

Harrer/Vane: My Great German Search
Chips of Alabaster

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Elise Harrer, as part of Percy Criddle's extended family, was introduced in Alabaster Chronicle Number Thirteen by Myrna Paquette. (Percy was the son of Harry Criddle and Mary Ann Alabaster.) Since that time we have new information: letters written by Elise's brothers, and documents treasured by Cecil's family (her youngest son) and his daughter Flora. Granddaughters, Cathy Noel and Joyce Tully offered them as gifts to this generation. The door of silence long closed by societal forces surrounding the Vane family has been opened.

Edwy was Elise Harrer's oldest son. His son, Rupert Vane, my father, was old enough to remember his grandmother's comforting arms and lullabies. He



worried that her 1903 grave in the cemetery on the Criddle homestead south of Shilo, Manitoba, would remain unnamed and forgotten. Shortly before Rupert's death in 1977 we supported him on a family pilgrimage to her grave to make sure the stone he had ordered, etched with her name, 'Elise Vane 1841-1903'¹, had been appropriately placed. I promised my father then to discover more about his grandmother. Since my retirement, I have been rewarded with incredible experiences culminating in a trip in 2003 to Germany's Schwarzwald (Black Forest). This seemed fitting on the

100th anniversary of Elise's death on the Canadian prairies far from the verdant green hills of her homeland.

Research into the past is very challenging in any country. People discouraged me saying, "The wars destroyed all records!" but I was determined.

Winnipeg, Manitoba, where I live, has many people of German heritage. I needed someone special, a person not only fluent in German but able to decipher old German script. Translation into English was then possible. I began working with a wonderful, retired teacher, Helen Ens. For over a year Helen carefully worked her way through personal letters to Elise from her



Rupert, Thyra, John Vane 1904, lived in same yard.

¹ My father thought the date was 1841. Her baptism certificate shows 1840

brothers, Friedrich in Mannheim and Carl in Karlsruhe, from 1882 to her death in 1903. There were a few more letters to Percy before 1910 when Friedrich died. Helen, who was familiar with German history and culture, put the letters into a context that helped me understand more than I could from my 'contemporary' worldview. One example of this is the address on the notice for a funeral was the home address of the family. Also, there is a difference between English and German pronunciation so that an 'e' on the end of a word is not silent, but more like the 'e' in **met**, so Elise is pronounced with 3 syllables. The 'ie' in Friedrich is pronounced as a long 'e', and 'ei' in Freiburg and Heidelberg is pronounced long 'i'. That Carl and Karl seem to be used interchangeably by both father and son in the documents. Father Carl's death record has Carl in the body of the document but 'Harrer Karl', in the margin. Her brother mentioned both 'Carl and Karl' and from the context the reader finds they are the same person. In Canada a child's middle name is most often only that, whereas in Germany the middle name was the name the child was usually called by. Children were traditionally given names in honour of grandparents or saints, if Catholic, which were placed first. However, if that parent or grandparent was deceased, the child may then use that honorary name which might be the case in Elise's brother, Carl Jacob Harrer.

The letters provided names, addresses, and dates to begin my research. Piece-by-piece I put together family names and locations in Germany. Unlike England where there is a central location from which to search for family history data, German records are retained locally for the most part. I began writing letters to each specific address. Much depended on the generosity of local historians or archivists as to the extent of their response.

In Donaueschingen we learned that a Carl Harrer, a Catholic, had been born in 1805, married a Susanna Harkert, was a Grandduke of Baden forester, and died January 15, 1849. I dismissed this as the wrong family.

In Schapback it was the mayor who responded to my letter when I wrote asking for information about Elise's cousin (also named Elise) who had returned from Paris to become engaged to Herr Schmid.

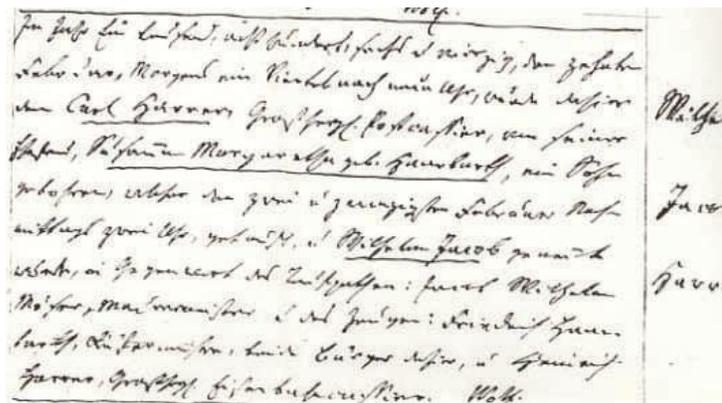
From Hechingen I discovered that indeed another cousin named Hermann had been postmaster there and provided a newspaper article of a celebratory farewell party on the occasion of his departure to Lörrach.

