

Tatiana Warsher 1880-1960

By L. Richardson Jr.

Tatiana Warsher was born 18 June (1 July new style calendar) 1880 in Moscow and died 2 December 1960 in Rome. Her mother was French and her father a prominent jurist and professor of law. His father was a brilliant church architect in a family of Polish Jews that had converted to the Russian Orthodox faith, and he had received a hereditary patent of nobility from the Russian crown.

Tatiana received an excellent education, culminating in attendance at the Women's College of the University of St. Petersburg from 1898 to 1901. While there she was a devoted pupil of Michael Rostovtzeff, the distinguished ancient historian and archaeologist, and a friend and classmate of his future wife. In 1911 she married a doctor named Suslov whose family, religiously conservative Old Believers, came from the Ural Mountains. On their honeymoon to western Europe she visited Pompeii, the study of which was destined to become her life's work. Her husband died very young, shortly before 1914, and Tatiana subsequently married his widowed brother, an engineer, in order to care for his adolescent children. A few years later he was killed as a member of the White Russian Army. During the war years she wrote extensively about political issues, especially in support of the objectives of the Constitutional Democratic Party, but did not then consider herself an archaeologist. After the Revolution she supported herself by teaching in girls schools in Riga, Archangel and Dorpat, for she was fluent in several languages.

In 1921 Tatiana left Russia and went to Berlin. She studied at the University of Berlin and attended lectures on Pompeian architecture by Professor Franz Noack and on Pompeian painting by Professor Gerhart Rodenwaldt. At the same time she tried to re-establish contact with Rostovtzeff, who had left Russia at the beginning of the Revolution and had gone first to Stockholm, then to Oxford, and after the war to the United States—first to the University of Wisconsin at Madison and subsequently to Yale. In the summer of 1923 she traveled to Paris to meet Rostovtzeff, and he encouraged her to establish herself in Rome and to become a student of Pompeii. He was embarking on the composition of his great work, The Social and Economic History of the Roman Empire, and was acutely aware of the wealth of unpublished material that the Pompeii excavations had unearthed but had been left to molder—all of which had a bearing on the life fabric of the early Roman Empire.

Tatiana accepted this charge very willingly and soon ensconced herself in the world of the German Archaeological Institute in Rome with frequent forays to Pompeii to gather information. She taught herself simple photography and became an indefatigable recorder of details, especially the sorts of detail that others might judge too humble to warrant attention. Thanks to introductions from Rostovtzeff she came to know the international archaeological community of Rome. The first fruit of her labors was a guidebook, Pompji, ein Führer durch die Ruinen, published in Berlin and Leipzig in 1925. This was subsequently translated into other languages and in English appeared as

Pompeii in Three Hours. In this book she thanks for their help in Rome Professor Walter Amelung and Dr. Karl Lehmann-Hartleben, and in Pompeii, Professors Matteo Della Corte and Giuseppe Spano. Della Corte, who was Director of the Excavations at Pompeii was a close friend of Rostovtzeff, and Tatiana Warsher and he were to enjoy an especially cordial relationship that was to last more than thirty-five years.

In studying the ruins of Pompeii Tatiana Warsher became especially interested in the streets, some broad and straight, others crooked and narrow, and their varied aspects. Some building façades were stately and severe while others were gaudy with color and emblazoned with inscriptions. She tried to document their variety and contrast in photographs. Her first attempt focused on Via di Mercurio, one of the finest streets in the city, lined with shops toward its lower end near the forum with sumptuous houses beyond these. She presented these ideas in a series of overlapping photographs that covered both sides of the street for its full length. This naturally led to an interest in what lay behind the façades, the varied lives of the artisans, shopkeepers, and householders, and the extent to which they were interwoven with one another or kept distinct. These ideas also interested Rostovtzeff, and he suggested that she take whole blocks of the city and examine and document every building and every room in each building.

Working at first as an independent scholar, later as a research assistant to Rostovtzeff, and during and after World War II, again independently, she compiled huge manuscript volumes, the Codex Topographicus Pompeianus, that included everything she could discover about the excavation of a building and whatever had been written about its architecture, decoration, and contents in an analysis of the vast and sprawling literature about the site. She photographed and reproduced all the plans and available drawings as well as the collections of Rome and Naples—not only the works of Alinari and Anderson, but also the Vasari, Sommer, and Esposito collections as well as those that might have old plates with preserved details that had faded or crumbled with time. To these assemblages she would add her own photographs of a building in its present state as well as a description of what there was to be seen and how it should be interpreted. Wherever she could she would add measurements and for anything of special interest or oddity she would add comparanda from her unparalleled wealth of knowledge of the ancient city. Appendices and excursus sometimes threatened to overwhelm the importance of the matter actually under discussion.

Her first volume was produced for the German Archaeological Institute library in Rome, but as Rostovtzeff became increasingly interested in her work and its implications for the wider world under the rule of Rome, he wanted duplicate copies for his own use and asked her to provide them. But as she reworked her analyses she would repeatedly discover that she had enlarged her knowledge especially in the interpretation of building techniques and evidence for lost features, such as wooden shutters and upper story rooms. So in producing a new copy she was constantly improving and enlarging on her original ideas. Copies of various volumes, no two exactly alike, came to be included in the libraries of the German Archaeological Institute, the American Academy in Rome, and the Swedish Institute in Rome as well as Rostovtzeff's personal library (which eventually became the property of the American Society of Papyrologists and now is kept in the

Department of Classical Studies at Duke University). Her last edit is always the latest version, except for one or two of the earliest volumes. The copies from which microfilms were made have been continually consulted by Pompeianists and students of Roman life in most of the major research libraries in the United States.

