**Hélène Cox, b. *c.*1894/5- d. before 1973 [Draft 3]**

A Londoner who worked pre- and post-1920 as a singer, artists’ and fashion model. She was daughter of one Henry Cox, noted as ‘deceased’ but previously of ‘independent means’ on her St Pancras registry office marriage certificate of 14 March 1916. He appears to have been British, perhaps of Gloucestershire background, and possibly the H. Cox of whom William Strang (1859–1921) did a portrait, etched by his son David in 1903.

The ethnicity of Hélène’s mother is uncertain. She was believed to be ‘an Egyptian’ by the Austrian writer and journalist Hilde Spiel, who lived in London from 1936 and visited Antwerp with her (as a friend of friends) shortly afterwards: ‘Abdul’ as the first name of Hélène’s elder son may also support that as birthplace of his maternal grandmother, although Hélène’s appearance in her painted portraits suggest black African rather than Arab antecedents, but these may also have been mixed. She was probably born in 1894 or 1895. Though possibly only coincidental, a ‘Helena’ Cox appeared in births for the December quarter of 1894 in the St Olave (Southwark) registration district, which would fit the age of 21 that she claimed at marriage. She then gave her profession as ‘vocalist’ and her husband was a 22-year-old composer, musician and schoolteacher named Wladimer (but more usually called Walter) Zalin, though the surname later often appears as Yelin, Yellin or Yellen. Although born in Manchester, he was later described as a Russian Pole of Jewish family, of striking appearance but also with early health problems and notably poor eyesight.

Hélène was about five months pregnant at marriage and her first son, called Tristram but whose full names were Abdul Almos Athanasius Wladimer Feodor Tristram, was born on 17 July 1916: the birth was registered in Bromley, Kent, under the surname ‘Yelin’, his mother’s usual version. She seems to have had a second boy called Alexander T. Yelin in late 1918 (when her own name was noted as Cox) but in March that year – presumably after her pregnancy began – her husband launched unsuccessful divorce proceedings against her for adultery with Alexis Gellman.

Gellman was a Russian friend of theirs and apparently her husband’s partner in various disreputable activities reported in the papers. These included helping Zalin fake suicide by drowning in the Thames near Cleopatra’s Needle in 1917 to cover his desertion from the West Surrey Regiment, into which he was drafted as a Labour Corps private for war service on 30 October 1916, after his claims to be a pacifist were ignored by the army. He also claimed that it had failed to give him proper medical examination.

In either December 1917 or the first days of January 1918, Hélène spotted him at Belsize Park underground station and, when he refused to stop for her, she shouted that he was a deserter and he was detained by the police, with a ‘Brahmin’ friend who had been hiding him. The latter, later reported as a doctor and named Ramanada Ommah (or Romanoff Omar), claimed to be son of an Indian maharajah. Both Hélène and Gellman were witnesses at Marylebone magistrates court, which handed Zalin back to the military and detained Ommah for further investigation. Gellman admitted to helping with the former’s fake suicide and Hélène claimed not to have seen him for about a year before his arrest (which if true would throw the paternity of her second child into doubt). Ommah, however, said she had assisted with the fake death and that Gellman’s main role was spreading the news of it. She also later claimed Zalin as the father of both boys, despite the disintegrating nature of the marriage. Subsequent 1918 refusal of Zalin’s divorce petition on grounds of her claimed adultery with Gellman may have been because the court considered it a plan concocted between all three of them, as then sometimes the case.

On return to the army, Zalin was given medical examination, his unfitness for service confirmed (primarily poor eyesight) and he was discharged at Nottingham in February 1918 with a payment of £20, then a considerable sum. It is unlikely he rejoined his wife: in June 1919 both he and Ommah were tried at Merioneth Assizes for sexual assault on an unnamed naval cadet at Harlech on and after 27 December 1918 and imprisoned for three years (see *Yr Adsain* [newspaper] 9 June 1919). At the trial the prosecution asserted that Ommah was in fact son of an office cleaner called W. H. Murray, in Sydney NSW, which he denied.

Between 1921 and 1923 Helene was living with her two sons at 138 Albany Road, Walthamstow, where she was a neighbour of the painter William Patrick Roberts and his family. They all took cycling and camping holidays together on one of which, in Gloucestershire, Roberts’s son, John, remembered Hélène looking for her English forbears. William Roberts also remembered her as one of the 1920s habitués of, and a singer at, the Harlequin Tea Rooms in Beak Street, one of a number of similar bohemian Soho venues then frequented by artists, models and musicians.

