

# Prologue

## The Malinowskis in the South Tyrol

Patrick Burke and Lucy Ulrich<sup>1</sup>

Bronislaw Malinowski and Elsie Masson arrived at Tilbury, east of London on the Thames, after a two-month-long journey by ship from Melbourne, on April 24, 1920.

For the next two years and more they led a “wandering life” (Wayne, 1995, p. 24), mostly together, sometimes apart, spending longer and shorter periods in different parts of Europe: at first, London and the countryside near Oxford; then, from June 1920, Edinburgh, where their first daughter, Jozefa, was born on August 8. Elsie remained in Edinburgh with the baby, while Malinowski divided his time between Edinburgh, London, Cambridge and Oxford. In November they sailed for the Canary Islands, where, on Tenerife, Malinowski – with Elsie as his “aide and critic” (Wayne, 1984, p. 196) – completed the manuscript of what would be published in 1922 as *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*. From there, in September 1921, they sailed to Marseilles, and set up house in nearby Cassis, where their second daughter, Wanda, was born on January 1922. In late July 1922 the Malinowskis travelled to Poland; and, although Malinowski was offered an associate professorship in ethnology at the Jagiellonian University in Krakow, they “made the fundamental decision not to take up life there” (Wayne, 1995, p. 27).

In September, while visiting their close friends, Paul and Hedwig Khuner, in Vienna on the way back from Poland, the Malinowskis took the advice

---

1 Patrick Burke and Lucy Ulrich are the children of Helena Wayne (née Malinowska), the youngest daughter of Bronislaw Malinowski and Elsie Masson.

Part of

Tauber, E. & Zinn, D.L. (Eds.). (2023). *Malinowski and the Alps – Anthropological and Historical Perspectives*. bu.press.

<https://doi.org/10.13124/9788860461940>



of a friend of the Khuners, Hans Busch, to visit the South Tyrol. Busch recommended a particular village: Oberbozen, which stood on a plateau on the Ritten, above the regional capital Bozen (Bolzano).

Here, the Malinowskis decided, would be their next home. From October 1922, they lived in a rented apartment in an old stone house – the Kinsele Haus – next to the small church of Maria Schnee. In January 1923 Malinowski was offered a permanent post as Reader in Social Anthropology at the London School of Economics (LSE); and was allowed to take up the appointment in 1924. Our mother's account suggests that this offer was what allowed Malinowski and Elsie to make the decision to remain on the Ritten: "He and Elsie foresaw that they could now stay in Oberbozen" (Wayne, 1995, p. 27).

The following summer they bought, and had renovated, the house across the fields from their rented apartment; in September 1923 the family moved into what would later become known as the Villa Malinowski. For the next six years Oberbozen represented home. Though there would be much traveling by both parents and children, the "wandering life" had come to an end.

For more than two years from their arrival at Tilbury the Malinowskis had not settled. What made them now choose Oberbozen? Why would a cosmopolitan, intellectual couple want to make their home in a small village in the South Tyrol, a good two days by train and boat from London, where Malinowski's immediate academic future lay, and a day's travel from Vienna, the nearest capital city?

Oberbozen and the Ritten had, in fact, many attractions. The area was "renowned for its beautiful views over the Dolomite range"; and Oberbozen was "quiet and peaceful, a good place in which to work" (Wayne, 1995, p. 28). Nor was Oberbozen physically isolated: the village was connected to the centre of Bozen by a cog railway (opened in 1907); and Bozen itself lay on the route of a main north–south train line that connected Rome, Verona, Innsbruck and Munich. By the early 1920s the Ritten was already a "gentle tourist resort" that attracted visitors from Vienna (including Sigmund Freud); from Czechoslovakia, the USA, and Britain (Young, n. d.); and from Berlin: writing to Elsie from the First International Congress for Sexual Research, held in Berlin in October 1926, Malinowski wrote that, "'Oberbozen is almost like a suburb of Berlin. I met lots of people who knew it ...[one of] the Secretaries [of the Congress] claimed to have walked often with our dogs'" (Wayne, 1995, p. 83).

The climate on the Ritten was also an attraction. Both Malinowski and Elsie were “so aware of their states of health” (Wayne, 1995, p. 27). The climate in Poland, with its “severe winters”, had been one reason why they had decided not to settle there (Wayne, 1995, p. 27). In their later correspondence Malinowski and Elsie touch on the unattractiveness of the English climate and the immediate environment in London: “I am not so glad to be sailing into those damp grey mists again”, Malinowski wrote while en route to London in May 1928 (Wayne, 1995, p. 118). In 1927, when a move to England was in prospect, Elsie – who, “brought up in Australia, hated English weather” (Wayne, 1984, p. 198) – wrote of the British capital as a “dirty hole” (Wayne, 1995, p. 90). In 1929, she “still favoured somewhere away from the pavement, smuts and soot of London” (Wayne, 1995, p. 145).

