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## **Special Issue – Women in Sciences: Historiography of Science and History of Science on the Work of Women in Sciences and Philosophy**

### **Helena Antipoff: Science as a Passport for a Woman's Career between Europe and Latin America**

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#### **Abstract**

Helena Antipoff was one of the pioneers in the constitution of the fields of knowledge of educational psychology and special education in Brazil. Born in Russia, Antipoff received her education in Paris and Geneva. Researches in the history of education and of psychology have revealed the innovative character of Antipoff's work as a researcher, as a professor and as a founder of different educational institutions in Brazil, with a focus on educational and psychological care for children with disabilities or at social risk. Her career is characterized by a sound scientific approach combined with a deep commitment to the right of children and youth to education and care. These directions can be associated with her scientific training in the sciences of education in a time of social turbulence and school reform, when many women became professionals in the field of education, trying to combine family, work and militant activity.

**Keywords:** Helena Antipoff; History of Psychology; Educational Psychology; Psychology of the Exceptional; Special Education; Women in Science; Women in the Sciences of Education

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#### **Introduction**

Helena Antipoff (1892-1974), a Russian psychologist and educator, settled in Brazil from 1929, played a role of great relevance in the establishment of areas of study and research in psychology and education in the country. She was educated in Saint Petersburg,<sup>3</sup> Paris, and

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<sup>3</sup> The name of the city of Saint Petersburg, in Western Russia, changed to Petrograd (1914-1924) and later to Leningrad (1924-1991). With the end of the Communist regime, it reverted to the old name (Le

Geneva, and worked in institutions for the shelter and education of abandoned children, in a social-risk situation, in revolutionary Russia between 1917 and 1924. Subsequently, she was an assistant professor at the University of Geneva (1927-1929), and in 1929, because of this work, she was invited to direct one of the first laboratories of pedagogical psychology established in Brazil, linked to the Teachers' College in Belo Horizonte, capital of the State of Minas Gerais. In this position, in the following years, she participated actively in the movement to renovate the public school system of Minas Gerais and in the formation of educators and psychologists. She acted as professor, researcher and creator of educational institutions such as the Pestalozzi Societies of Minas Gerais and Brazil, the educational complex of the Rosário Farm, in Ibitaré, Minas Gerais, and several other initiatives for the education of children with disabilities, and in the preparation of professors and specialists for special education, rural education and public education in general.

In the Psychology Laboratory of the Teachers' College, the research carried out by Antipoff and her students had the objective of describing the psychological and psychosocial characteristics of Belo Horizonte schoolchildren. The focus of the investigation were children's ideals and interests, their cognitive and socio-affective development, and their life in the family and at school. The idea was that the knowledge of the child and the adolescent was necessary to best orientate educators in the educational process. This was inspired by the ideas of educational renovation defended by the doctor and psychologist Édouard Claparède (1879-1940), and his colleagues, the founders of the Jean-Jacques Rousseau Institute, a college of preparation in educational sciences founded in Geneva, in 1912. The institutions whose creation was initiated and orientated by the Russian educator in the years 1930-1940 – the Pestalozzi Society of Minas Gerais, and the Pestalozzi Society of Brazil – , had the objective of caring for children and adolescents with deficiencies, particularly of those that presented deficiencies or problems of mental health, utilizing innovative methodologies, in harmony with the most advanced scientific discoveries of the time. In 1939, Antipoff inaugurated the chair of psychology in the recently established Faculty of Philosophy, Sciences and Letters of the University of Minas Gerais, initiating her work of preparing educators at university level (Alvim, 1954; Haddad, 1988). In this position, she contributed to the university education of some of the members of the first generation of Brazilian psychologists and helped to initiate the movement for the legal regulation of the profession in Brazil.<sup>4</sup> She also continued to expand the applications of psychology to education, as a psychologist herself and also through her students, who came to learn with her from diverse Brazilian states, and also from other countries in Latin America. New methods were taught in the education of children with disabilities or in the preparation of teachers for the public schools, both in rural and urban areas. In 1972, she became an emeritus professor at the Faculty of Education of the Federal University of Minas Gerais for her outstanding contribution to the theory and practice of psychology and education and to the preparation of new generations.

Her work was characterised by a solid theoretical foundation, obtained in the studies in educational sciences that she did in Europe, and by a concern in applying the knowledge in the resolution of the practical problems encountered in the process of institutionalisation of the public health and educational systems in Brazil. Her sensitivity to local culture helped her transcend frontiers and promote the development of institutions focused on the realization of the fundamental human rights of needy populations in a situation of social-risk,

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*Petit Larousse Illustré* 2002, 1655). In this article, we shall use the original and current denomination of Saint Petersburg.

<sup>4</sup> The movement for the legal regulation of the profession of psychologist and the establishment of university courses for the training of psychologists in Brazil was initiated by educators, psychiatrists and other professional in the beginning of the 1950s and was successful with the approval of Law 4119 in August 27, 1962. (Brasil, 1962)

contributing to make her an outstanding leader in popular education, in special education, and in rural education in Brazil (Campos, 2010, 2012; Lourenço, 2000)

In this text, we shall accompany her professional trajectory using her own reports and those of the people who were closest to her, such as her son, the psychologist Daniel Antipoff (1919-2005), her husband, the Russian writer Viktor Iretsky (1882-1936), and her friend and master from Geneva, Édouard Claparède. We shall try to comprehend her courageous decisions in this web of personal and professional relationships where she made her way. We utilize as sources for the narrative the correspondence and writings published by the personalities in this fascinating story, affected by the extraordinary political events of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Among them, we single out the biography written by her son, the correspondence conducted with Édouard Claparède between 1915 and 1940, carefully organized and edited by Martine Ruchat of the University of Geneva, and the correspondence between her and her husband Viktor Irestky during the years 1920-1930, recently found in Moscow.<sup>5</sup> (Antipoff, D. 1975; Ruchat 2010; Iretsky to Antipoff, H. unpublished manuscripts). Also important are studies about the Antipoff's life and works in France, Russia and Switzerland during the difficult years of war and revolution in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. (Campos, 2010; Ruchat, 2012; Masolikova & Sorokina, 2018)