From Freiburg city archives I learned that Elise's father had been a postal official who lived at two addresses during a two-year time span including

1840 when she was born. Archivist Dr. Ecker couldn't say where the family had come from or where they had gone. Elise's complete baptism record, in translation by Helen, recorded her grandmother Sabine Haarbarth, (nee Schaaf), from Heidelberg, as the Godmother in absentia. This was the clue as to why Elise was baptized Protestant in a very Catholic town. This fact provided a tracing point of family roots to the north.

A long awaited response from the Mannheim Stadtarchiv provided a page from the 'Family Book' showing that Elise's family had lived there before moving to Freiburg. Elise's older brothers Friedrich [1837] and Carl [1839] were born there.

At that opportune time, Myrna Paquette sent an IGI notation listing a Wilhelm Jacob Harrer, born to Carl and Susannah Harrer in Heidelberg in 1846. A document obtained from archives verified Elise's little brother.



I still did not understand how her brother Carl's visit to Donaueschingen where "our father rests again" could fit into this picture. I decided to revisit the 'forester from Donaueschingen' and a most helpful archivist, Herr Schlomski. He was happy to explain how recorders in the past could easily mistake one letter for another when copying from the original, leaving the record wrong from that time on. The similarity between the letters in old script of Susanna's last name 'Haarbarth' and 'Harkert' as well as 'Großherzoglich Badischer Forstmeister' and 'Großherzoglich Badischer Postmeister' could have been such copying errors. The original records were destroyed in a fire in 1909.

The language barrier continued to frustrate my progress and thankfully at this time Laraine Hake introduced me to Valerie Knobloch, an Alabaster descendent from the 4th branch living in Germany. Valerie's translations helped convince me that this was indeed my family. On our visit to Donaueschingen in June, I found Carl Harrer's death certificate in the archives of the Catholic Church of St. Johann to confirm that Elise's father died there January 17, 1849 at the age of 44.

I then began to concentrate on Heidelberg's city archives where I now knew Elise had lived before her father's death and later attended school in her formative years. Thanks to Valerie Knobloch's many letters to the city archivist, Diana Weber caught my vision of finding a wider context of the social and political situation in which to set Elise's story. Frau Weber arranged for my husband, Art Veldhuis, and me to meet another transplanted Valerie (Vierneisel) from England. She interpreted for us and next day treated us to a half-day tour of Elise's old Heidelberg. She shared of her extensive understanding of music, art and literature of that time. Our stay in Heidelberg was a truly rich experience.

In early January my husband sent a letter containing a few Harrer family facts to all the Harrers he could find on the Internet. On May 18 I received a response from one of the enquiries. It began: "Dear Cousin Oriole" and proved to be from descendents of that postal cousin Herman Harrer I had been following in the 1890s. They were very surprised to discover relatives in Canada and welcomed us to visit them when we came on our planned trip to Germany in May. The war in Iraq and the outbreak of SARS caused the tour to be rescheduled. However, when we received this new family information we quickly rebooked our flights. We travelled to Lörrach, just across the Rhine from Basel and enjoyed the warm hospitality of the Harrer family descendents for eight days.



We were also pleased to visit Valerie and Peter Knobloch at Gütersloh. We enjoyed good conversation, research, excursions, great food and Reinhard Knobloch wine! At the time of writing there are still copies with old German script to be deciphered located in archives at Freiburg, Donaueschingen, Heidelberg, Karlsruhe, and Mannheim.



Archivists in each place were patient and helpful. I am sure there is more to discover but already I have made what seems like miraculous discoveries of Elise's family and life before she left Germany in 1867.

Here then is the story of my great grandmother, Sabine Elise Harrer, born 1840 in Freiburg im Breisgau, Baden, Germany, based on the information I have found up to this time, August 2003.

The Harrer family was a privileged one. Elise's father, Carl Harrer, had a promising career as Grand Ducal Postmaster overseeing the growing movement of people, mail and goods. That he had been appointed to important places such as Mannheim and Heidelberg reflected well of his abilities.