The labor of producing the volume, or more often multiple volumes was exhaustive. A new architectural block always took many months to research and involved a fresh campaign of photography to fill in the gaps of the coverage. Consequently the choice of each new block was an important one. Whereas Tatiana Warsher's first interest had been in the Via di Mercurio, she changed her direction to research the Strada Stabiana, the great artery that divides Pompeii along a natural depression and extends in a straight line from the highest point on the site at the Porta del Vesuvio to the lowest at the Porta di Stabia. This street is deeply scarred by wheel ruts along its entire length.

Along this axis there is enormous variation, for while the small shops and workshops line the whole length, these change character from those at the gates geared to the convenience and comfort of those arriving from elsewhere (and though the Porta di Stabia passed most of the traffic from Pompeii's port on the River Sarnus) to those catering to the crowds that frequented the theaters and great public baths, with others interspersed between. And just behind these lie some of the largest and finest of all Pompeian houses from the grand old mansion known as the Casa del Torello di Bronzo to the elegant, richly decorated, Fourth Style Casa di Marco Lucrezio. For the blocks along this artery Mrs. Warsher wrote volumes for I i, I ii, and I iii, IX I, IX ii, and IX iii, VII ii, VII iii, and VII iv, and VI xiv, omitting only I iv, the blocks that are largely taken up with public buildings (VIII viii, VII I, and IX iv) and those excavated relatively recently.

Along the Via di Nola, the northern east-west artery of Pompeii, she covered all the blocks from the Strada Consolare to the Strada Stabiana on both sides of the street, except for VII v, which is largely taken up with the Forum Baths, and along the Via di Mercurio she covered everything from the Via di Nola to the city walls. By the time of her death she had completed thirty-seven volumes for Rostovtzeff and his successor, Professor C. B. Welles, and those in the libraries in Rome would double that number. At the beginning it was her ambition to cover all the so-called Old Excavations, but as time passed she became aware that this was impractical—hence her concentration on major streets.

In the late 1920s Rostovtzeff began to send students to Rome, especially to the American Academy in Rome, to study Roman archaeology, and many of these became Tatiana's friends and students. They helped her improve her English for she was then writing the Codex; she in turn introduced them to the archaeological community in Rome. She moved to an apartment in Monteverde Vecchio to be nearer to the American Academy and was "at home" for tea one afternoon each week at which time Academy Fellows, archaeologists of many nationalities and White Russian émigrés mingled. It would be hard to identify which were her close friends and which rather professional colleagues, but she seemed to esteem especially Ludwig Curtius, Erich Pernice, and Armjr von Gerkan among the Germans, and Enrico Paribeni and Caterina Caprino among

the Italians. She was very modest about her own accomplishments and a great admirer of other Pompeianists, seeing it as a sacred mission to record correctly what survived of the ancient city before it was lost to time and the Campanian summer sun.

This led her into parerga, as well as into digressions within the volumes of the Codex. Certain subjects fascinated her, and on these she collected material constantly. The variety of window openings and door closures in Pompeii, the types and uses of marble on the one hand and of terracotta on the other, the birds and flowers shown in Pompeian decorations, and the location of pictures that have been cut from the walls. She projected volumes on each of these subjects and for the last was in the process of producing a new edition of W. Helbig's Wandgemälde Campaniens in which each entry would be accompanied by a photograph of the picture or its faded ghost, and for pictures removed to the Museo Nazionale of the place it had occupied. She accomplished producing a volume for the pictures in the gallery of the museum devoted to the subject of paintings in the Third Style. The enormous size of this task may have prevented her from the production of further volumes before the Codex was completed, but she kept notes for all these subjects and was constantly adding to these in the margins of her copy of Helbig.

During the years of the Second World War, when communication with the United States was cut off, her life was very difficult; existence depended almost on a trickle of aid through the Swiss Red Cross and a little work at the Swedish Institute. But this did not prevent her from actively engaging in the sheltering and protection of Jews, often at considerable personal danger. Of her share in this endeavor she was justly proud but also very reluctant to talk about it. And throughout her life she was always very generous to those who had greater need, or she perceived as having greater need than herself. After the war her American friends rallied to her assistance with CARE packages and funds, and thanks to Professor Welles's efforts she began to receive a small income from the sale of the microfilms of the Codex. The great change in her life, however, came with the establishment of Halsted B. van der Poel and his family in residence in Rome in 1957. A passionate interest in antiquity had been kindled in him by Rostovtzeff when he was an undergraduate at Yale, and this was now rekindled through Tatiana Warsher. He became her last student and a singularly devoted and inspiring one.

Before her death she was able to see him take on the charge of providing the excavations of Pompeii with detailed and accurate plans, a full bibliography, and proper documentation. He gathered about him a team of dedicated assistants and insisted on high scientific professionalism. Although he somewhat changed the focus of research in the volumes of his Corpus Topographicum Pompeianum from description and compilation to cartography and documentation, he continued the basic work of recording to which Tatiana Warsher devoted her life on a different level. Hers is a great legacy.

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