Helena Antipoff's biography reveals important aspects in the experience of women who, like her, sought to combine family tasks with professional obligations throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and who were also militants in the movements for educational reform, trying to make education more humanized and concerned with the rights of the children. The social and cultural transformations provoked by the accelerated industrialization and urbanization that occurred during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries led many women to participate increasingly in the productive processes and to assume progressively the tasks of caring for and educating children and young people in the large mass education systems that were set up in several countries. Institutions destined for the education of the very young, and primary and secondary education sprang up in the large cities and industrial areas, promoting the development of new methods and educational processes. In the middle of the population movements, the wars and revolutions, the progressive construction of the area of sciences in education and of a new education movement were also being organized (Éducation Nouvelle, in the francophone tradition, New Education, in the Anglo-Saxon, Reformpädagogik in the Germanic countries). This multifaceted movement was born out of these new educational experiences that were being disseminated, transforming the ways of educating and promoting cultural standardization, as well as the listening and institutional care of children and young people. In recent years, much research has been done on the ideas that circulated worldwide from these educational innovations, and on the participation of women in their preparation (Hameline, Helmchen and Oelkers 1992; Haengelli-Jenni 2012, 2015; Droux and Hoffstetter 2015; Gutierrez, Besse and Prost 2012). Studying the participation of women in the New Education Fellowship, founded in Calais in 1921 by a group of educators and scientists of education interested in promoting educational renovation and peace through education, Haengelli-Jenni observed that belonging to the feminist movements and political networks and movements for the protection of childhood was a constant among them. It was through these networks and movements that the new pedagogical ideas were disseminated at the national and international levels (Haengelli-Jenni, 2015).

In Antipoff's trajectory, we can see the tensions and the effects of these movements and transformations in the life and intellectual production of a woman who participated actively in building the new educational movement and the educational sciences, in Europe

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<sup>5</sup> The authors wish to thank the historian Marina Sorokina and the psychologist Natasha Masolikova, of the Solzenitsyn Institute for Studies on the Russian Diaspora, in Moscow, for the precious information on the life of Helena Antipoff and Viktor Iretsky in Russia and Berlin, as well as for access to the correspondence between them during the years 1920-1930.

and Brazil, and who contributed to its dissemination and consolidation. In this article, we intend to provide evidence of the impact of this participation on her personal and professional life, and how her professional career was being moulded by these movements.

As Haengelli-Jenni observed concerning the participants of the New Education Fellowship in the interwar period, Helena Antipoff also combined scientific activity with political militancy for educational reform in her work and by the attention to the rights of children and young people. They stress especially in Antipoff's case the adherence to science as a means of adapting to diverse environments and cultures, utilising scientific language as a *lingua franca* in the different countries in which she acted professionally, making of the sciences of education a passport for the building of a productive and successful career.

## Education in Europe

Helena Antipoff was born in Grodno, in Russia, in 1892. Her father was a general in the Russian army, and her mother was from a military family. They lived in Saint Petersburg until 1909. In this city, an important cultural and intellectual centre of the Tsarist Empire, Helena was educated at an elite college, learning to play the piano and to speak French, German and English. While she attended the Teacher's College, she was a witness to the value then attributed to scientific activity by the Russian elites. In 1904, the scientist Ivan Pavlov received the Nobel Prize for physiology for his work on conditioned reflexes; the Saint Petersburg Psychoneurological Institute was founded in 1907. The intense cultural life of the city awakened an interest in science, music and literature. At the same time, the young woman was witness to the social conflicts and political struggles that swept Russia at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – struggles against the absolute power of the Tsar, and in favour of installing a constitutional monarchy in the country, with a division of powers between the Tsar and parliament (Antipoff, D. 1975).

The atmosphere of political and social insecurity and the signals that a revolutionary movement was about to break out in Russia led the Antipoff family to move to Paris, in 1909. The general stayed in Saint Petersburg, and Sofia Antipova, the mother, took the three daughters to France. While Sofia gave private classes in the Russian language, in her own apartment in the Paris Montparnasse District, Helena decided to continue her studies at the University of Paris, the famous Sorbonne. After a period of some months in England working as a young lady's governess, and afterward in an institution for children with neurological difficulties and emotional problems, she commenced her studies in medicine at the University of Paris soon becoming attracted to psychology, while attending the seminars of the Collège de France.<sup>6</sup>

Antipoff has recognized the influence of the seminars in her background, especially those of Henri Bergson (1859-1941), because of their phenomenological approach to human consciousness, and Pierre Janet (1859-1947) because of their functional approach to psychology. Other strong influences on Antipoff's education in France came from her participation in the research undertaken by Alfred Binet (1857-1911) and Théodore Simon (1873-1961) with the intelligence tests, invented at the time in the Sorbonne Psychological Laboratory itself, which was directed by Binet. These were fully tested in the laboratory on school-age children of an elementary school located in the Rue Grange-aux-Belles, in Paris, the first pedagogical and psychological laboratory established in France. By means of the tests, Binet and Simon went deeper into the study of the causes of school failure in primary schools in Paris to recommend forms of treatment and education for children considered

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<sup>6</sup> The *Collège de France*, founded by François I in 1530, is a teaching and research institution where the courses are public, with no examinations or the granting of diplomas. These courses, ministered by specialists and researchers of advanced level, are considered as complements to the higher education ministered in the faculties (*Le Petit Larousse Illustré* 2002, 1252).

retarded, complying with a request from the French Ministry of Education. It was to evaluate the cognitive capacity of children that the two built the first scale for the measurement of intelligence, in 1905. The scale consisted of a set of questions, graded by age, so that for each age there corresponded a set of typical replies. The tests were reviewed in 1908 and 1911 when the concept of mental age was included for the first time (Binet 1920; Nicolas 2013).