Following years of strife the Grand Duke of Baden wanted to create unity in his Dukedom. To accomplish this, postmasters and other high civil servants were moved from posting to posting and especially between Catholic and Protestant areas. Elise's Uncle Friedrich was also a *Großherzoglich Badischer Postmeister*. We saw Friedrich's certificates for various appointments as well as a splendid portrait hanging in his great-grandson Hans-Eugen Harrer's house in Lörrach. Elise's father would have worn a similar uniform and moved strategically from city to city. Carl Harrer, a Catholic born in Radolfzell and living in Mannheim, married Susanna Haarbarth, a Protestant from Heidelberg, in that city in 1836. They had 4 children, Carl Friedrich Wilhelm [1837] and Carl Jacob Wilhelm [1838] both born in Mannheim. Sabine Elise [1840], born in Freiburg, had the distinction of being baptized in a very old but newly relocated, rebuilt and dedicated Evangelical Ludwig Church, the very first Protestant church in that Catholic city. Transferred back to the north, Wilhelm Jacob was born in Heidelberg in 1846. The family moved south from Heidelberg to Donaueschingen where Carl died January 17, 1849.



His wife, Susanna Harrer was suddenly without a husband for support. With four young children she must have been devastated. She returned to her family in Heidelberg and is listed in the address book as "Postmaster's Widow" in 1852, living at Kettengasse 17. This was on the higher side of the Hauptstrasse (Main Street), less subject to flooding from the Neckar River. Susanna must have been a very determined and courageous woman to find ways to have her children educated on her small pension. At that time education for women was not expected yet Elise attended a very progressive and prestigious private school, the Erhardt Institute. Her 1855 report card



lists among regular subjects: Math, Music, Art, French, and English. She must have studied the poetry of Hölderlin and Gottfried Keller, famous German poets whose images she combined in her own poetry. Students attending the Erhardt Institute from Germany, France, Switzerland, and England indicate that this school was known throughout Europe. Susanna

must have sacrificed for her children as Elise was still sending her mother money toward debts up until the time Elise left for Canada. Her brother Friedrich wrote: “. . .you do not need to send us the money; you should have used it for your own children!”

In the 1860s it was not surprising that a young Englishman might want to live in Heidelberg. England’s renowned landscape painter, William Turner, had painted romantic scenes of Heidelberg in the 1840s. It was the travel destination of the rich especially after 1840s when train service made it much more accessible. The University of Heidelberg’s long tradition as an axis of learning extended beyond its walls. The whole town became a bustling centre for art, philosophy and science and the ‘place to be’. Mark Twain gave such an interesting account of his visit to Heidelberg in 1879 that the fame of the town and its castle ruins continued to increase.



Percy Criddle was issued a British passport Jan. 4, 1860 and stamped ‘Rotterdam’ August 14 & August 15, probably of the following year since his mother’s letter acknowledges his safe arrival in Heidelberg October 17th, 1861. He had the good wishes of his cousin Henry Alabaster from Bangkok, Siam, who had expected him to be in Germany when he wrote Dec. 28th 1860: “You will there be polished out of your nonsense a little and if you determine not to behave otherwise than as a gentleman you will always be glad of going there.” And just like a big brother added in conclusion: “. . .and don’t do anything to vex your mother.”

Heidelberg University archives report that Percy enrolled on December 21, 1861 at the age of 17. He stated his birthplace as ‘London’ and that his father was a ‘gentleman of private means’. The archivist also reports: “He

was Protestant and he studied history. He was enrolled in Heidelberg only for that one semester.” Percy’s mother, Mary Ann Criddle, had arranged for him to lodge with her friend Marianne Wiss only a few houses from Kettengasse 17, the residence of Elise’s family. Her husband, Dr. William Wiss was teaching English in the 1860s on the Plöck (a street).

From letters we know Percy took piano lessons from a Mr. Peter Beck. There seemed to be some discussion around continuing this instruction as we read in the following letter from Marianne Wiss in Heidelberg to Percy’s mother dated March 11th 1862.

My Dear Mrs. Criddle, I enclose you the Drs [sic] account of the disposal of the pounds sent him through Percy. We hope Percy will arrive safely in Addlestone (England) after his rapid journey through Paris. I confess I should have thought with you, that if he continued his studies under another but equally good master, the change would not necessarily interfere with his progress - He thinks it could materially. His best, indeed his only good reason seems is that his present master take an interest in him, that another would not, at any rate at first I can understand that Heidelberg can present few attractions to you.

