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## **These women blazed a trail in math and science for other women to follow**

*By Diether Haenicke*  
*October 01, 2008*

Among my good friends are two very talented female professors, a chemist and a biologist.

A generation younger than I, these two are successful, self-assured and competent professionals. Our research institutions are now full of such women, and I often wonder how much better the world would be had we not, for many generations, excluded half the population from certain professional careers, especially in the sciences.

When I sit with my two friends I am often reminded of my Aunt Alexandrine, or Aunt Lex, as we used to call her. She was my father's youngest sibling and only sister and a woman of singular distinction in my family.

My grandfather, a career officer in the imperial army, died very young, leaving his widow with five young children. The four boys were schooled to become officers like their father, and Aunt Lex was destined to lead the life of young women at that time. That meant to get a minimal education, make some man a congenial wife, run a middle-class household and raise their children.

Aunt Lex was as far away from that social stereotype as the South Pole. She was bright, very self-assured and determined, but as a woman born in 1885, those admirable qualities were a gigantic handicap rather than an advantage. As a child, she secretly learned along with her brothers, using their school textbooks, until her mother finally allowed her to receive the same classical education as the boys. The brothers all studied the piano; Aunt Lex chose the cello. Her brothers studied languages and literature; the natural sciences were her passion.

When she graduated from high school in 1903, a career in science for a woman was out of the question. Nevertheless, she enrolled at the university and declared biology her major. She often told me that science professors would stop lecturing when they discovered a woman among their

students. She was often asked to leave the lecture hall. Consequently, she cut her hair very short, wore mannish clothes, sat in back rows, and managed to sail below the radar of discrimination and bigotry. Eventually, she found a professor who accepted her as a lab assistant and directed her doctoral dissertation in biochemistry.

She insisted on being treated equally, much to the exasperation of her officer brothers. On visits at home she often caused them great embarrassment. It was customary that, after dinner, the men would go into one room to smoke and the women carried their knitting to their salon. But Aunt Lex declared that she neither knitted nor exchanged recipes, then lit a cigar and insisted on joining the men, whose conversation she declared more interesting. Her rather formal brothers died many a death because of their little sister.

According to the conventions of the time, she was denied the university research career to which she aspired. Working as a lowly lab assistant, she sent her publications to professional journals under the name Alex Haenicke, pretending to be a male. The papers and books by Herr Dr. Alex Haenicke were all published.

In her 20s, she met her life partner, whom we children knew as our Aunt Dora. Dora Varrentrapp, daughter of an eminent professor of mathematics, was in the same situation as Aunt Lex. She held an advanced degree in mathematics, but barely could find a job as a math teacher, since math just was not taught by women. The two threw their lots together, and for almost 50 years lived a rich, loving and interesting life as partners. Aunt Dora died of a broken heart within weeks of Aunt Lex's death in 1969.

As a student, I visited them regularly and went on long hikes with them. I had wonderful talks with these two unusual, strong, and intelligent women who, all their lives, had gone against the powerful societal currents of their time. I learned a lot from them and loved both dearly.

When I see professional women nowadays, entering law or medical schools, enrolling in the sciences, being judges, professors, politicians, college presidents or business leaders I am delighted. I see behind them Aunt Lex and Aunt Dora, two courageous pioneers who blazed the trail on which their younger sisters would travel -- eventually.

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