Antipoff was an intern in the laboratory of the Rue Grange-aux-Belles in 1912, under the direction of Simon (Binet having died a few months previously) and participated in the standardization of the scales for the Parisian school population. During the apprenticeship, she became familiar with the techniques for the validation of tests of mental level, with the statistical analysis of the different items of the scale, and with the study of the relationship between verbal development and motor skills.

At this time, this Laboratory attracted researchers from various parts of the world, interested in studies on intelligence. There Antipoff was introduced to the Swiss doctor and psychiatrist Édouard Claparède, professor at the University of Geneva, where he founded the Jean-Jacques Rousseau Institute, for “introducing students to the use of scientific methods necessary for the advance of child psychology and instruction techniques”, collaborating in the development of educational sciences (Claparède 1931, 267). Claparède went to Paris to recruit students for studies at the Rousseau Institute and Antipoff was invited to be part of the Swiss group. Her son, Daniel, describes the meeting of the then student of medicine in Paris with the professor who she was later to call “mon patron”, my master, throughout her life:

One afternoon, a neurologist, professor at the University of Geneva, came to visit the laboratory. He was trying to organize an institute of the “Educational Sciences” in that city. He had already visited Belgium and other countries, to recruit professors and students. Seeing the work of those “emeritus interns”, who did not receive<sup>7</sup> any remuneration, after months of activity, invites two of them: Aline Giroud and Helena Antipoff herself. (...) It is thanks to this casual meeting that Simon's intern got to know the eminent Swiss psychologist Édouard Claparède. (Antipoff, D. 1975, 40)

The contact with Claparède was crucial for the development of Antipoff's scientific and humanistic view of the relationship between intelligence and education. Accepting the invitation, she left for Geneva and decided to make herself an educator, having received her diploma from the Rousseau Institute. She embraced the principles of functional education recommended by Claparède, who affirmed that the educational process should take the interests of the children as the basis for their activities in school. In this approach, the purpose of education would be the development of intelligence and creativity. It was supposed that intelligence would be developed as the students had the opportunity to manipulate the environment and to seek active solutions for the problems raised by them over the educational process. From this perspective, denominated currently constructivist, education, instead of depending on mental skills already existing in children, would become the process itself of building the skills. The methods of functional education and of the Genevan “active school” were developed at the *Maison des Petits*, an experimental school linked to the Rousseau Institute, where Antipoff acted as one of the first professors under the supervision of Claparède (Hameline 1996; Ruchat 2010).

The political situation on the European continent, at this time, however, was very complicated. The First World War, which had started in 1914, continued to provoke conflict and immense losses. The war had affected Russia, where in addition to the struggle against Germany, was also suffering from internal movements of the struggle against the tsarist regime. In receiving the news that her father, the General Vladimir Antipoff, had been gravely

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<sup>7</sup> In this case “perceive” means to receive payment.

wounded in her native country, in 1916, the educator decided to absent herself from Geneva and, after briefly passing through Paris, said goodbye to her mother and sisters and returned to Russia to see her father. After finding him and taking care of his recovery, she sent him to Sinferopol, in the Crimea, a small town with a pleasant climate on the Black Sea, where he continued to convalesce in the house of relatives.<sup>8</sup>

Helena then returned to Saint Petersburg, where she started work in an institution for orphaned or abandoned children who had lost their families in the disorganization in the country following the war and the internal conflicts, and were living on the city streets. To shelter them, the government organized hostels and educational centres (Antipoff, H. 1924, 1931). In the Medical-Pedagogical Post of Petersburg the task of the psychologist consisted in identifying and examining the children sheltering in the orphanage, and planning their re-education. In these exams the Binet-Simon tests were used, with which she was already familiar, and also the Lazurski technique for studying children's personalities, called "natural experimentation" because it included the observation of children in their natural environment, to avoid the artificial situation of the laboratory or the tests. It was due to these studies that Antipoff started the preparation of the concept of "civilized intelligence" to describe the intelligence measured by the tests, a concept that she was to develop later on in her work in Brazil. The fact is that, although the performance of the abandoned children in the intelligence tests, or those in a street situation, was lower than that of children in normal conditions of life, it was possible to observe, in practice, their "incredible capacity to deal with the concrete problems of life", as she stated several years later, in relation to the research carried out in Brazil. Thus, the limited results obtained in the tests could be better explained, according to the educator, by problems deriving from the instability of their conditions of life, by the lack of a family life and troubles in schooling, that is, by questions of a social and cultural origin (Antipoff, H. 1931). Thus, the educator started to operate a synthesis between the psychology learned in Paris and Geneva and the socio-cultural perspective then being developed in Soviet Russia.

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The time she spent in her native land, however, was very troubled. In 1917 the Communist Revolution occurred producing great social and political upheaval. Daniel Antipoff describes the situation thus:

October 1917 is the date of the insurrection of the masses and the Russian revolution. It is the end of the tsarist regime that for centuries had dominated Russia. It is also the date of great violence and horror on the part of the wronged and starving plebeians. Russia will still take many months to raise itself from the chaos and complete disorganization; years will be needed before the old regime can accept the impositions of the communists; long periods will be needed for the supporters of the new regime to make themselves respected in their new goals. (Antipoff, D. 1975, 70)

Moreover, it was precisely at this time that Helena Antipoff became a mother, thus assuming responsibility for a child in this uncertain and turbulent condition in the country. In 1918 she had joined the writer and journalist Viktor Iretsky, whom she had met in Petersburg, when he had visited the institution where she worked. From this union, in March 1919, their only son, Daniel, was born.

The first years of the boy's life seem to have been difficult, food was scarce, he suffered greatly from rickets and was sick. A peasant woman, Tatiana Vassilevna, who had lost an also sick son, ended up saving Daniel, suckling him at his mother's request. When the wet nurse no longer had any milk, Viktor and Helena decided to live with the son and a helper, Olga, in

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<sup>8</sup> Her son Daniel Antipoff divulged this version of Antipoff's return to Russia. Up to the present the version has not been entirely corroborated by Russian sources, according to information received by the author from the historian Marina Sorokina.

an abandoned house in the country, in the neighbourhood of Petersburg, obtaining food with fishers and smallholders in the region. Helena continued her work for some time at the Medical-Pedagogical Post in Petersburg.