Writing in late 1922 to the director of the LSE, Sir William Beveridge, Malinowski emphasized how two years in a mountain climate would restore his health, which was poor after the trip to Poland (Young, n. d.). The Ritten was indeed renowned for having a “benign climate that helped those suffering from lung complaints” (Wayne, 1995, p. 28). (Whether or not Malinowski actually had a lung complaint is another matter. He had certainly suffered from “wretched health” all his life [Young, 2004, p. 37]. But he was also a hypochondriac; and he was at times convinced that he had illnesses where none existed. One such illness was tuberculosis: a “medical examination in his later life” revealed “no evidence of previous t.b. infection” [Wayne, 1995, p. 243]. That the bracing mountain air would attract him does not surprise.)

Malinowski may also have been drawn by the various reminders in Oberbozen, Bozen and elsewhere in the South Tyrol – the streets and buildings in Bozen, for example, the woods on the Ritten, the high Dolomite mountains themselves – of the world of his childhood in Krakow, Zakopane and the Tatras. “I dream of our being once more in Bozen”, he wrote to Elsie during his six-month visit to the USA and Mexico in 1926. “Bozen ... seems a real paradise. Probably its old-fashioned atmosphere, the vague associations with Cracow and my youth which it gives me” (Wayne, 1995, p. 68). Until 1918 Krakow and Zakopane, in Galicia, and the South Tyrol, had been part of the Habsburg Empire; the end of the empire saw Poland regain its independence and the South Tyrol ceded to Italy. The Malinowskis must have been very good at adapting to new surroundings; living in a former part of the empire

would surely have made this easier, at least for Malinowski. We have speculated in the family that the Malinowskis would have fitted fairly easily into the society of the South Tyrol, as Malinowski's position in the social hierarchy of the former Habsburg empire would have been recognised by people of all classes, both in Oberbozen and Bozen. This is only speculation.

The Malinowskis' financial situation in 1923 may also have prompted them to choose Oberbozen. In London in 1920, they had found it "impossible to rent a house or flat they could afford"; and their plans at that stage had included moving to an "inexpensive place in which to live" (Wayne, 1995, p. 3). In Oberbozen they could afford to buy, renovate, and redecorate a 3-storey house with seven bedrooms, a balcony and a veranda, each of which ran the width of the house, and two large fields (though for this they still needed a sizeable loan from Paul Khuner [Young, n. d.]).

Additional attraction to Malinowski in particular may have been precisely the fact that, because Oberbozen was two days' journey from England, he could pursue his career at the LSE unencumbered by the demands of family life with two, then three, young children.

In the autumn of 1924 a new arrangement began, which in its basic pattern held until all the Malinowskis moved to London in October 1929: Malinowski spent every term in London, living in boarding houses in central London, and later in a rented flat, while Elsie and the girls remained in Oberbozen or Bozen. Elsie joined him in London when she could. In the holidays Malinowski would return to his family in the South Tyrol. From late 1926 until their departure for London in October 1929, Elsie and the girls (joined by Malinowski in the holidays), spent about eight months of each year – October to June – not in Oberbozen but in Gries, "something of a health resort" in the western part of Bozen. The principal reason for the move was Jozefa and Wanda's need for "schooling and companionship" (Wayne, 1995, p. 78). With this move the villa in Oberbozen in effect became a holiday home.

That same autumn (1924) Elsie experienced the first symptoms of what would in January 1928 be diagnosed as multiple sclerosis. Despite the many and varied treatments she received, her health declined; by 1929 she was "confined to couch and wheelchair" (Wayne, 1984, p. 198). Nevertheless, Elsie maintained her active life in Oberbozen and Gries: she "went on ... as centre of the household ... supervising the maids and cooks and nannies, but al-

ways in charge of her children's upbringing" (Wayne, 1984, p. 197); and she welcomed and entertained visitors – students of Malinowski, amongst them Raymond Firth and Isaac Schapera, members of the family from Edinburgh and Australia, and her own friends from Australia, Germany and England. She also continued to observe and describe the spread of Fascism in the South Tyrol.

