

**“How I shudder at the thought of becoming a useless old woman”:
Strategies for Coping with Old Age
and Aging Processes in the Diaries of a
Swiss Woman Anna Maria
Preiswerk-Iselin (1758–1840)**

During the 1800s, elderly women were often expected to take on the role of grandmother, depending on their social standing and familial status.¹ The example of the wealthy Basel citizen Anna Maria Preiswerk-Iselin (1758–1840) shows that ageing women in Switzerland around 1800 were not necessarily satisfied with exclusively fulfilling this role. More specifically, the aim of this paper is to analyze the alternative strategies ageing women developed in order to remain a useful member of society and at the same time keep themselves occupied in a meaningful way. This question is addressed using Reinhart Koselleck’s concept of temporality and sense of time around 1800,² as well as the concept of increasing autonomy from

1 Original title quotation: “Wie bebe ich vor dem Gedanken zurück, ein altes unnützes Weib zu werden”. StABS, PA 511a (304-03-04), Tagebücher der Anna Maria Preiswerk-Iselin, book 23, 28 May 1826, p. 8.

2 Cf. Koselleck, Reinhart: *Vergangene Zukunft. Zur Semantik geschichtlicher Zeiten*. Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1979 (Theorie); see also: Jung, Theo: Zeitgeist im langen 18. Jahrhundert. Dimensionen eines umstrittenen Begriffs. In: *Frühe Neue Zeiten* (Landwehr, Achim, ed.). s.l.: transcript, 2014, 319–356; Jung, Theo: “Das Neue der Neuzeit ist ihre Zeit. Reinhart Kosellecks Theorie der Verzeitlichung und ihre Kritiker”. In: *Moderne: Kulturwissenschaftliches Jahrbuch*, 2011, 172–184.

established norms and social obligations in old age.³ To contextualize the findings, contemporary social norms and bourgeois sociability practices are taken into consideration.

The main source used for this work are the extensive diaries of Anna Maria Preiswerk-Iselin, which she wrote over a period of 44 years. She began writing at the age of 37 and continued until she was 81. The author died just a few months after her last diary entry. The 32 small-format diaries comprise around 1200 pages. They are made of paper and were written in iron gall ink, in the German Kurrent script. The ink and script were both commonly used at the time. Preiswerk-Iselin did not write in her notebooks every day, but only when events in her life seemed worth writing down. Her topics were varied and ranged from descriptions of visits and journeys, family matters, such as weddings, births, conflicts, illnesses and deaths, to political and religious criticism. Central themes for Preiswerk-Iselin were also self-reflection, her own infirmities and shortcomings and coming to terms with the grief over the loss of her children. She was also concerned with female education and noted down numerous references and reflections on literature she had read. Unsurprisingly for her time and in the Basel context, the entire diary is permeated by religious views. The diaries were passed down through the family line of Preiswerk-Iselin's daughter, Sophia Vischer-Preiswerk (1787–1859), and thus found their way into the Staatsarchiv Basel-Stadt (Basel State Archives, StABS in short), where they are now kept.⁴

Current research on the early modern period is now increasingly focusing on female writing and, in particular, female self-testimonies. Further, medical history has already dealt with the menopausal phase, but has largely

3 Cf. Rosenmayr, Leopold: *Lebensalter und Kultur. Ein Versuch vergleichender Soziobiologie und Soziologie*. In: *Gerontologie und Sozialgeschichte. Wege zu einer historischen Betrachtung des Alters* (Conrad, Christoph, Kondratowitz, Hans-Joachim von, eds.). Berlin: Deutsches Zentrum für Altersfragen, 1983, 54.

4 The diaries can be viewed online: <https://dls.staatsarchiv.bs.ch/records/435144>. There is also an online edition of the diaries which has been published under the lead of Prof. Dr. Claudia Opitz-Belakhal with research assistants Selina Bentsch and Anna Christina Münch. The online edition is based on a transcription by lic. phil. Esther Baur and research assistant Andreas Berger. It is not currently available to the public, but will be appearing on the website of the Basel State Archives (Staatsarchiv Basel-Stadt).

ignored the ‘postmenopausal’ woman.⁵ In historical research, women already played a role as widows, for example, or regarding their educational background.⁶ Old age has also been a topic of historical research for several decades and there has been a growing number of corresponding studies on the treatment and experience of ageing people in the early modern period. However, this mainly relates to English and some French sources.⁷ In German-speaking countries, however, old age and especially ageing women have so far remained a marginal phenomenon. It is therefore no coincidence that Kaspar von Greyerz stated that “the history of old age has yet to be written”.⁸ This article addresses the mentioned gap in research on specifically female ageing in the German-speaking early modern period and endeavors to help close it.

In the following, I will firstly look at Preiswerk-Iselin’s family and local context and at her as a person and diarist. This is essential to understand how she perceived herself as an aging woman and how she was regarded by others. It must also be clarified at what point she considered herself to be ‘old’ and how this can be linked to the common notions of old age at the time. Her changed social behavior in old age will then be examined in the context of bourgeois socializing practices. It is shown what social and economic conditions she faced in relation to her status and gender and what strategies she developed to maintain her place and status in bourgeois society in Basel. This is illustrated in particular by a project close to Preiswerk-Iselin’s heart and on which she worked intensively during her later years: the construction of a small girls’ school. Although she pursued

5 Schäfer, Daniel: Alte Frau = Alter Mann? Die Wahrnehmung von Matronen in der medizinischen Fachprosa des 18. Jahrhunderts, in: *Alter und Geschlecht. Repräsentationen, Geschichten und Theorien des Alter(n)s* (Hartung, Heike, ed.). Bielefeld: Transcript, 2005, 135–154, specifically p. 136.