Viktor Iretsky was quite a well-known journalist, one of the founders of the Writers' House in Petersburg, founded in 1918 as a syndicate of writers and intellectuals to represent them in their relationships with the revolutionary power. At the end of the Civil War that followed the Communist Revolution, in 1921, and with the Bolshevik victory, the House started to be seen as an ideological opposition to the government. The authorities decided that all opponents of the new regime should exile themselves and, to oblige them to leave the country, a group of intellectuals (including Iretsky) was arrested on 4 September 1922, and sent into exile in Berlin, in Germany. Antipoff even protested against the exile of her husband, in a letter to the head of the secret police in Petersburg, but this manifestation only resulted in putting off Iretsky's journey for a month, and he left Russia in fact on 15 December 1922.<sup>9</sup>

With the exile of her husband, Helena had accepted an invitation to work in another medical-pedagogical institution located in the city of Viatka, in Russia. At the end of 1924, however, the husband sent some money to pay for the journey of the wife and son Daniel to Germany. She then definitively left Russia, with an authorization signed by Netchaiev, professor of pedagogical psychology at the University of Petersburg, on the pretext of visiting centres of education for abandoned children in Germany.

Antipoff never returned to Russia. However, during the years of the Revolution, she had aggregated this extraordinary experience of applying the knowledge of psychology in institutions of social education to her intellectual makeup that would profoundly mark her work in the future, especially her work in Brazil, as we shall see.

## **From Exile in Geneva to the Invitation to Lecture in Brazil (1925-1929)**

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In Berlin, Antipoff tried to resume the contact with Claparède, by correspondence, sending news of her experience in the Soviet Union, of the situation of psychology and education in the country, after the Revolution, and asking him about the possibility of returning to Geneva to complete her studies, under the orientation of the master. She explains her work in Russia to her former professor thus:

the two years I worked under your direction allowed me later, returning to my native country, to join several Russian establishments, for the psychological study of children. In spite of the revolution, the hunger and the general disorder that have characterized recent years in Russia, the institutions of pedagogical research are functioning satisfactorily and have garnered rich empirical material. For my part, I was able to study, in different laboratories in Saint Petersburg and Viatka, during the last five years, more than a thousand children, mainly orphans, that the government has put in homes for normal and abnormal children. The children were submitted to different psychological examinations and treated by various methods of pedagogical investigation. (Antipoff, H. to Claparède 18.10.1924; cited by Ruchat 2010, 4)

In the letters sent to the Genevan psychologist, Antipoff adopts a position of neutrality in relation to the Bolsheviks. She observes that her work in the Soviet Union possessed a humanitarian as well as a scientific character, and sends news on the work of psychological observation of children and adolescents utilizing the method of "natural experimentation"

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<sup>9</sup> Information supplied to the author by the historian Marina Sorokina.

elaborated by the Russian psychologist Alexandre Lazursky, celebrated in Russia for his research of individual and characterological psychology. About the method, Antipoff explains:

This method, situated between pure observation and the psychological experimentation of the laboratory, possesses the advantages of one and the other without the defects, which are the imprecision and the part played by chance, on the one hand, and the artificial milieu as well as the artificial problems, on the other. This method, far from disappearing with the death of its author, currently encounters wide application in Russian laboratories of individual and child psychology. In addition, the researches of Lazursky have been very useful for school programmes, as almost all the teaching material has been analysed from the point of view of the psychological functions that each of them exercises in the child. (Antipoff, H. to Claparède 18.10.1924; cited by Ruchat 2010, 5)

After the description of the experience in Russia and the situation of an exiled person with no work in Germany, Helena proposes to Claparède the publication of articles of her authorship on Soviet psychology and education. Claparède replies positively to the proposals of his former pupil, and she is elated with the news received from Geneva:

I cannot tell you how happy I was to receive your news in such a beautiful letter. Reading it in the post office I couldn't stop myself giving little jumps of joy besides my five-year-old son. My son, seeing me do this, started to do the same. The people (present there) I believe must have been asking themselves if we had not gone mad. I thank you from the bottom of my heart for the help you have offered me. (Antipoff, H. to Claparède 8.11.1924; cited by Ruchat 2010, 7)

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Effectively the professor had invited Helena to return to Geneva as his assistant, commenting on how she had always demonstrated great enthusiasm for university activities. The student accepts the invitation, and comments about her situation in Berlin and her professional plans:

in Berlin, I did not put down very deep roots. I collaborate in the direction of a Russian *kindergarten*, and put a lot of energy into this, the school is good, but the pedagogical work itself interests me much less than what you are proposing for me – because it is happiness itself to be able to be in the Institute again and work near you, under your direction. (Antipoff, H. to Claparède 19.9.1925; cited by Ruchat 2010, 15)

About her husband and son, she states:

my husband will separate from us with much regret, but, in the end, will give me his blessing. Life in Berlin is becoming daily more difficult and expensive. Regarding my little Daniel, he will come with me to Switzerland, naturally. At the moment, he is six and a half. I shall ask you, my dear sir, should my journey become reality, that you recommend a new school not far from Geneva where he could be accepted as a boarder (should my means permit it). So that, free from all domestic concerns I shall be able to concentrate my whole time and effort on one thing only – my work at the Institute! (Antipoff, H. to Claparède 19.9.1925; cited by Ruchat 2010, 16)