In a letter to his mother in the spring of 1863 Percy asked her to help him find a renowned location to study as he had decided to become a professional musician.



Percy and Elise had become engaged by February 1863 and to mark this important occasion it is likely that a fine photo was taken. They may have enjoyed coffee in the Knösel Cafe opened in 1863 and frequented by students from the university and chaperoned girls from Erhardt Institute. (We bought their traditional chocolate ‘Student Kisses’ there). Perhaps Percy proposed to Elise in that very room!

However, Percy’s mother Mary Ann (an artist) would not give her son permission to marry; first because she was not able to support a family and secondly Percy’s age of 19 was too young.

It appears that Percy continued to travel back and forth to England as we read in letters from Maryanne Wiss in Heidelberg, March 13th 1864:

I trust we will be settled in our new abode by the time you arrive.... If you have a few odd corners to fill up in your box you might bring me a 12 lb box of “ ‘Bobbs’ biscuits for Infants” and a few dozen yards of good calico suited for

childrens [sic] wear and ½ a doz. pots of marmalade- but these only if you have room to spare! The doctor would like a skye terrier, a seal and an ostrich- the young gentlemen have no requests to make.

April 10th 1864, Maryanne Wiss asked if his mother was surprised that Percy brought a letter from her.

Friedrich reminisces in 1904: “40 years ago we were all together for New Years, Mother, Elise, Carl & Wilhelm.”

Many years later after Elise’s death Percy wrote to Friedrich, recalling being at his wedding to Marie “40 years ago” which was Sept. 7, 1865.

In March 1866 Marianne wrote to Percy in England:

...if you are coming over for Easter and if so whether you could or would be troubled with a parcel for me? Rumour said that this to be your last journey as a bachelor, but finding that rumour doesn’t generally know what she is talking about, I have not put implicit faith in the statement...

During one of these visits in the fall of 1866 Percy wrote his mother from Heidelberg: “Elise was feeling rather seedy this morning.” Elise, now 25, was indeed pregnant and applied for a passport in January 1867 to travel to England. Their baby was born in London May 20, 1867, and registered as Mabel Vane with parents Percy Vane and Elise Vane, nee Harrer. Percy’s application for marriage, which in Germany is very detailed and required permission from a parent plus a secure job and a home, remained blank. The 1871 census lists the family as Elise H. L. Vane,

head of household, married, age 30, occupation ‘Wife of retired tradesman.’ They had two more children, Minnie Vane (Myrna Paquette’s grandmother) and Isabel Vane. Baby Mabel had died in her first year.



Myrna modeling Elise’s fine silk dress. Hand sewn for her wedding?

Incidentally, the choice of surname ‘Vane’ remains a mystery except that a genealogist theorizes Percy liked its association with a ‘noble’ English family. However, when my grandfather Edwy Criddle was born shortly after the census in 1871, he was recorded as a son of Percy Criddle and Elise Criddle, (nee Harrer). Harry and Cecil were also registered as Criddle and the family attended school as Criddles as recorded on the 1881 census. The family lived at 131 St Georges Road, Southwark a district of London, above

Percy's business office. All the children except Cecil, who was five, were listed as scholars.

On 8th September 1874 a marriage certificate shows Percy Criddle marriage to Alice Nicol. He gave 131 St. George's Rd as his home address and his status as bachelor.

The following spring Elise and Alice each birthed a son with birthdates of less than a month apart; Cecil was born to Elise on 19th April, whilst Norman was born to Alice on 14th May 1875. Both mothers reported Percy Criddle as the father.

Elise and all her children are reported as Criddle on the 1881 British census. Indeed, according to my grandfather he was unaware of the name Vane until they arrived in Liverpool. Percy's diary of July 14, 1882 records:

Arrived in conjunction with 9 children and two other adults, at Liverpool at 5.00 p.m., from London en route for New York, St. Thomas and Winnipeg, (per S. S. Wisconsin, Intermediate) North Western Hotel.

Alice and her children travelled with Percy Criddle in 'intermediate class' with a cabin. Elise and her children travelled in the hold as immigrants under the name of Vane.