6 Research on early modern widowhood: Moring, Beatrice; Wall, Richard: *Widows in European Economy and Society (1600-1920)*. Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2017; research on early modern female education: Kleinau, Elke, Opitz-Belakhal, Claudia (eds.): *Geschichte der Mädchen- und Frauenbildung*. Frankfurt a. M., New York: Campus Verlag, 1996.

7 Stearns, Peter N. (ed.): *Old Age in Preindustrial Society*. New York, London: Holmes and Meier, 1982; Botelho, Lynn, Ottaway, Susannah R., Kugler, Anne (eds.): *The History of Old Age in England 1600–1800*. London: Routledge, 2008, 2009; Thane, Pat (ed.): *A History of Old Age*. Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2005; Troyansky, David: *Ageing in World History*. New York, London: Routledge, 2016.

8 Von Greyerz, Kaspar: *Passagen und Stationen. Lebensstufen zwischen Mittelalter und Moderne*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2010, 45.

the project for years, it ultimately failed. The reasons for this failure and a reconnection to female aging in Basel form the conclusion of this analysis.

This article is based on my completed but not yet published dissertation entitled *A female perspective on age(ing). Perception of and coping with ageing processes in the diaries of Anna Maria Preiswerk-Iselin (1758–1840)*.⁹ It touches upon several aspects of the dissertation in a condensed form. Since Preiswerk-Iselin was predominantly German-speaking, apart from some French passages, the quotations from her diaries are given in the original language. This is done to show her characteristic style of writing and specific use of words and metaphors. An English translation is provided in the footnotes, for reasons of comprehension. The only exception to this procedure is the title of this article.¹⁰

Anna Maria Preiswerk-Iselin: Family and person in the context of Basel

Anna Maria Preiswerk-Iselin was born as the second of nine children of the philosopher and council clerk Isaak Iselin and his wife Helena Forcart. Iselin was very concerned about his children's education. While his sons attended public schools, he tutored his daughters independently at home. His daughter and diary author Anna Maria admired her father for his efforts to educate her and her sisters, as is visible in her writings. Nevertheless, she would have liked to learn even more and often felt insufficient in higher educational matters. In the context of female education, which will be addressed in more detail later, Preiswerk-Iselin noted in her diary: "Nicht meine Bildung, meine Kenntnisse ihnen beyzubringen, den da fühle ich wohl daß mir beynahe alles fehlt".¹¹ Isaak Iselin taught his daughters French, for example, which was the language of education in Switzerland

9 Original Title: *Alter(n) aus weiblicher Sicht. Wahrnehmung und Bewältigung von Alterungsprozessen in den Tagebüchern der Anna Maria Preiswerk-Iselin (1758–1840)*. The dissertation was written at and accepted by the Faculty of Philosophy and History at the University of Basel, Switzerland.

10 Concepts in German research literature are also given in the original language with a translation in parentheses. Longer quotes are given in English to fit the sentence structure. The original quotes will be provided in the footnotes.

11 Translation: "Not to bring them my education, my knowledge, because I feel that I lack almost everything". StABS, PA 511a (304-03-04), Tagebücher der Anna Maria Preiswerk-Iselin, book 12, 1815, p. 12.

at the time – but Latin was exclusively reserved for boys. The family was not particularly wealthy but belonged to a circle of long-residing Basel families. This circle included families who had held citizenship for several generations. Political offices were almost exclusively held by male members of this group. It often happened that older men from Basel's upper class moved into politics after their professional careers. Preiswerk-Iselin's father as well as her sons and sons-in-law were all members of the Basel Council, the city's government.

At the age of eighteen, Preiswerk-Iselin married the twenty-one-year-old silk merchant and later ribbon manufacturer Niklaus Preiswerk. It was a marriage befitting their rank. Both spouses came from the elite Basel circle mentioned previously. As a merchant, Niklaus Preiswerk was quite wealthy. However, he had always criticized how little money his wife brought into the marriage. At least, that is what his wife complained about in her diaries: "Wenn ich's oft hart hören u fühlen mußte daß ich kein Vermögen zugebracht hätte".¹² Although the marriage began quite harmoniously, in the end it was anything but happy. In retrospect, Preiswerk-Iselin even went so far as to metaphorically describe her marriage contract as "Kaufbrief der scllaverei".¹³

At the age of 57, Preiswerk-Iselin did not consider remarrying, as was customary for her social standing. She had inherited 50% of her husband's assets in accordance with Basel law and was therefore not financially dependent on male support. The rest of the inheritance was divided between the children. Moreover, these children were already long grown up and independent. Young children were often a reason why widows or widowers remarried. In Preiswerk-Iselin's case, however, all her children were well married. Only the youngest son, Lucas, was still unmarried, though it can be assumed that he was already engaged, as he married a year after his father's death. Further, Lucas ran his father's silk company together with his older brother Dietrich.

12 Translation: "When I often had to hear and feel it hard that I had not brought a fortune with me" (*Ibid.*, book 11, 10 January 1811, p. 9).

13 Translation: "Bill of sale of slavery" (*Ibid.*).

It is important to note that their prenuptial agreement did not contain any specific clauses, but merely regulated inheritance matters. This was common practice in Basel at the time.