The earliest image of her is as model for William Strang’s portrait ‘Dreams’ dated 1915 (Edinburgh city collection) and the related etching annotated with her name as sitter, probably by David Strang since from his collection (National Galleries of Scotland, P2333.713). Jacob Epstein made a head and torso bronze bust of her in 1919 (‘Hélène’; Fitzwilliam Museum, ref. 12312, presented in 1931) and Roberts painted her as ‘The Creole’ (a.k.a. ‘Portrait of a Negress – Hélène Yelin’, now in the Potteries Museum, Stoke-on-Trent) as well as including her as one of the figures in his Cubist group canvas, ‘The Joke’, both painted in 1923: ‘The Joke’ was last sold at Sotheby’s, London, in November 2018. She also modelled for Joseph Kramer, another figure included in ‘The Joke’, and by family report also knew T.E. Lawrence, Freya Stark and others in literary and artistic circles.

When she moved to Brussels is not clear, other than by implication in being about the time, or shortly before, accompanying Hilde Spiel to Antwerp in *c.*1936–38. The 1918 divorce file bears a note of ‘further proceedings’ in 1938, this time apparently begun by her and probably from Brussels. She was certainly there before January 1939 when a United Press agency report from Buffalo, NY, recounted her attempt to sue an American film-score composer called Jack Yellen for divorce in the London courts, believing that he was really her husband Walter, who she then claimed had deserted her and was father of her two children. It was assumed she had seen Yellen’s name in film credits and drawn that conclusion, which (with three American lawyer brothers) he had no difficulty in rejecting.

On 15 August 1946, writing from 1 Rue de Florence, Brussels, she sent a warm letter on ‘our’ behalf to Alice Toklas in Paris, remembering a visit by her to Brussels with Gertrude Stein and offering condolences on Stein’s death (Beinecke Library, Yale). On this occasion she signed herself ‘Hélène Yelin-Cox’. In the first quarter of 1950 she married (Jules) Hubert Madox-Knopff, in Marylebone, her surname appearing in the register index as ‘Yelin or Zalin’. Khnopff was Belgian, born in 1898 in the family home of the Chateau de et à Bodeghem St Martin (Sint-Martens-Bodeghem) ten miles west of Brussels. His father was Georges Khnopff, second son of a lawyer (Edmond) and younger brother of the Belgian artist Fernand Khnopff (1858–1921). In *The Times* of 12 December 1952, she appears as Mme Hubert Khnopff, with the Chateau as her address, in the forthcoming marriage announcement of her son Tristram (by the ‘late Walter Yelin’) to Elizabeth Rosalind Buxton, of Chipping Ongar, Essex.

From this it seems likely that she formed a relationship in London or Belgium with Hubert Khnopff at some point in the 1930s and then attempted to divorce her husband, which failed because she could not find him. By early 1939 she was already living in Brussels and her letter of 1946 to Alice Toklas, from 1 Rue de Florence, at least implies that Hubert was the other partner of the ‘our’ and ‘we’ in which she expresses condolences, as well hinting at an artistic and literary friendship with Stein and Toklas from their prior visit into the Khnopff circle in Belgium. That she and Hubert only married in 1950 suggests difficulty in establishing her first husband was dead, probably not helped by the intervening Second World War. When she died is not yet known but in 1973 the Musées Royaux de Beaux-Arts in Brussels acquired (from a third party) a sketchbook by her husband’s uncle, Fernand Khnopff, as an item from her collection. This implies that she and Hubert had by then died, him before her.

Her son Tristram became a schoolmaster and taught at The Leas School, Hoylake; St Peter’s Court, Broadstairs; Ludgrave; Abberley Hall School and Bramcote School. He and his wife had three children (two daughters with a son between, b. 1954–59) and he died at Lindhead Lodge, Harwood Dale, Scarborough on 30 January 1982. He left estate valued at £56,844 and was buried in Cloughton Church Cemetery. The only thing yet known of his brother, Alexander, is that he appears to have emigrated to Canada before 1939. Tristram and Elizabeth Yelin divorced in 1964 but both, and their children, appear in online peerage sources through her antecedents in two baronetcies (Buxton and Seeley).

*Summarised from Art UK discussion on William Strang’s ‘Dreams’ in the city collection, Edinburgh, December 2020 –January 2021.*

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