



Lou Andreas-Salomé, 1897

## A Handful of Flowers

*Thousand of years to live and to think!  
In your arms I long to remain.  
And, when you have no more joy to give,  
Very well, there still remains your pain.*

Lou Andreas-Salomé, Hymn to Life

**A**LMOST EVERYONE HAS HEARD of the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche and the psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud, and many also of the great poet Rainer Maria Rilke.

But few know much about Lou Andreas-Salomé, the Russian woman who was lover or muse to all three, although certainly no intellectual inferior to any of them.

Born in St. Petersburg in 1861 to parents of French-German descent, Andreas-Salomé was the only daughter and youngest of six children, circumstances which no doubt armed her to compete successfully with strong-willed men throughout her adult life.

Raised in a wealthy, cultured family, Salomé studied Russian, German, and French, as well as philosophy and literature.

Already attracting the unwanted attention of men at age 16, Salomé found herself the object of affection of her instructor, a Dutch pastor 25 years her senior, who was so smitten with her that he offered to divorce his wife. (He was disappointed to find that Salomé was interested neither in sex nor marriage.)

Following the death of her father in 1879, Salomé moved to Switzerland, where she enrolled in the University of Zurich, one of the few schools accepting female students.

Suffering from a respiratory disease, she spent only a single year in Zurich before moving to the warmer climate of Italy on the advice of her doctor. It was there, in Rome, that Salomé met her first famous admirer, the German author Paul Rée.

Rée proposed to her, but Salomé insisted that they instead live together platonically. Rée accepted, and they began forming an ‘academic commune,’ inviting Rée’s friend Friedrich Nietzsche to join them in Rome.

Nietzsche immediately fell in love with Salomé, as much for her fierce intellect as for her feminine charms, and also proposed marriage, which Salomé once again rejected. (Nietzsche would later write of the 20-year old Salomé: “A very feminine child, she is strikingly mature...knows very clearly what she wants, does not look for advice, and is not interested in public opinion.”)

Nonetheless, Nietzsche agreed to join the growing group in their travels throughout Switzerland and Italy—although after failing to find a suitable location, they abandoned their plans for a commune.

Salomé and Rée parted company with Nietzsche in late 1882 and moved to Berlin, which caused Nietzsche to fall into a deep depression and feelings of recrimination. (Throwing himself into his work, Nietzsche’s ambivalent ‘love/hate’ relationship with Salomé may have been the inspiration for *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, his epic work on the struggle between good and evil.)

Two years after departing from Nietzsche with Rée, Salomé finally accepted marriage with the linguistics scholar, Friedrich Carl Andreas, with whom she would remain until his death in 1930. This uncharacteristic turn of events, however, caused her to become estranged from the disappointed Rée.

While she never surrendered her desire for independence and a wide circle of relationships with other men and women, the stability of marriage resulted in Salomé’s most creative period, with over a dozen books on a wide variety of topics, including fiction, philosophy, psychology and religion.

(Despite having declared herself an atheist at the age of 17, Salomé retained an interest in religion as a purely intellectual pursuit.)

She also began to practice psychoanalysis—one of the first women in history to do so—while engaging in platonic friendships with Sigmund Freud and Victor Tausk, another noted Viennese psychoanalyst.

In 1897, the 37-year old Salomé met Rilke, 16 years her junior. Rilke would be her lover only for a few years, but she would remain his advisor, confidante, and muse throughout his entire adult life. (Rilke himself credited her with him finding his vocation, and Freud later wrote of their relationship, “She was both muse and attentive mother to the great poet.”)

Rilke’s increasing possessiveness would, however, eventually cause Salomé to withdraw from the relationship, with the poet’s famous and moving *Duino Elegies* likely resulting from his anguish over the breakup.

After her husband Friedrich died from cancer in 1930, Salomé also began to increasingly suffer from ill health. She died from uremia in 1937 at age 76, having outlived most of her many lovers and admirers.

Salomé lived her life determined to accept whatever fate might bring, writing “he who is afraid of suffering is also afraid of joy.”

This passion to fully embrace life, with all its joy and sadness, is reflected in a poem from Salomé’s memoirs in which she likens the experience of living to “reaching into a rosebush [to] seize a handful of flowers.”

She implores us to live our lives to the fullest, no matter what the future may hold:

*Only if we refuse to reach into the bush...  
or if we spread out our handful of roses  
as if it were the whole of the bush itself—  
only then does it bloom apart from us,  
unknown to us, and we are left alone. ■*