Shortly after the Malinowskis' arrival in Oberbozen, Elsie had written two articles on Fascism (Young, n. d.). In one, published in the Australian Magazine *The Forum*, she offers a vivid account of the Fascist regime as it took control of South Tyrol. She contrasts what a group of Fascist activists marching through Bozen looks like to "the foreigner" – "a party of silly boys turning real life into burlesque" – with the actual threat that the Fascisti ("apt as they were to use violence of a very nasty kind against individuals of whose views they disapproved") posed to the local population (Masson, 1923). In the following years descriptions of the impact of Fascist policies on life in South Tyrol are a theme in her letters to Malinowski.

One Fascist policy affected the family directly: Italianisation, under which the use of German was forbidden by law. Schooling in German, at all levels, became illegal, with even "'underground' or 'catacomb' nursery schools ... liable to police raids". Italian-language schools, for their part, were required to spread Fascist propaganda. In 1926 Jozefa "started private lessons, in German, with some other children"; and Wanda attended a "kindergarten also run in German" (Wayne, 1995, p. 86).

How did Elsie and Malinowski feel about life in Oberbozen and Gries? Before they moved into the new house, Elsie had written affectionately about it to Malinowski: "'some things won't be perfect, but it will be a very nice little house, all the same ... I love the view more and more'" (Wayne, 1995, p. 30). Three years later, on a day on which "'Oberbozen was unattractive ... the roads absolutely feet deep in mud'", she nevertheless had a "'passion of affection for our little house. It seemed to me a wonderful and miraculous thing that it really belonged to us'". The house seemed intertwined with their lives: "'saturated with the happy and even unhappy times we have had there'" (Wayne, 1995, p. 88).

Yet despite this sense of attachment, the visiting friends and family, and other demands on her time – managing the household, bringing up three

daughters (Helena was born in May 1925) – Elsie’s letters indicate that her life in the South Tyrol became also one of comparative isolation and loneliness. While she made “friends both local and foreign, predominantly women”, her description in 1925 of her social life as one of “aimless amiabilities and un-amiabilities” (Wayne, 1995, p. 48) does not suggest that this life was particularly stimulating. Some two years later she compared her life in Bozen and Oberbozen negatively with that of her old friend Jean Campbell in Cassis. Campbell was “very satisfied with life and herself because Vanessa Bell ... and Duncan Grant ... live near them and are great friends”; Elsie tells Malinowski that she wondered “why I was so friendless and was not given a “beautiful time” by any circle, here or in London” (Wayne, 1995, p. 123). One reason may have been that, unlike the south of France, the South Tyrol was not well-known in the English-speaking world. Three years later – in marked contrast – when the Malinowskis are living in Tamaris, east of Cassis along the Mediterranean coast, “a great many visitors came and went”, and the family’s “friends and acquaintances from the locality” included Aldous and Maria Huxley and Edith Wharton (Wayne, 1995, p. 161).

Above all, Elsie missed her husband. She loved him; and she feared what the part-separated life would do to their marriage. In early 1925 – shortly after Malinowski’s three-times-a-year residences in London had begun – there are “pangs of apprehension that these separations will really separate us, when they come so often and communication is rare” (Wayne, 1995, p. 35). There was no telephone in the house – and would not be until the mid-1960s – so all communication between the Malinowskis had to take the form of letters. Towards the end of the 1925 summer term in London: “I have an attack of melancholy and forebodings, as if I were alone in the dark, and I want you near me. I feel tonight as if I could not bear it one day longer without you” (Wayne, 1995, p. 45). An invitation to Malinowski at the end of 1925 from the Rockefeller Foundation, which he accepted, to spend a good part of 1926 working in the USA, produced something close to despair: “Existence seems all wrong and I am not at peace without you ... This separated life is horrible. We didn’t marry for this, surely ... I simply dare not look ahead and think of all those months – from March to June – alone in Oberbozen” (Wayne, 1995, pp. 53–54).

Her sense of isolation – in the South Tyrol, away from Malinowski and his busy life, which should also have been hers – stands out in a letter in November 1927: “I felt I should have been in London seeing [Raymond] Firth off, taking my place with you and in our circle”; the next day, in “deserted Oberbozen”, she has a “curious feeling ...: ‘What have I to do in this forlorn little place perched on the top of a mountain that has nothing whatever to do with me, my past, my real life?’” (Wayne, 1995, p. 107).

Elsie’s health was worsening, increasingly affecting her mobility. She began to spend time trying cures in Bozen, Austria, Germany and Czechoslovakia. Some may have brought her temporary relief, but nothing more than that.

