

Henriette André-Walther (1807-1886) – a short biography

Henriette (Napoléone Joséphine Frédérique) Walther was born in Paris on June 14, **1807**. Her father was Frédéric Louis-Henri Walther (1761-1813), son of a Lutheran minister¹ and commanding officer of the mounted grenadiers (*grenadiers à cheval*) of the Imperial Guard; his mother, Louise Coulmann (1783-1822), was the daughter of an advocate of the Regence in Bischwiller (Alsace).

Henriette was the couple's second daughter; she had an elder sister, Louise (1803-1875). Their only brother, Napoléon Frédéric, died during his first year (1810).

The Walther family was quite close to the imperial court; Napoleon and his wife Joséphine expressed their desire to be Henriette's godparents, but the baptism could only take place during the "Hundred days" (i.e. in 1815).

Having had a brilliant military career – he was appointed count of the Empire in 1808 – Frédéric died on the return from the Russian campaign in Cusel (Saarland; now Kusel) on November 24, **1813**, from exhaustion and a typhus infection.

When the allied troops entered Paris, in **1814**, the Walther residence was occupied by soldiers of the Grand Duke Constantine (1779-1831), but finally the family enjoyed the protection of the Russian commander. After the occupation, Ms Walther, whose health was very poor, brought her daughter to Dieppe (Normandy) and then back to Paris. After the battle of Waterloo in **1815**, the family residence was again occupied by soldiers, this time from Prussia. Finally, Ms Walther put it up for sale.

In **1817** the family returned to Dieppe where the daughters became friends with the daughters of Paul of Württemberg (1785-1852): Charlotte (1807-1873), who married Grand Duke Michael Pavlovich of Russia (1798-1849) in 1824, and Pauline (1810-1856), the future wife of William, Duke of Nassau (1792-1839)².

In **1818**, Ms Walther acquired a residence in Santeny in the suburbs of Paris. There she often received the visits of the Cuvier family and of the princesses of Württemberg before their return to Württemberg.

In the summer of **1820**, the Walther family travelled and visited, among other places, Württemberg, Ludwigsburg, where the princesses of Baden lived, and Baden, where the daughters were introduced to the high society of France and Germany. For instance, Henriette became acquainted with the entourage of Maximilian II of Bavaria (1811-1864). These contacts were renewed in **1821**.

In **1822**, Louise married the baron Jean-Frédéric Bartholdi (1794-1839) and left the family home. Another separation awaited Henriette in November of the same year: her mother died from a lung disease from which she had suffered a long time. Henriette was entrusted to the family of scientist Georges Cuvier (1769-1832), who was a parent of hers. The transition from

¹ Frédéric Walther's mother, Catherine Marguerite Elisabeth Châtel (1738-1820) was a sister of Clémence Catherine Châtel (1736-1792), mother of Frédéric et Georges Cuvier.

² Their brothers Frédéric (1808-1870) and Auguste (1813-1885) had been entrusted to Jean Monod's education.

the jet set life of Baden to the household of the famous scientist proved to be quite a shock to the young girl.

Jean André (1793-1850), a young associate in the bank of his father, made the acquaintance of Henriette via the baron Bartholdi. He planned to ask for her hand, but the project failed. Some time later Henriette accompanied her sister-in-law on a trip to Aix-les-Bains (Savoie), where she met a young officer of the royal guard, from a good protestant family, who showed a vivid interest in her. Having heard the news, Jean André reacted quickly and formally proposed to Henriette. Henriette accepted the proposal; the wedding took place in May **1825**.

This was the beginning of a period of high society life. In **1826**, Henriette gave birth to her daughter Marie Louise (1826-1907) who later married the baron de Neuflyze, mayor of Sedan. In December **1827**, she gave birth to twin sons only one of whom survived: Alfred (1827-1893), who later was to be the biographer of his mother.

The year **1828** began with hardship because Jean André fell from his horse and was afflicted with some sort of acute rheumatism which resulted in almost complete paralysis. He was prescribed a long stay in Aix-les-Bains. When his condition slowly improved, his family came back to Paris in **1829**. The year after, which was the year of the revolt in Paris and the abdication of Charles X, Jean André decided not to work in his father's bank any more. He accepted the offer to take care of the tax office of the Indre-et-Loire department in Tours, together with his brother-in-law. Thus the families of Jean André and Jean-Frédéric Bartholdi moved to the countryside. Henriette and her sister nevertheless took care of several charities in Paris. Henriette also received many visitors at the tax office in Tours; many big names in culture and politics were her guests.

In **1832** there was a cholera outbreak in Paris; Georges Cuvier was among the victims.

In **1833** Henriette gave birth to her second daughter, Gabrielle (1833-1907). Henriette had difficulties in recovering from this birth and went for some time to Pornic (Loire-Atlantique), a town on the Atlantic coast, whereas her husband had to spend another season at Aix-les-Bains.

This was a period of revival for French Protestantism, whose charities developed very rapidly. Jean and Henriette André also gradually turned away from worldly activities towards religion. In **1837** Jean André succeeded in having a pastor sent to Tours.