As a widow, Preiswerk-Iselin was subject to a bailiff who administered her monetary possessions and immovable property. The bailiff usually came from the same guild as the deceased husband or father, as in the case of unmarried women. This role was often filled by a relative, which was also the case with Preiswerk-Iselin. Her son-in-law Benedikt Vischer, husband of her youngest daughter, became her appointed bailiff. However, as a widow of high standing and excellent reputation, she had an instrument of power at her disposal: she was able to apply for so-called 'Freie Mittelverwaltung'.¹⁴ In the year 1816, a few months after Niklaus Preiswerk's death, her son-in-law (as bailiff) applied for free administration of funds for Preiswerk-Iselin, which allowed her to manage her assets largely independently. She only had to refer to him for large transactions, such as property sales. The application was also signed by her second son-in-law and her two sons, as closest male relatives.¹⁵

Through her four surviving children, Preiswerk-Iselin became the grandmother to fifteen grandchildren and great-grandmother of 32 great-grandchildren, although she never got to know all of them. Some were born after she had already passed. Preiswerk-Iselin deeply cared for her descendants and often welcomed her grandchildren into her home at St. Apollinaris in Alsace, France and later in her house outside the Aeschentor in Basel.¹⁶ In the last months of her life, she was cared for by her daughters, as can be seen from daughter Susanna Paravicini's eulogy.¹⁷

To analyze and understand Preiswerk-Iselin's life as an aging woman in Basel, it is necessary to make some essential comments on the political, religious and social context of Basel around 1800.¹⁸ Preiswerk-Iselin lived

14 Translation: "free administration of funds".

15 StABS, Vogtei J5, Einzelne Fälle freier Mittelverwaltung (1717-1878), entry: 24 January 1816. No document could be found that confirms the free administration of funds for Preiswerk-Iselin. However, a positive result can be inferred from her diary. She does not mention any conversations with her bailiff in which she obtains his permission for any kind of transaction. Her sons and sons-in-law only play a leading role in the sale of her country estate.

16 The Aeschentor was one of the city gates. It was quite common for wealthy citizens of Basel to either own a country house or residence outside the city for the summer months. In winter they usually resided within the city walls.

17 StABS, Leichenreden (LA), Leichenrede für Susanna Paravicini-Preiswerk, 22 May 1843, p. 14.

18 The context of Basel can only be briefly outlined in this article. Further reading on the individual topics is provided in the following footnotes.

in turbulent times, characterized by unrest and uncertainty. On a family level, Preiswerk-Iselin wanted to live close to her family members but remain independent. This is perfectly in line with Leopold Rosenmayr's principle of "Intimität auf Abstand" (intimacy at a distance).¹⁹ Family and religion were of major importance to her. Preiswerk-Iselin's father Isaak Iselin was an Enlightenment philosopher and she herself was brought up as a Protestant. In practice, she made use of various approaches to faith and developed her own religious ideas and personal piety. Further, she had strong political opinions that she voiced in her diary. Being a woman, however, she could not participate in any official political activities.

As briefly mentioned earlier, men from long-established families shared political power in Basel. Women and people without citizenship had no opportunity to hold office. The city was governed by the Small Council and the extended Grand Council. Representatives from the city made up the majority of council members, although the countryside was far superior in terms of area and numbers of people. This fueled discontent among the rural population, which led to bloody conflicts and ultimately to the separation of the cantons of Basel-Stadt and Baselland. In addition to the internal conflicts, Basel was also affected by Napoleon's campaign across Europe. Due to its position on the map, parts of Switzerland were already in an invidious position as a buffer between the conflicting parties. Further, French troops were stationed in Basel and had to be supplied, which meant considerable financial and resource expenditure.²⁰

On a religious level, Basel was primarily Protestant. However, a closer look reveals a conglomerate of different religious movements in the city. Theoretically, religious freedom prevailed throughout the city. However, inter-confessional marriages were not contracted for a long time and Protestant faith was a mandatory requirement for obtaining citizenship. Basel also had a Jewish community and was an important Pietist center and point of contact for the Moravian Church. Pietism was so deeply

19 Rosenmayr, Leopold: *Die Schnüre vom Himmel. Forschung und Theorie zum kulturellen Wandel*. Wien: Böhlau, 1992, 265.

20 For Basel (not only) during French occupation: Kreis, Georg, Wartburg, Beat von (eds.): *Basel - Geschichte einer städtischen Gesellschaft*. Basel: Christoph Merian Verlag, 2000; and for Switzerland in general: Maissen, Thomas: *Geschichte der Schweiz*. Baden, 2019.

rooted within the city walls that it was somehow mockingly nicknamed ‘pious Basel’.²¹ In reality, many people of Basel made use of the city’s entire religious offering and drew from it the approaches that were relevant and coherent for them personally.

Furthermore, Basel, like the rest of Switzerland and most Central European countries, did not yet have an institutionalized and compulsory social security and pension systems around 1800. For the most part, everyone had to provide for their own monetary security and housing situation during old age.²² As previous research has shown, the three-generation household was not the ideal living situation in Western and Central Europe. Older people wanted to run their own household for as long as possible.²³ In the middle classes or bourgeoisie, the elderly often lived under one roof with employees or boarders. Older people were also expected to remain active and useful to society for as long as possible. If they became in need of help, they were quickly considered dispensable.²⁴

When does ‘old age’ begin?

To be able to analyze Preiswerk-Iselin’s strategies for coping with old age and her roles as an aging woman, it must first be clarified when or in which situations she considered herself old. Furthermore, it is also essential to consider when those around her perceived her as an individual, as well as women of her status in general as ‘old’, and what this meant for her in particular.

21 For pietism in Basel: Cf. Hebeisen, Erika: *“Leidenschaftlich fromm”. Die pietistische Bewegung in Basel, 1750-1830*. Köln: Böhlau, 2005.