There is comparatively little in Malinowski’s letters about his feelings about Oberbozen, Gries and the South Tyrol; but in places he expresses his affection for them – an affection that is intertwined with his feelings for Elsie. From America in May 1926 he told Elsie, that “I have dreadful pangs for you and for idyllic Europe ... and for our dear little home” (Wayne, 1995, p. 68). In spring 1928, on the train journey back to London, he tells her that it “has been a wonderful holiday ... in the narrow but so beautiful corner of the world which we had for ourselves we were so happy, weren’t we? ... when I think of our weather and landscape from our dear balcony I am glad to think of you there” (Wayne, 1995, pp. 117–118).

In October 1929 Oberbozen and Gries ceased to be home: The Malinowski household moved to London. Malinowski needed to have permanent residence in the UK if he was to get British citizenship, which the LSE authorities were pressing him to obtain; Elsie’s health had deteriorated to the point where living in Gries and Oberbozen was impractical; and the girls’ schooling was “becoming inadequate and dominated by the political question.” Even Wanda’s school had been the target of a police raid (Wayne, 1995, p. 126). In 1930 and 1931 the family again spent the summer months in Oberbozen. From there, in the autumn of 1931, they moved to the South of France, to a rented villa in Tamaris near Toulon. Malinowski had taken a leave of absence from the LSE to finish *Coral Gardens and their Magic*, his last monograph to draw on the material from his fieldwork in the Trobriand Islands. In the summer of 1932 the family appears to have remained in Tamaris.

They returned to Oberbozen in the summer of 1933. This was Elsie's last visit and the last time the family was there together. Elsie's health continued to deteriorate, reaching the point where the houses in Oberbozen and London became too difficult for her to negotiate. At the suggestion of Elsie's Austrian assistant, Rosa Decall, who had come to work for the Malinowskis in 1932, Elsie and Rosa moved to Natters, a village near Rosa's hometown of Innsbruck in North Tyrol. Natters was close to Innsbruck and easily reachable by car, whereas Oberbozen was connected to Bozen only by the cog railway that took an hour for the journey.

The three girls, now all at boarding school in England, spent their holidays in Natters with their mother in 1934. Their father spent the months from May to October of that year in various parts of southern, central and east Africa, visiting Elsie in Natters on his return. In 1935, the family was reunited in Natters during the summer holidays.

Elsie's condition worsened during those weeks and she died on September 18, some two days after her daughters were sent back to England to return to their boarding schools.

From 1934 onwards, the house in Oberbozen was rented out to a couple from Bozen, the Schulzingers. The Malinowski family spent the summers of 1937 and 1938 in Oberbozen, but the Schulzingers continued to rent the house throughout the Second World War and for several years thereafter. Family legend says, possibly incorrectly, that they pretended to have bought the house, which may be why it was never seized as the property of an enemy alien.

Malinowski was in the United States of America when the war broke out; Yale University had offered him a position and he brought his daughters across the Atlantic to join him.

By the time the war in Europe came to an end in May 1945 Malinowski had been dead for just under three years. His older daughters, Jozefa and Wanda, were by then both married to Americans; Wanda had had her first child.

Helena, the youngest, was still unmarried. She returned to Europe as soon as she was able to book a berth on a ship and made her way to the South Tyrol to reclaim the Villa Malinowski for herself and her sisters.



The house is still owned by Bronio and Elsie's descendants – now their grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Although we grew up in different countries and continents, the house in Oberbozen has remained a much-loved focal point for the family.

### Acknowledgement

The authors would like to thank Michael Young for showing them draft chapters of the forthcoming second volume of his biography of Malinowski.

### References

- Masson, E. R. (1923, January 17). Viva il fascio! Black Shirts at Bolzano. *The Forum. A Journal for Thinking Australians*, 1(18), 12.
- Wayne, H. (1984). Bronislaw Malinowski: The influence of various women on his life and works. *Journal of the Anthropological Society of Oxford*, 15(3), 189–203.
- Wayne, H. (Ed.). (1995.) *The story of a marriage. The letters of Bronislaw Malinowski and Elsie Masson. Volume 2, 1920–35.* Routledge.
- Young, M. (1984). *Malinowski. Odyssey of an anthropologist, 1884–1920.* Yale University Press.
- Young, M. (n. d.). Oberbozen: At home in the Dolomites [Draft chapter of forthcoming second volume of biography on Malinowski].