The death of baron Bartholdi in autumn **1839** was a difficult challenge for Henriette. She made the acquaintance of the young Lutheran pastor Louis Meyer (1809-1867) who came to Tours to take care of the sick baron. Meyer stimulated Henriette's growing faith. Her correspondence of that period shows that she entered into a profound spiritual crisis in the course of the year **1841**; in **1842** she finally had a conversion experience. Her husband followed her on that path. Their conversion had an impact on the education of their children: from now on the family stayed away from the theatre and other worldly distractions.



Still in 1842, they made their son André leave the Keller boarding school in Paris and put him in a protestant secondary school in Sainte-Foy-la-Grande (Gironde), which was looked upon with great hopes by the protestants of France at that time.

At the same time Jean André became involved in the project of a rehabilitation unit for young protestant offenders, again in Sainte-Foy. He also worked in the central consistory and several other activities aiming at the development of local Protestantism. These activities resulted in tensions with the archdiocese. In **1843**, when Jean and Henriette André received the opposition MP Odilon Barrot (1791-1873), who had just lost his only daughter, at the tax office, Jean André was reported to the government and had to go to Paris to defend himself.

In **1846**, Henriette gave birth to her son Georges (1846-1875).

In **1848**, Adolphe Monod, who had been appointed pastor in Paris, became the pastor of the family and a friend of Jean and Henriette.

When the revolution broke out, Tours became a refuge for people fleeing Paris. Jean and Henriette received many big names in politics (minister de Salvandy, chancellor Pasquier, ...) and culture (Balzac, Chateaubriand, ...), as well as, unbeknownst to them, Louis-Napoléon's mistress, Harriet Howard³.

In **1849**, the couple was in Paris when there was another cholera outbreak. Shortly afterwards, Jean André's health deteriorated seriously. He died in Paris on the 18th of August, **1850**. Adolphe Monod, who had offered his pastoral support to the dying man, spoke at the funeral.

After the death of her husband, Henriette sold their house in Tours and retired in order to put the family affairs in order. She felt called to dedicate the rest of her life to God.

In **1851** she accepted to become a member of the governing board of the Deaconesses of Reuilly.

In **1852** her daughter Gabrielle married the banker Henri Mallet (1824-1908).

Henriette became more and more involved in religious activities. She received young people at home on a regular basis. They used to spend the evening discussing serious subjects or to go together to the Temple de l'Oratoire and participate in the service presided by Adolphe Monod.

In 1853 Henriette went to a health resort in Bad Ems (Rhineland-Palatinate); on her way back she stopped over at Kaiserswerth in the suburbs of Düsseldorf in order to study how the local Deaconess Institute worked.

³ Having finally understood whom they had lodged, Jean André asked Odilon Barrot to protest to the head of state. Barrot, "who did not know how to carry out this task, had the idea of leaving their letter 'inadvertently' on the office of his brother Ferdinand, who was the president's secretary. The letter was read by the prince, who responded to Mr Odilon Barrot in a very crude and insensitive way, speaking out against the narrowness of mind and the puritanism of Mr André, criticising him for complaining about a fact which he could have prevented by inquiring in advance whom he was about to receive, and expressing his regrets that a woman of such commitment and elevated character had stumbled on a house in which, under the mask of religion, there was nothing but ostentation of stilted virtue lacking any Christian charity ..., thereby adding insult to injury. Mr Barrot, who was to transmit this incredible pamphlet to Mr André most certainly refrained from doing so. The story only was revealed many years later, when his Memoirs were published." (Alfred André, *Madame André-Walther*, p. 241)

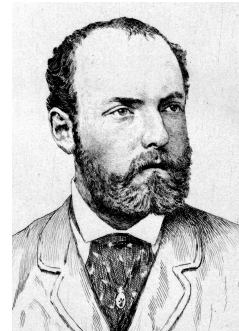
In **1855** she invited Adolphe Monod, whose health was in steady decline, to her residence in Viroflay (Yvelines). During the winter 1855/1856, Henriette was among the happy few who can take part in all the weekly gatherings around the dying pastor. His death in **1856** was a real bereavement for her.

In this year she also began to work hard for the female prisoners of Saint-Lazare: she visited them often, presided over services and took care of the inmates. In autumn 1856 she also accepted to live with the Deaconesses for some time and to take the lead of the institution in order for Sister Malvesin to be able to have some rest.

In **1857**, she settled down in Versailles, in her estate *Les Ombrages*. The following years were dedicated to travels, religious activities and charities. Henriette had a deep passion for evangelization activities of all kinds and for institutions for social recovery. She had periods of intense activity, interrupted by periods of exhaustion. In **1865** she had to withdraw from the Council of the Deaconesses. As she wanted to concentrate her work in the surroundings of *Les Ombrages*, she decided to establish an infirmary there.

In **1867**, she took part in setting up Bible stands at the Universal Exhibition in Paris, where she distributed a great number of religious leaflets. She also supported the project of an ecumenical translation of the Bible, but the project was abandoned as a consequence of the war. Among her other projects of that time, there is the establishment of a boarding home teaching handicraft to children, and the foundation of a typographical institution in the suburbs of Paris, in collaboration with several protestant orphanages.