22 The first social security system in Basel was the ‘Prediger Witwen- und Waisenkasse’, founded in 1777. This non-mandatory security fund was open solely to clergymen and provided their widows or orphaned children with some sort of social security. The development of the modern social insurance system in Switzerland only began during the 20th century.

23 Ehmer, Josef: Zur Stellung alter Menschen in Haushalt und Familie. Thesen auf der Grundlage von quantitativen Quellen aus europäischen Städten seit dem 17. Jahrhundert. In: *Gerontologie und Sozialgeschichte. Wege zu einer historischen Betrachtung des Alters* (Conrad, Christoph, Kondratowitz, Hans-Joachim von, eds.). Berlin: Deutsches Zentrum für Altersfragen, 1983, 187.

24 Göckenjan, Gerd: Hilfebedürftigkeit als Rahmug der Statuspassage ins hohe Alter. Zur Geschichte einer unsicheren Statuspassage. In: *Moderne Lebensläufe im Wandel* (Leisering, Lutz et al., eds.). Weinheim: Deutscher Studien Verlag, 1993, 187.

Preiswerk-Iselin already described physical weaknesses in the early years of her diary, which she began at the age of 37. At this time, however, she did not attribute this to her increasing age, but to other exertions, such as her daughters' illnesses, which demanded a great amount of energy and strength from her. In her 50s, she explicitly mentioned old age for the first time, such as in October 1813, with 55 years of age:

*“Aber mein Alter, meine Schwächlichkeit die mir keine lange Anstrengung mehr erlaubt, meine Zurückgezogenheit, mein schüchternes Wesen, mein finsterers Aussehen, mein langsamer Ideengang mein Mangel an schneller Geistes Gegenwart, die Mühe die ich habe meine Gedanken, besonders mündlich, klar u leicht auszudrücken u ach wie vieles noch!”*²⁵

Over the years, Preiswerk-Iselin repeatedly resolved to adapt her activities to her age and take her declining strength into account. However, she rarely put these plans into practice. Despite her frail physical condition, she still carried out strenuous work on her house at the age of 72: “mancherlei Hausgeschäfte so wie Waschen [,] Gibsen des Hauses u Änderung der Köchin nahmen meine schwach Kräfte so ganz in Anspruch.”²⁶ The fact that Preiswerk-Iselin was even still plastering her house indicated that she did not limit herself to pure housework, but also carried out more demanding manual work. Only her diminishing hearing caused increasing difficulties for her. She first mentioned this ailment at the age of 64: “natürlich ist es also daß der Mangel am Gehör den ich seit einigen Wochen fühle, mir beschwerlich ist.”²⁷ Her hearing did not improve from that point on. She

25 Translation: “But my age, my frailty which no longer allows me to exert myself for long, my reclusiveness, my shy nature, my gloomy appearance, my slow flow of ideas, my lack of quick presence of mind, the difficulty I have in expressing my thoughts clearly and easily, especially verbally, and oh how much more!” StABS, PA 511a (304-03-04), Tagebücher der Anna Maria Preiswerk-Iselin, book 10, 29 October 1813, p. 57.

Note: “finsterers Aussehen” does not necessarily refer to her looks, it might also be connected to a poorer eyesight. I deal with this topic in greater detail in my dissertation.

26 Translation: “various household chores such as washing [,] plastering the house and changing the cook took up so much of my weak strength”. StABS, PA 511a (304-03-04), Tagebücher der Anna Maria Preiswerk-Iselin, book 27, 22 March 1830, p. 21.

27 Translation: “it is natural that the lack of hearing I have been feeling for a few weeks is troublesome for me” (*Ibid.*, book 18, 3 September 1822, p. 1).

repeatedly complained about her declining hearing and the impact this had on her social life.

Preiswerk-Iselin always felt and described herself as ‘old’ when something was not working the way she was used to and when her physical limitations became noticeable. She also liked to describe her body as a reliable machine that occasionally got out of gear: “einige Verdrüßlichkeiten griffen mich an, dazu kam eine Erkältung u meine Maschine war aus dem Gang gehoben: nun ist wieder etwas besser.”²⁸ Although illnesses and ailments were seen as God-given, it was still necessary to take care of the body, which was God-given as well, as best as possible. Preiswerk-Iselin therefore also consulted doctors and healers in order to obtain relief and remain capable of action. To be able to measure her own biological and perceived age, she also compared herself with people around her. This was particularly the case when either people younger than her were already struggling with more serious age-related ailments or older people appeared particularly agile and healthy to her. Preiswerk-Iselin’s own sense of age was strongly oriented towards the images of old age of her time, place and social context. She came to terms with her own age as a natural process, but this did not mean that she did not develop strategies to retain her agency and also went against social conventions. Depending on the situation, she perceived her age differently and was also perceived differently by her surroundings.

In general, various standards can be used to measure age. In addition to chronological age, which is the age recorded in a passport or other official document, the physical-biological age, the socially ascribed age or the psychological age, i.e. the person’s own perceived age, can also be taken into consideration.²⁹ On a purely chronological or calendrical level, the question arises as to how old people lived in Basel around 1800 and, in

28 Translation: “some indispositions attacked me, plus a cold and my machine was out of gear: now it’s a bit better again” (*Ibid.*, book 28, 25 November 1830, p. 15).

Although the machine metaphor is reminiscent of Julien Offray de La Mettrie’s “l’homme machine”, Preiswerk-Iselin had little in common with his general approach. After all, he depicted the soul, for example (and extremely abbreviated), as part of a physical process in the brain and did not concede any God-given immortality to it – a theory that Preiswerk-Iselin would certainly have disagreed with. For an English version of La Mettrie’s work: La Mettrie, Julien Offray de: *Man A Machine*. Chicago: The Open Court Publishing Co., 1912, <<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/52090/52090-h/52090-h.htm>>.