One sees, therefore, that Antipoff accepts with satisfaction the invitation to become the pedagogical assistant of Claparède. She calculates that the work in Geneva will allow her to grow professionally more than in Berlin, as well as to give Daniel a more advanced education,

from the pedagogical point of view. This school that she wishes for her son should follow the “new school” orientation. Thus, soon after she manages to exchange her Russian passport for a Nansen<sup>10</sup> passport, granted by the League of Nations. But the difficulties are great for obtaining an entry visa into Switzerland, where the authorities fear the entry of foreigners who would end up by settling there permanently. Only on 21 November 1925 does Claparède receive a communication from the Swiss police department charged with foreigners conceding the visa for his future assistant, the concession being conditioned to the immediate presentation of the return visa to Germany and the guarantee deposit of 2,000 Swiss francs. On receiving the news, Antipoff is disappointed and almost gives up the idea of the journey, advising Claparède in the following terms:

unfortunately, the Bolsheviks took everything we had and neither I nor my husband will be capable of depositing the gigantic amount that is required of us. I asked a staff member (of the Embassy) if he thought it was possible to reduce the guarantee or even suppress it altogether. He replied very seriously that the Berne resolutions were incontestable. (Antipoff, H. to Claparède 26.11.1925; cited by Ruchat 2010, 22)

The professor also tried to convince the Swiss authorities to remove the requirement of the guarantee, without success. He then wrote to the police department in charge of foreigners, making himself responsible for the payment. In a long letter, he guaranteed the honour of his former pupil and explained the difficulty of finding Swiss candidates for the post of assistant to the Psychology Laboratory offered to Antipoff, because of the low salary. And he concluded saying that the invitation to a foreigner was justified because, in those circumstances, her qualifications recommended her to the University of Geneva. Thus, Antipoff finally succeeds in transferring to Geneva in January 1926, remaining there until 1929. Claparède helped her to find a person who could put her up and take care of her son while she was working in the Laboratory, a Russian woman living in Geneva, Madame Baranoff. The idea of Daniel boarding in a “new” school, outside the city, was put off for later. 23

During this new stay in Geneva, Antipoff lectured psychology and collaborated in the laboratory, carrying out research on the development of intelligence, the relationship between the higher mental processes and motor skills and the development of moral judgment in children. At the time, her articles, published in the *Archives de Psychologie*, (a scientific journal published by Claparède), and the **Intermédiaire des Édicateurs**, (a journal published by the Rousseau Institute, aimed at educators), were characterized by a concern with the study of children in their natural environment. An attempt was made to know their forms of interaction with the environment, physical as well as socio-cultural, and on the development of motor skills. The emphasis on the relation between psychomotricity and intellectual development seems to be part of the inheritance of the Soviet period, because Russian thinking at this time accorded considerable value to the association between manual and intellectual work. Later, in Brazil, Antipoff was to comment that the human being “thinks with his hands”, showing the need to educate children and adolescents by supplying them with opportunities to exercise their motor skills in the pedagogical workshops of the Pestalozzi Society (Campos 2010; Borges 2015).

At the end of the 1920s, the Jean Jacques Rousseau Institute was already known worldwide. Claparède's book called *The psychology of the child and experimental pedagogy* (Claparède, 1926) had been translated into several languages and Geneva was already a centre known for its studies on child psychology and its active methods in education (Hofstetter, 2010). So that when the government of the state of Minas Gerais, in Brazil, decided to create a Teachers' College for the preparation of specialists and educational

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<sup>10</sup> The Nansen passport was an international document conceded to stateless persons, allowing them to travel between countries (Ruchat 2010, 15).



## Her Work as a Psychologist and Educator in Brazil (1929-1974)

In the first letter she sent to Claparède after arriving in Brazil, Antipoff recounts her first impressions of the country and of the city: the beauty of the city, appropriately called “Belo Horizonte” (meaning ‘beautiful skyline’, because of the mountains that surround it), inhabited by people who were a little suspicious on the first contact, the expectation of political problems that were looming – the Revolution of 1930. About this, she commented to the master:

The state of Minas Gerais is particularly agitated because its President<sup>13</sup> is the head of a liberal alliance; together with another two states, they are against 19 others in Brazil. There is therefore little chance that the liberal alliance will be the winner. The new government can turn the politics of the country on its head, compared to what it is today, and then it will be goodbye to all foreign missions and perhaps goodbye also to the contracts signed by the former government. (Antipoff, H. to Claparède 15.9.1929; cited by Ruchat 2010, 52)

Insecure about the future of Brazil and far from her son, she describes in the following section, the students of the Teachers' College where she was to lecture:

150 women and young people from Minas were taken from their homes and the schools where they taught by government Decree, and made to come to Belo Horizonte to attend the Teacher's College. Mothers were not spared and were separated from their children. The course lasts two years with only one month of holidays, when they can return to their homes, in the interior of the country. In the school they receive teaching in psychology, the methodology of their mother tongue, arithmetic, natural sciences, drawing, modelling and physical education. (Antipoff, H. to Claparède 15.9.1929; cited by Ruchat 2010, 52)

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However, Antipoff appears to be charmed with the young women, whom later she was to call her “bees”. It was they who would gather the data (as the bees gather the pollen to produce honey) to be worked on in the Psychology Laboratory, with the objective of understanding the child in Minas Gerais better and thus being able to orientate schools regarding their education:

Our students are, in their majority, charming and extremely beautiful. I think that it is in Brazil that one finds the most beautiful women in the world. Beautiful and gracious, but also intelligent, with a quick understanding. They are good mothers, faithful wives and very good educators, in the family, or the schools. In the primary schools only the women teach; the men, at least in Minas, do not. (Antipoff, H. to Claparède 15.9.1929; cited by Ruchat 2010, 52)

The Teacher's College had been set up by the government of Minas Gerais in 1928, as part of a wide-ranging reform of education undertaken in the state to facilitate access to it, improve the preparation of the teachers of elementary level and rationalize the academic and administrative processes. This reform was associated with other educational reforms promoted in several Brazilian states during the 1920s, with similar objectives. The contribution of psychologists for setting up the new policies was highly valued. Using the information obtained in the literature circulated about the New Education movements in

<sup>13</sup> The governor of the state, at the time, was called ‘President’.

Europe and of progressive education, in America, the leaders of the New School movement, in Brazil, recommended the use of tests for measuring intelligence – the famous intellectual quotient (IQ) tests. This had the purpose of organizing the “homogeneous” classes at the primary level and improving the selection of students for secondary and higher level by basing it on their intellectual capacities. In addition, the changes realized in the educational system reinforced the importance of having a new well-prepared generation, in terms of academic and civic skills, to fill positions of leadership in a society undergoing a process of modernization and urbanization (O'Neill 1975; Wirth 1977).