Henriette took care of her infirmary herself and visited poor, sick and aged people in Versailles. However, her health declined: she often suffered from headaches, eye troubles as well as the gout. In **1869**, she returned to Paris to be closer to her son Georges.



When France declared war on Germany in July **1870**, Henriette's life changed thoroughly. She made her estate *Les Ombrages* available to organisms that offered help to the war-wounded. The situation was not easy for French protestants, who were often accused of fraternizing with the enemy. The crown prince of Prussia occupied *Les Ombrages* by means of a military requisition order, but the rumour spread that the owner, being close to the Germans, had offered it to the invaders. Henriette was even suspected of espionage. When she heard those rumours, she was outraged and requested the government in Tours to carry out a public investigation.

Henriette also had the idea of a common declaration of Christian women of all countries. She contacted Valérie de Gasparin (1813-1894) in Switzerland, but her foreign correspondents did not share her enthusiasm. After the defeat of Sedan, Henriette wrote a letter to the queen of Prussia in order to ask her to act in favour of peace. A few days later, she even wrote to the king of Prussia, and later on she maintained a correspondence with the crown prince. She also asked the Grand Duchess Elena of Russia (i.e. her childhood friend Charlotte de Württemberg) and the Queen of England to intervene in favour of peace. These efforts were, however, unsuccessful.

When a great number of injured people arrived in Vierzon after the first battles of Orléans, Henriette established a first-aid station with 50 beds. Once the German had regained control

of Orléans, she organised the distribution of soup, bread, linen and clothing. As she feared the arrival of troops, she lodged all the young girls of the village in her residence for some time. She employed about a hundred poor women and had them manufacture clothes that were to be distributed to families living in precarious circumstances and, later on, to French prisoners of war.

Her son George, who had come back from a trip to the United States, enlisted in the *Armée du Nord*. He distinguished himself in the battle of Saint-Quentin.



As soon as the armistice was signed, in **1871**, Henriette returned to Paris. She was involved in the distribution of food to the public. Her son Alfred, together with Mrs Léon Say and Dutilleul, took part in the negotiation of the ransom of Paris with Bismarck. Henriette was about to settle down in Versailles when the civil war broke out. She had the opportunity to host people related to the government that met in Versailles but also a great number of persons fleeing Paris.

After the defeat of the Commune, Henriette accepted the invitation of Elisabeth de Mac Mahon (1834-1900) to be part of the board of distribution of emergency aid in the suburbs of Paris. She was particularly in charge of Neuilly and its surroundings. She also got involved in helping the female prisoners of the Commune by visiting them and improving their living conditions. She also funded a school for training unemployed inmates.

In July 1871, her son Alfred was appointed MP in Paris. Subsequently several MPs met regularly around Henriette. She also got involved in the Committee for the orphans of war and took part in the “Sou des chaumières”, an institution promoting the reconstruction of villages that had been destroyed in the war.



When the **1872** general synod of the Reformed Church of France closed, Henriette invited all the emissaries of the Churches to a banquet in her *Les Ombrages* residence. In this year she also re-launched her boarding home for orphans of war.

As of **1873**, she succeeded in having a regular service organised in Neuilly, where she also opened a girls’ school, the direction of which was entrusted to pastor Paul of Versailles.

In February **1875**, her son George suddenly died from an infectious disease⁴, and in September her sister Louise died from a stroke. These losses afflicted Henriette profoundly. She reduced her commitments and turned in on herself to some degree, but she still took part in weekly prayer gatherings with both pastors and laymen.

In **1877** she organised a great party for the Christian unions for young people in the park of her *Les Ombrages* estate. In this year she also published a collection of letters and travel notes of her son Georges. She also became involved in the evangelisation of young soldiers, by supporting the pastor and military chaplain Perrier.

⁴ “Her young son, who seemed full of strength and health, was struck down by a devastating disease. He died after three days of a bad fever, the germs of which he had doubtlessly brought back from his travels abroad.” (Alfred André, *op.cit.*, p. 499)

In **1878** she was involved in the launch of a republican protestant newspaper initiated by Léon Pilatte (1822-1893). However, this project met the opposition of a great number of influent protestants. Finally, Henriette withdrew and the project was abandoned.

Still in 1878, Henriette got involved in the establishment of a nursing home for men in Neuilly. She also regularly visited the Deaconesses in Paris and took part in establishing a residence for servant girls (*Asile des servantes*) as well as a residence for young female workers (*Maison de famille pour les jeunes ouvrières*). However, her circle of activity gradually decreased.

Henriette died on August 6, **1886**, surrounded by her loved ones. Her funeral was attended by large crowds and presided by the pastors Ernest Dhombres, Léon Paul and Jean Meyer.



Main source

Alfred André, *Madame André-Walther (1807-1886)*, Paris, Librairie Fischbacher, 1896, 557 p.

This is a rather hagiographical book, the unction and pompous style of which are quite typical for the writings of the evangelical protestants of the Paris high society in the 19th century. This notwithstanding, it is one of the very rare sources of information on the life of Ms André-Walther, offering quite a few interesting pieces of information to the the diligent and patient reader.