29 Cf. Laslett, Peter: *Das Dritte Alter. Historische Soziologie des Alterns*. Weinheim, München: Juventa, 1995, 38–39.

particular, what the life expectancy of women of the upper classes was. The possible age to be reached depended on many factors, including periods of crisis, such as wars, environmental factors, famines or epidemics. Child and infant mortality were still considerably high around 1800 and did not exclusively affect the lower classes. On average, a newborn baby did not even reach the age of 40, while around 20% of infants died before their first birthday.³⁰ However, those who survived the critical phase of childhood could live to be well into their 60s. Although the 82-year-old Preiswerk-Iselin died at an advanced age for her time, she was not alone in that age group. There are even several people up to 100 years old recorded for the early modern period.³¹ As early as the 16th century, wealthier women at least lived to the same age or grew even older than their male contemporaries.³² Although women could certainly reach an advanced age, they played only a marginal role in medical research and literature of their time. Only the onset of the menopause was of medical interest, as were age-specific ailments and diseases in general. However, the treatment methods remained largely the same, regardless of age and gender.³³

Certain expectations were placed on ageing people. Gerd Göckenjan referred to this as “Alterserwartungscodes” (age expectation codes).³⁴ Depending on factors, such as age, gender and status, the elderly were expected to behave in certain ways. In a time when there was no retirement age, anyone who was no longer able to fulfill his or her socially intended

30 Audrey, Georges: Auf der Suche nach dem neuen Staat (1798-1848). In: *Geschichte der Schweiz und der Schweizer* (Mesmer, Beatrix, ed.). Basel: Schwabe, 2006, 579. By comparison, 25–30% of newborns in Switzerland died in their first year of life between the mid-17th and early 19th century. Cf. De Capitani, François: Beharren und Umsturz (1648-1815). In: *Geschichte der Schweiz und der Schweizer* (Mesmer, Beatrix, ed.). Basel: Schwabe, 2006, 449.

31 For France: Stearns, Peter N.: *Old Age in European Society. The Case of France*. London: Croom Helm, 1977, 19.

Johann Koechlin-Dollfus (1746–1836), Preiswerk-Iselin's relative by marriage, who was also known as Jean, lived to the age of 90.

32 Schäfer, Daniel: *Alter und Krankheit in der Frühen Neuzeit. Der ärztliche Blick auf die letzte Lebensphase*. Frankfurt a.M.: Campus, 2004, 268.

33 The fact that the treatment methods for older people did not differ significantly from those for younger people and were at most somewhat weakened (see, for example, bloodletting) was already evident in the 17th century: Bothelo, Lynn A.: “An idle youth makes a needy old age”. The 17th century. In: *A History of Old Age* (Thane, Pat, ed.). Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2005, 113–173.

34 Göckenjan, Gerd: *Das Alter würdigen. Altersbilder und Bedeutungswandel des Alters*. Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2000, 25.

role, for example due to physical infirmity, was quickly considered unserviceable and old. This was particularly serious for individuals who became in need of assistance. Elderly people quickly lost their reputation and were at risk of becoming socially dependent or suffering financial hardship. It was therefore particularly important for the ageing population to maintain their state of physical health for as long as possible or to find other meaningful tasks. Further, marriage could be a positive transition into older age. However, if a woman of a certain age was not married, she could be pejoratively referred to as “alter Jungfer” (old maid).³⁵ Taking contemporary depictions of ‘Lebenstreppe’ or ‘Altersstufen’ (steps or stages of life) into consideration, one often finds 50 as a standardized boundary and transition to old age.³⁶ After this peak in life, the pictures show an inevitable descent down the steps. For women in particular, this age was also equated with the onset of the menopause – a physical entry into female old age.

Old age brings change

As Preiswerk-Iselin described herself as ‘old’, she also began to write more frequently in her diary. In the following, it will be argued that this was related to various changes in the diarist’s life that were related to her age and aging. On the one hand, her children had left home and were independent, and her husband also died during this phase. She had more time for herself, but rarely described herself as lonely in a negative sense. On the other hand, her social behavior also changed. The family became more of a focus, while at the same time she increasingly withdrew from bourgeois sociability.

Bourgeois socializing included making regular visits to other families of the same class or receiving visitors themselves. Participation in this practice was crucial for the reputation of the bourgeois household. Visits could be scheduled at practically any time, as the early modern house,

35 Göckenjan, Gerd, Taeger, Angela: “Matrone, Alte Jungfer, Tante. Das Bild der alten Frau in der bürgerlichen Welt des 19. Jahrhunderts.” *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte*, 30, 1990, 44.

36 Cf. Joerissen, Peter, Will, Cornelia (eds.): *Die Lebenstreppe. Bilder der menschlichen Lebensalter*. Köln: Rheinland Verlag, 1983.

as a semi-public space, was always open. Accordingly, this type of socializing took up a lot of time in the lives of the higher classes. Women like Preiswerk-Iselin played a central role in this socializing practice by acting as hosts, creating a seemingly informal setting for conversation, catering for guests and introducing suitable topics of conversation themselves. This also gave them a certain position of power in society that they were otherwise denied. Socializing was also cultivated in the streets outside the front door, around church visits and at the bathhouse.