In Minas Gerais, the educational reform of 1927, among other initiatives, proposed the significant expansion of the number of Teachers' Schools for the preparation of educators and the establishment of the Teachers College for the preparation of personnel qualified for planning and managing the educational system. The discipline “educational psychology” was instituted as part of the regular curriculum of Teachers Schools, and, in the Teachers' College, the laboratory of psychology was established. Helena Antipoff was contracted to lecture psychology and pedagogy, and to direct the laboratory, where the research would be carried out on the psychological and psychosocial characteristics of local children, helping the schools in the organization of the homogeneous classes, through the research and standardisation of IQ tests (Peixoto, 1981; Cirino and Miranda, 2015).

In taking over the classes at the Teacher's College, and the direction of the laboratory, the educator soon commenced a programme of research on the ideals and interests of the local children. She had the idea of organizing a museum of the child, with data on the physical and psychosocial development of the smaller inhabitants of the city, relevant for parents and educators. About these first activities, she expressed herself thus to Claparède:

My 'pet scheme' – the Museum of the Child – seems to have interested the public and the powers that be, and I believe that it is going to become a reality. We have just carried out an inquiry about the ideals and interests with nearly a thousand children of Belo Horizonte. This is truly a psychological and social tool, revealing at a glance the mentality of the people. These inquiries carried out systematically every 20 years will demonstrate well the march of culture. This march will not always be progressive; there will be more or less durable halts and retreats, I believe (Antipoff, H. to Claparède 9.12.1929; cited by Ruchat 2010, 63)

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Effectively, the first report of the inquiry into the ideals and interests of students of the fourth primary grade was quickly published (Antipoff, H. 1930). In this survey, both the influence of the Genevan “active school” and the historical-cultural Soviet approach can be seen. Antipoff was concerned in investigating the thoughts of the children that the schools in Minas Gerais should adapt themselves to. The small questionnaire replied to by the students of the local public schools focused on the preferred tasks at home and school, preferred toys and books, adult models and plans for the future. The results were compared with those obtained in other countries and reveal the influence of the social and cultural environment on the children's formation.

Antipoff observed that the ideas and interests of the Brazilian children seemed less diversified than those of their foreign counterparts. The author interpreted these results considering that the students who replied to the questionnaire came, in large part, from a modest social *milieu*, in which family life was the predominant experience in their lives. She also observed the influence of schooling on these results: Brazilian children had fewer daily hours of classes than European and North American children. How could the school enrich and diversify the students' experiences? In her opinion, the intimate tendencies of the children could only develop in a sufficiently diversified environment, in which “various types of children will encounter the destiny adequate for their nature” (Antipoff, H. 1930, 42).

These basic premises were to guide her subsequent work in Brazil: on the one hand, the concern with the impact of the social environment on the modelling of the cognitive and psychosocial characteristics of the children; on the other, the idea that the schools could promote the development of the intellectual, physical and socio-affective capacities of the children.

Continuing with the laboratory research, she studied the curve of the mental development of the local children and adolescents through the application of instruments such as the Binet-Simon scale, the Goodenough Draw-A-Person Test, and others. The objectives of these studies were: 1) to investigate the mental development of school-age children, by age group; 2) to compare the mental development of Brazilian school-age children with the results obtained in other countries; 3) to investigate how the mental development can vary because of the influence of the socio-cultural environment. In these investigations, the impact of society and culture on the development of cognitive skills was examined more deeply, a theme that increasingly was to influence her work in Brazil. Based on the definitions of intelligence proposed by Binet and especially by Claparède, as “the capacity to resolve new problems by thinking” (Claparède 1933, 3), Antipoff observed that the intelligence tests dealt only imperfectly with the skills of comprehension and invention implicit in such a definition. In her opinion, the results of the mental tests should be considered, more modestly, as an evaluation of the general level of mental development of a given population. This could include the skills of concentrated attention, observation, logical reasoning, and a certain “fluidity of thought”. But this was only part of the problem. The other important question was to know if this intelligence could be considered natural, that is, dependent only on the innate dispositions and age for its development. For Antipoff, intelligence was a combination of innate dispositions, intellectual as well as of character, and of the environment in which the subject was educated, thus including the conditions of life and culture, and the experience itself of the child in school.

According to this reasoning, Antipoff worked out her definition for the capacities measured by intelligence tests: for her, they would be the mental skills polished by the action of society and culture, which she denominated “civilized intelligence”. In this definition, she recalled her experience with abandoned children in Russia, as well as the observation of street children in Brazil. She had observed that these children, although presenting lower scores when submitted to intelligence measuring scales, could not be considered less endowed. Of course, they lacked a certain capacity for concentrating their voluntary attention, on the one hand, and on the other, to achieve a state of abstraction that made possible conceptual thinking. However, in the particular domain, stimulated by an immediate interest, and by spontaneous attention, they were successful in working out complex strategies of survival in adverse conditions.

The investigation of the mental development of the school-age children in Belo Horizonte allowed an empirical check of the precision of the Antipoff concept of “civilized intelligence”. Results of tests applied to the school children in Belo Horizonte demonstrated that, on average, the performance of the local children was inferior to European or North American subjects of the same age group. They also suggested quite a strong association between the socio-economic conditions and performance in the tests. To confirm this correlation, the average IQ scores were compared for each school, which led to the conclusion that the “classification of each school corresponded approximately to the level of economic and social wellbeing of the district in which the school was located” (Antipoff, H. 1931, 191). As a conclusion, Antipoff observed that the IQ tests should be utilized with care in the evaluation of the general level of children's mental development, but they could be considered a reasonable instrument for evaluating the level of the social and economic wellbeing of a determined population.