It seems like a strange lack of planning for such a voyage but on the eve of departure Percy reports in his diary the purchase of "E's tickets" and going to a shop where: "...for 17/6 we purchased 4 beds, water can, 2 pint cups (tin), canteen, utensils, six knives, six spoons and six forks for E. and her children..." We see her amazing character when under such stressful circumstances she was still able to smile at a man trying to get attention. Percy wrote: "...E. smiled & grinned at his sundry sallies much to my rage." Percy also reported the day following their departure on July 16:

Visited the Emigrants (sic) quarters... horrified - smell enough to poison a rat - could only stand them a few minutes at a time and then rush on deck for sweet air - or lie down sick. Women, men, children, huddled up anyhow amid sawdust, biscuit tubs, gruel and imigration [sic] utensils."

A few days later he wrote:

Went to see the Emigrants [sic] have their breakfast - stared down on them in the hold (!) from railing round hatch on main deck. Precisely like looking down on bears at the Zoo. Some of the poor creatures have never been on deck yet.

A vivid memory that my grandfather, Edwy, shared later was of “Mr. Criddle” looking down on them from above.

Like her mother Susanna Harrer, Elise faced these new hardships with great courage as she and her children, Cecil (5), Harry (9), Edwy (11), Isabel (12), and Minnie (13), crossed the Atlantic to New York in the hold of the S. S. Wisconsin. How could a mother explain this abrupt change of status? Believing in a better life for her children she mercifully could not foresee the hardships awaiting them in this “promised land”.

A book of poetry in Elise’s handwriting gives expression to the depth of her feelings of betrayal, yet she retained faith in a God who shone like a “bright star in the blackness”.

Receiving letters from Elise’s family in Germany must have been a great source of encouragement for her. Freidrich writes August 19, 1882:

Your Precious letters from St. Thomas with Postdate Aug 3 arrived on the 16th of the month. We are all happy to know you arrived safely. . . . We hope and wish fervently that you will enjoy your stay in that faraway country and that your hopes will be fulfilled.”

It is clear from the letters from Elise’s brothers, Friedrich and Carl Harrer, that they were a very caring family. They also clearly show her mother and brothers had no knowledge that she was not Percy’s legal wife or that her five children were not his only children.

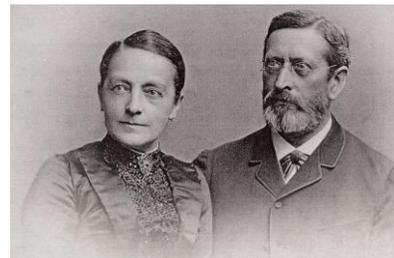
Karlsruhe, 27th October 1886:

My dear Elise! A few days ago I received your letter, addressed to Friedrich and learned to my consternation, that you again experienced much sorrow. God willing, the sickness will not have left some bad after effects. Amalie and I talk about you often and lament the fact that we live so terribly far apart. ... How often I am reminded of a prophecy our dear mother, now resting in the arms of God, used to say, when we as children, would fight with one another: "Later some time you will be glad, if you could only be together." Fate has certainly fulfilled this prophecy and has not allowed any of us to be together. ... Amalie and I send you, Percy, and the children many thousand well wishes, with the plea, that you will send a letter soon, and I also promise to write more often. May God protect you! Your brother, Karl

Mannheim, Sept 28, 1890:

Dear Elise, ...

I told you in the letter we celebrated our 25th wedding anniversary on Sept 7, thanks be to God in good health. We were very happy that day,



many of our relatives from far away showed up, even Mariechin's uncle Georg from Riga, Russia with his wife, which gave us much joy... We regretted very much that you and Percy could not be present: we thought of you a lot and remembered how gay we had all been at our wedding 25 years ago. We drank to your health. How our good old mother would have enjoyed being present on this day... Looking forward to some news soon I close with greetings from all of us to you, Percy and your dear children. Farewell again and a hearty greeting from your loving brother, Friedrich.

Why Elise did not return to Germany or share her situation with her family in Germany? Was it a blend of love and pride on her part to protect her family from her shame; or obedience to Percy orders to keep silent? We cannot know why she kept that secret.

There are still gaps in this story. Research will continue. Each piece of the puzzle leads me to have more pride in my German heritage. Elise was a woman of talent, ability, courage, and resiliency. She was able to give her children 'moral leadership' of the highest calibre in very difficult circumstances. Her modern day Harrer cousins in Germany are amazed that this privileged woman could adjust to a life of servitude and survive to see her children mature. My proposed book will continue the saga of how Elise and her children survived and later flourished in the new land of Canada.



Painting by Elise given to Cecil when the Criddles left Aweme for the Coast

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