met again.

Speaking about Paul Schiemann, I have attempted to bring back to life what I saw, heard, and understood, not taking into account the information and thoughts of later days.