In addition to the studies of mental development, the educator proposed a series of studies that she denominated “*escolológicos*”.<sup>14</sup> She commented that, among the educational sciences, one dedicated to the study of the school as an educational institution was lacking, in all its complexity: building, organization of the work, management, teaching methods, characteristics of teachers and students, the flow of activities, results of the teaching. She explained this new initiative to Claparède in the following way:

With the second year students, we are undertaking a magistral pedagogical study in the schools. Each pair of students has under its responsibility a complete study of a school class. The monograph of a class (...) should comprehend the global and detailed study of the whole life within this class, conceived as a society whose conduct is determined by all the physical and psychical conditions possible: this study, comprehends the study of the school building, the furniture, all the hygienic and material conditions; all the influences that emanate from the master, from the regime and the school method; the interactions between the children, the survey of the types of children – what is done from the individual study of each one (physical, social, psychological study) (Antipoff, H. to Claparède 21.2.1930; cited by Ruchat 2010, 71)

In that year 35 monographs of classes were prepared, each one with 40 children. Regarding the expected results of the initiative, Antipoff commented:

A study such as this will provide them (the students) with real pedagogical competence, and counter the frightening dilettantism, the lack of consciousness, the unserious work which prevail in the school. (...) several problems can be studied for the final work of our students. They will only have to extract, from the immense material collected, the documents relevant to the study of the particular problems. It will be a small tribute to science, because I hope that the efforts of our 70 intelligent and diligent students will know how to extract a tiny amount of scientific synthesis. Could I be mistaken? (Antipoff, H. to Claparède 21.2.1930; cited by Ruchat 2010, 71)

Still a little sceptical regarding the results to be obtained from all the work she was planning, Antipoff was optimistic. however with the possibilities opened up for her. She observed, in a letter to her husband written at the time:

(...) Minas – one of the most beautiful Brazilian states, picturesque and rich. The beauty of the landscape, the mountains, the vegetation or steppe and distant horizons – incredible – and for me, personally, it can compensate for the nostalgia of the separation from my son, and the lack of the cultural life of Europe. (Antipoff, H. to Iretsky 3.11.1929)

She also comments on the work that she is doing, with a particular interest in the study of cultural differences in thinking and in the psychological development of the children:

Now, exploring the mental development of the local children, to obtain interesting data, (I'm thinking) of comparing them with what we know about Europeans and North Americans (children). After all, our tests, do not (inform) so much about the natural mental talent as about the degree of civilization in which the child is developing and maturing. Naturally, in the case of super-endowed children or those with birth defects, it is conceivable that it does not depend so much on the environment. But the average person is a mirror of the environment. (...) To know the conditions of

<sup>14</sup> Translator's Note. An invented word, roughly “scholological”.

civilization in Brazil, Belo Horizonte or even Paris (helps) you to have the correct data for determining what is necessary for the children (...) All this is, of course, obvious, but the task of science is to situate a banal piece of knowledge within some simple laws, whose combination allows one to forecast a series of more complex phenomena with considerable precision. (Antipoff, H. to Iretsky 15.1.1931)

She does, however, feel the lack of her son's presence very much, and decides to bring him on holiday to Brazil. She expresses herself about this plan to her husband:

Being separated from Dônia<sup>15</sup> is seriously affecting me. Not figuratively, but my heart really aches (...). If I can't see him at the end of this first year of separation, I'm going to throw the contract (away) and return to Europe. The following would be more reasonable: Dônia would come here during his summer holidays. In the school, I have two weeks of holiday – when I will be able to see him and we could be together, and then, for him not to be sad with me in Belo Horizonte, I could take him to the Stavrovietski<sup>16</sup> place in Caeté (where, by the way, he could study Russian). The schedule of talks would leave me free on Saturday. I would have to go to Caeté on the Friday night and return on Monday morning – its 2 hours by car from Belo Horizonte. Two and a half days a week, we will be together. He could stay here in July, August, September and the start of October, and when the classes start up again, he would return to Europe to complete his primary education. These three months in the most agreeable climate, dry and cold in Brazil, he would not find that strange. If there are no friends to accompany him on the ship – he can be put in Villefranche, in the care of the ship's captain, the same "Julio César".<sup>17</sup> In Rio, I should be there to meet him after his 11-day voyage. I am writing to you about my plan now to know your opinion. (Antipoff, H. to Iretsky 21 February 1930)

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The boy really did come to Brazil in 1931, and thus his mother could continue her work in the Teachers' College. Daniel reports what happened in the following years, after the return to France:

For eight more years mother and son were separated by the ocean, each one expressing him/herself in a different language, French for the son and Portuguese for the mother. During these eight years, Helena was to return to Europe on two occasions, until the only son settled definitively in Brazil in 1938, on the eve of the Second World War (Antipoff, D. 1975, 126).

In 1938 Daniel left Paris because of the coming war (World War II, 1939-1945) and joined her mother in Belo Horizonte, at the age of 19 years old. He got his university diplomas in Agronomy at the University of Viçosa (in the city of Viçosa, near Belo Horizonte) and in Philosophy at the University of Minas Gerais. He worked in education and psychology, and became one of the first educators to be recognized as a psychologist in Brazil, after the profession's regulation in 1962. After a successful career as a clinical and educational psychologist, he passed away in 2005 (Campos, 2001, 50-53).

<sup>15</sup> Dônia is the son, Daniel's nickname.

<sup>16</sup> The couple Anatole and Nina Stravovietski, Russian immigrants who lived on a rural property in the region of Caeté, MG, were friends of Helena Antipoff.

<sup>17</sup> Júlio César was the name of the ship in which she herself had sailed to Brazil.

## Exceptional Children

Starting in 1932, Antipoff involved herself in initiatives destined to help and resolve the problems of children who were intellectually retarded or not adapted, which she proposed to call “exceptional” to avoid the negative associations of the word “abnormal”. Together with a group of clerics, intellectuals, professors and philanthropists, she founded the Pestalozzi Society of Belo Horizonte, the name of the organization inspired by the celebrated Swiss educator, to collaborate in the education of “exceptional” and socially disadvantaged children. In 1933, the Pestalozzi Society established medical-pedagogical consultancy offices for the examination and orientation of these children. Starting in 1935, the offices were expanded and, with the support of the state government, became the Pestalozzi Institute, receiving children with disability or mental/psycho-social problems (Sociedade Pestalozzi 1934, 129; Lourenço, 2000; Borges, 2015).