Through her father Isaak Iselin, who was also very well connected beyond the city walls, Anna Maria Preiswerk-Iselin was part of this bourgeois hustle and bustle from an early age. Many central figures in Basel and Swiss history at the time came and went with the Iselins. Even as an adult and after her father's passing, Preiswerk-Iselin maintained good and regular contact with some of those visitors, such as the educationalist Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi and the clergyman Johann Caspar Lavater. Preiswerk-Iselin certainly did not mention every visit or participation in social events in her diary. This is probably because these visits were too common and too firmly anchored in the everyday life of the bourgeoisie. It seems that whenever she was in the city, she combined this with various visits to family, friends and acquaintances. After all, the journey from her country residence to Basel and back by horse carriage could hardly be completed in one day.

As she got older, Preiswerk-Iselin withdrew gradually from social events and focused instead on contact with close family members. A diary entry from 1827 reads:

“Ich habe gestern einige Besuche gemacht, u bin davon sehr ermüdet zurück gekommen: das muß ich künftig bleiben lassen u meine wenigen Kräfte nur in einem kleinen Kreise zusammen ziehn; man glaubt oft den Verwandte Zeichen der Liebe geben zu müssen, allein in meinem Alter ist man der aussern Welt so wenig mehr!”³⁷

37 Translation: “Yesterday I made a few visits and came back very tired: I must refrain from doing so in future and only gather my little strength in a small circle; one often thinks one has to give signs of love to relatives, but at my age one is so little more to the outside world!” StABS, PA 511a (304-03-04), Tagebücher der Anna Maria Preiswerk-Iselin, book 24, 20 January 1827, p. 4.

That she felt to retreat was partly due to her dwindling strength, which she wanted and needed to manage better, and partly due to her poor hearing, which made it difficult for her to follow lectures or sermons. In addition, and possibly connected to her bad hearing, she felt increasingly uncomfortable in larger crowds of people. At the age of 69, and in the same year as mentioned above, she aptly summarized this in her diary: “am öffentlichen Gottesdienste kann ich nicht Theil nehmen wegen meinem schwachen Gehör u auch, weil ich das Gewirre vieler Menschen gar nicht mehr ertragen kann.”³⁸

However, her status alone did not allow her to completely withdraw from society and become lonely in the negative sense. In line with Arthur Imhof's approach that “being alone and being lonely are two different matters,”³⁹ she valued being alone from time to time, but increasingly less with advancing age. On Christmas day 1830, she wrote about this as follows: “Ich verbringe den heutigen, Weihnachtstag, recht zufrieden u froh, ob ich gleich ganz einsam bin”.⁴⁰ Preiswerk-Iselin regularly received her children and grandchildren at her country estate. The latter often stayed with her for several weeks and were brought up and taught by her. Nevertheless, she felt lonely when no one was visiting her. She noted: “Ich hätte nie geglaubt daß mir das allein wohnen so schwer fallen würde.”⁴¹ Being alone had a particularly negative effect when the family had just left and went back to their own homes, as she stated: “die kleine Marie war nur ein pr Tage bei mir u ihr Abschied that mir doch so wehe. Ist dieses Gefühl Altersschwäche, sollte es mit den Jahren zunehmen?”⁴² In this particular case, with her granddaughter going back home after a few days visit, Preiswerk-Iselin explicitly associated the increasing pain of parting with

38 Translation: “I can’t take part in public church services because of my poor hearing and also because I can’t stand the noise of so many people” (*Ibid.*, book 24, 13 April 1827, p. 23).

39 Original: „[dass] Alleinsein und Einsamsein zwei verschiedene Dinge sind“. Imhof, Arthur Erwin: *Die Lebenszeit. Vom aufgeschobenen Tod und von der Kunst des Lebens*. München: C. H. Beck, 1988, 302.

40 Translation: “I am spending today, Christmas Day, quite content and happy, even if I am quite lonely”. StABS, PA 511a (304-03-04), Tagebücher der Anna Maria Preiswerk-Iselin, book 28, 25 December 1830, p. 18.

41 Translation: “I would never have believed that living alone would be so difficult for me” (*Ibid.*, book 16, 01 February 1821, p. 55).

42 Translation: “Little Marie was only with me for a few days and her departure hurt me so much. Is this feeling age-related weakness, should it increase with the years?” (*Ibid.*, book 18, 29 January 1823, p. 38).

her increasing age. In these times of loneliness, she found refuge in writing her diary: “Das Schreiben ist mir Ersatz an genügender Unterhaltung, u bevestigt meine Gedanken u Entschlüsse.”⁴³

It is no coincidence that many of the entries on loneliness and solitude were written around the turn of the year or in winter, although not exclusively. On the one hand, the sense of time around 1800 was future-oriented and characterized by the idea of progress.⁴⁴ On the other hand, as Koselleck proposed, this increased the feeling of insecurity.⁴⁵ Traditional patterns of experience were no longer sufficient to imagine a predictable future. This became increasingly difficult for Preiswerk-Iselin as she grew older. There was additional uncertainty as to how long her life in this world would last. Against this background, the family seemed all the more important as a known variable and a sign of stability. Visits from grandchildren filled this need for family closeness and Preiswerk-Iselin was very happy to fulfill her role as a grandmother. In the context of these visits, she also developed an idea – a project close to her heart. Driven by the need to live closer to the family and thus make faster and more frequent visits possible, and determined to be able to offer her grandchildren an adequate upbringing and education in their grandmother’s house, Preiswerk-Iselin planned a building project in front of Basel’s Aeschentor.