The treatment of the children's problems was carried out in special classes established in the Institute, the children were grouped according to their IQ. The definition of the concept of exceptionalness, adopted by Antipoff, included, in addition to organic problems, also the abnormality socially produced by a school system whose requirements were beyond the possibilities of many children. Above all, Antipoff did not consider abnormality a definitive and irreparable defect. For her, the majority of children who presented some mental abnormality were educable and could be successful.

In addition, for Antipoff, the concept of mental abnormality included other disorders in addition to limited intelligence, for example, disorders of personality due to problems in the primary socialization of children. The psychologist was conscious that families with economic difficulties were far from offering ideal conditions for the development of their children. Research undertaken at the time showed high rates of alcoholism and violence in the interior of families. So that the low results presented in the IQ tests could be considered a symptom of a complex of social and family problems experienced by the “exceptional” children. The proposals of the team from the Pestalozzi Society had the objective of supporting these children and adolescents in their trajectory through school and life.

At the end of the 1930s decade, and have decided to stay in Brazil, Antipoff promoted the creation, by the Pestalozzi Society, of a model rural school for retarded and abandoned children on land near the small town of Ibirité, near Belo Horizonte. In her opinion, this school would be the place for the demonstration of practical forms of dealing with “exceptional” children. According to the guidelines issued by the International Bureau of New Schools, from 1919, the Rosário farm-school was inspired by the methods of the “Active School” for the education of exceptional children in a rural environment (Antipoff, H. 1946, 1952, 1956, 1966).

The Farm-School can be considered Antipoff's most important work. In the Rosário, she attempted to proportion the ideal environment for the education of all the children and adolescents, exceptional or normal. The school became a living experiment, during the years 1950 and 1960, including in its activities those related to the preparation of teachers for the rural schools. As a majority of Brazilians lived in the interior, (where a large part of the “exceptional” children came from who failed in the urban primary schools), the educator thought that more advanced cultural standards should be introduced into the rural areas. This would allow people to take advantage of the benefits of civilization and at the same time live off the produce of the land and contribute to ameliorating the extreme poverty of the rural workers. For these reasons, Antipoff saw education as a source of democratization. Citing the Geneva Declaration of the Rights of Children issued by the League of Nations in 1924, she thought that a school should not proportion to its students a limited consciousness of their rights of citizenship. On the contrary, citizenship was seen as one of the important

consequences resulting from better development of intellectual and psycho-social capacities of children and adolescents (Antipoff, H. and Rezende 1934).

Dissatisfied with her experience of wars and revolutions in Europe, Antipoff struggled for social harmony, which would be achieved if each one was given the opportunity to develop his/her vocation. In this development, education would have a central role. Believing in education as a process with a scientific basis, Antipoff followed her master Claparède: the sciences of education should accumulate knowledge, little by little, to help in the development of children in a harmonious, free and cooperative environment. All through her life, Antipoff maintained this faith in science, as well as the vision that individuals become useful for society to the degree to which it is allowed them to develop their vocations. In this sense, a school system would be democratic to the extent that the students were supported and encouraged to develop their capacities. Mental tests could be useful instruments in the deeper knowledge of the possibilities of each individual. However, they were only a start, the first step for the planning of development. The success of children in education was, therefore, the responsibility of the schools, and not of isolated individuals. A variety of instruction methods, originating in the proposals of the "Active School", should be put into practice for schools to be able to fulfil their civilizing role.

## Conclusions

Helena Antipoff is considered a pioneer in the psychology of development and education in Brazil for her work as a researcher, university professor and creator of institutions. As a researcher, she established one of the first laboratories of psychology in the country, leading a consistent programme of investigations on Brazilian children and adolescents, an experience almost unique in Brazil at the time. In this laboratory, a contribution was made to the scientific preparation of a whole generation of professors and specialists in education with a lasting influence on Brazilian education in general, and of special education in particular. As a professor, she initiated the preparation of psychologists of university level in the state of Minas Gerais and contributed to the movement that led to the regulation of the profession in Brazil, in 1962. As a creator of institutions, she contributed to setting up a model for the wide-ranging system of institutions dedicated to the education of people with special needs, today represented by the various Pestalozzi Societies and Associations of Parents and Friends of Exceptional Children spread all over the country, with a methodology based on tolerance and respect for differences.

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Her main legacy was and is in the hands and minds of her many students and disciples who spread through the institutions of higher learning and special education in Brazil. As a modest and unpretentious person, she received the many honours bestowed on her for her work with detachment, attempting to transfer the prestige to her followers and collaborators.

As a psychologist, Helena Antipoff combined the two attitudes considered by many to be irreconcilable: the scientific rigor of the researcher, and the richness and sensitivity of a clinical approach. This mixture led her to value science as a guide to well-informed action, aimed at benefiting humanity. Having left her native land, Russia, and learned respect for human rights during her education in Geneva, she adopted many Brazilian students, children and adolescents, as part of her family, devoting to them her competence, energy, dynamism and professional knowledge. Her commitment to the ideas of democracy was expressed in the belief that education should be a right of every human being, and that helping others was a form of obtaining human understanding and happiness.

In her educational work with exceptional children, she made the following recommendation to the educators:

Extol the truly democratic attitudes, where personal responsibility is joined to a consciousness of collective responsibility making the whole work appear a product of each one and of everyone at the same time. (...) Prove that every human creature has value and all men can contribute, each with his own talent, to the progress of humanity. Show also that the human value is not limited only to intellectual aspects, but that other factors, like moral gifts, effort, humility, altruistic feelings, which we so often find in so-called exceptional children, constitute an appreciable social treasure in times (...) where egoism, greed for gain and the exploitation of the weak by the strong prevail. The Pestalozzi work thus appears as a work of justice and compensation for the ills that increasingly filter into social life. (Centro de Documentação e Pesquisa Helena Antipoff 1992, 307)

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