Female education – A ‘retirement project’ for the aging Preiswerk-Iselin

In 1826, the 68-year-old Preiswerk-Iselin decided to build a property in front of the Aeschentor in Basel. Around the same time, she wrote in her diary: “Wie bebe ich vor dem Gedanken zurück, ein altes unnützes Weib zu warden.”⁴⁶ In order to remain a useful member of society in her old age and to keep herself occupied in a meaningful way, Preiswerk-Iselin had to

43 Translation: “Writing is a substitute and sufficient entertainment for me, and it strengthens my thoughts and resolutions.” (*Ibid.*, book 29, 28 January 1832, p. 25).

44 Cf. Jung, “Das Neue der Neuzeit ist ihre Zeit”, 175.

45 Cf. Koselleck, *Vergangene Zukunft*. Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1979, 374.

46 Translation: “How I shudder at the thought of becoming an old useless woman.” See footnote 1.

look for a new project – in keeping with the *Zeitgeist*. She had fulfilled her role as a mother and being a grandmother alone was not enough for her. Meaningful occupation was also necessary to maintain her body and mind for as long as possible. At the same time, the St. Apollinaris estate in Alsace was up for sale, as Preiswerk-Iselin found it unsuitable for her retirement project, and decided for the founding of a private school for girls. She wanted to set up a small residential section in the new building and teach her granddaughters and a few other pupils in the rest of the house. Her project, both regarding the building and the female education, was entirely in keeping with her time. Firstly, the choice of building site was hardly surprising. Other well-known Basel families and personalities also had their homes in the neighborhood. In general, many Basel families kept a country house.⁴⁷ Secondly, the education of girls and women was also an important Enlightenment topic in Basel.

A good 10 years earlier, Preiswerk-Iselin had already been dealing with the topic of education and, in addition to detailed diary entries, she also wrote an essay in which she drew up a detailed schedule, timetable, and a set of values she wanted to convey.⁴⁸ In doing so, she linked the education of her grandchildren to a larger context that would contribute to the betterment of society. She also considered how many teachers and helpers she needed to employ to aid her with the ambitious plan. Even though she thought about male employees, ideally the teachers were to be mainly women. With the help of at least one other female teacher and a principal, she wanted to educate and teach girls across all social classes. That included “Frauenzimmer vom gesitteten Mittelstande”⁴⁹ and “Menschen vom niedren Stande nach ihren Kräften u Fähigkeiten zu ihrem Stande auszubilden”.⁵⁰ In addition to moral and religious teaching, girls were to learn at least one other language than German. Presumably they were to be educated in French, the language of education in Basel around 1800. Also,

47 Cf. Salathé, René (ed.): *Baslerische Landsitze einst und jetzt. Ein kommentierter Reprint*. Liestal: Verlag Baselland, 2021.

48 For the whole essay: StABS, PA 511a (304-03-07), Aufsatz von Anna Maria Preiswerk-Iselin, 1815.

49 Translation: “Women from the civilized middle class”. StABS, PA 511a (304-03-04), Tagebücher der Anna Maria Preiswerk-Iselin, book 12, 1815, p. 17.

50 Translation: “To train people from the lower classes according to their strengths and abilities to fit their social standing” (*Ibid.*, book 26, 16 March 1829, p. 40).

the pupils should have been taught mathematics and geometry, as well as geography and natural history. Fine arts, music, and drawing also found a place in the curriculum. Finally, the “Erlernung aller weiblichen Arbeiten” was on the syllabus.⁵¹ As Preiswerk-Iselin did not go into detail about the latter subject, ‘female work’ probably needed no further explanation for her contemporaries. According to a listing from the *Basler Töchterschule* (Basel school for daughters), this included domestic and textile work, such as knitting.

Preiswerk-Iselin’s school project was indeed ambitious and progressive in terms of female education, but not so much revolutionary. Like her father, she did not want to prepare the girls for a working life, but rather for their role as wives, mothers and heads of households:

*“Auch der Ausbildung des weiblichen Geschlechtes ist dieses Verhältnis sehr ungünstig: Ich bin weit entfernt eine Ausbildung derselben zu wünschen die sie ihrer Bestimmung entrückte: aber eine welche sie dieselbe in einem ausgedehnten Grade derselben fähiger machte, damit sie nicht nur eine gute Hauswirthin sondern auch eine u gute Mutter sondern auch eine verständige weise u glückliche Mutter werden möchten.”*⁵²

In order to be good hostesses, for example, who maintained bourgeois socializing and visiting practices as mentioned earlier, women had to have a certain level of education. They were also expected to be good conversation partners for their husbands and provide them with advice.⁵³ In Preiswerk-Iselins imagination, only a small percentage of women were fitted to learn a trade. No doubt to reassure her fellow male citizens and preventively put their minds at rest, she noted in the year 1815:

51 Translation: “learning of all female work” (*Ibid.*, book 12, 1815, p. 16).

52 Translation: “This relationship is also very unfavorable to the education of the female sex: I am far from wishing for an education that would take them away from their destiny: but one that would make them more capable of it to an extended degree, so that they would not only become a good housekeeper but also a good mother and also an intelligent, wise, and happy mother” (*Ibid.*, book 11, 02 January 1811, p. 3).

53 Simon, Christian: Einleitung. In: *Sozioökonomische Strukturen; Frauengeschichte/Geschlechtergeschichte* (Simon, Christian, ed.). Basel: Helbing & Lichtenhahn, 1997, 1–12, 9.

*“Man besorge nicht daß eine solche Einrichtung der Fortpflanzung des Menschengeschlechtes hinderlich seyn würde: wenn nur von allen unver-heuratheten Frauenzimmern ein Dritthel zu den edlen Zwecken angestellt würden so wäre es hinreichend, / auch würden immer der größte Theil eine günstige Heurath einem Art Klosterleben vorziehn.”*⁵⁴

According to Preiswerk-Iselin, not more than one third of all unmarried women were to be trained for a profession. Here, the diarist considered alternative occupations to married life for women but emphasized that this would not pose a threat to the traditional role of women in early modern society as wives and mothers. In doing so, she mitigated the potential transgression of boundaries by the female sex and ruled out a possible threat to social order. In the urban-reformed context, it was not common for girls from the educated middle classes to take up a career. An exception to this was the profession of teacher or governess, to which more and more unmarried daughters from good families devoted themselves towards the end of the century.⁵⁵

An old-age project doomed to fail?

Although Preiswerk-Iselin's old-age project certainly fitted in with the Enlightenment debate on usefulness well into old age, which was still relevant around 1800, the planned girls' school never materialized. The reasons for this were manifold and ranged from a lack of family and social support to the general mentality of Basel society, which was in favor of female education, but only as long as it remained within established

54 Translation: “It is not to be feared that such an institution would hinder the procreation of the human race: if only a third of all unmarried women were hired for noble purposes, it would be sufficient, / and the majority would always prefer a favorable marriage to a kind of monastic life.” StABS, PA 511a (304-03-04), Tagebücher der Anna Maria Preiswerk-Iselin, book 15, 07 October 1819, p. 26–27.

55 Using the example of the vicar's daughter Valerie Gernler (1741–1806): Opitz-Belakhal, Claudia: *Die Gernlers. Eine Basler Familiengeschichte*. Basel: Christoph Merian Verlag, 2023, 139–146. Elsewhere and under certain circumstances, women were also able to work as entrepreneurs, cf.: Labouvie, Eva: In weiblicher Hand. Frauen als Firmengründerinnen und Unternehmerinnen (1600-1870). In: *Frauenleben – Frauen Leben. Zur Geschichte und Gegenwart weiblicher Lebenswelten im Saarraum, 17.–20. Jahrhundert* (Labouvie, Eva, ed.). St. Ingbert: Werner J. Röhrig Verlag, 1993, 88–131.

boundaries. Despite all the adversities and hardships that Preiswerk-Iselin had to endure, she stuck to her plan for many years and well into old age. Although the opinions of those around her, especially her children, were always important to her, they became less so as she grew older. This increasing indifference to what others thought of her is linked to the concept of growing autonomy from social norms and expectations in old age.

Preiswerk-Iselin's unmarried sister Esther Iselin actively supported her in her project – in complete contrast to her children, something the diarist often complained about, such as:

*“Warum meine so gutmüthige T. V. sich so sehr dagegen (nehmlich gegen mein Projekt) sträubt begreife ich nicht! Ich muß mich offen mit ihr erklären. Wie es die Para. Aufnimmt muß ich auch sehn. Ich bin / so gerne der l. T. gefällig, aber wo es gegen meine innere Überzeugung geht, da glaube ich nicht nachgeben zu sollen.”*⁵⁶

Here, Preiswerk-Iselin already shows signs of resistance to her daughters' opinions. We do not learn the reasons for the children's negative attitude from the diary of their mother. On the one hand, they were perhaps worried about their mother's health. After all, the building project was already quite exhausting for the ageing Preiswerk-Iselin, as she herself confirmed: “Die Zurüstungen zu meinem künftigen Wohnsitze kosten mich mehr Mühe u nehmen mir den Kopf mehr ein als <für> mein sich nach Rhue sehndes Gemüth gut ist, als für mein Alter paßt.”⁵⁷ She also explicitly linked the strains to her age. On the other hand, the children might have possibly been worried about their inheritance. The building alone cost a lot of money. Teaching staff would also have had to be paid, and with such a small private school, which was also supposed to accommodate girls from the lower classes, there would certainly not have been many revenues

56 Translation: “I do not understand why my so good-natured T. V. [daughter Vischer] is so reluctant (namely against my project)! I must openly explain myself to her. How the Para. [daughter Paravicini] takes it, I must also see. I am / so glad to please the l. T. [loving daughter], but where it goes against my inner convictions, I do not think I should give in.” StABS, PA 511a (304-03-04), Tagebücher der Anna Maria Preiswerk-Iselin, book 22, 13 December 1825, p. 23–24.

57 Translation: “The preparations for my future residence cost me more effort and take up more of my head than is good for my mind, which longs for calm, than is suitable for my age.” (*Ibid.*, book 23, 19 September 1826, p. 32).

in the way of school fees. The latter would be plausible, as the construction of the property consumed considerably more money than originally planned, as Preiswerk-Iselin complained after two years of planning and building: “Die Unkosten meines neuen Wohnung kömmt mich wenigstens um 1/3 höher als ich vermuthete: das macht einen fatalen Strich in meine Pläne!”⁵⁸ She was certainly not impoverished by the construction costs but was therefore all the more dependent on external support for her school. Despite the opinions of her children, Preiswerk-Iselin stuck to her project. As she herself described, this was also due to the fact that the opinions of others became increasingly unimportant to her. With 75 years of age, though in a different context, she wrote in her diary: “Was habe ich in meinem Alter noch von d Menschen für Rechtfertigung nöthig? Wem mein Denken u Thun nicht genügt den muß ich gehn lassen.”⁵⁹ This clearly shows an increased autonomy from social norms and obligations in old age. Preiswerk-Iselin not only had to contend with a lack of family support and financial shortages, but also with particularly male opposition. Together with her sister, she tried to recruit suitable female teaching staff. For the most part, the women approached did not initially seem averse, but ultimately declined. Contrary to the various reasons given by the women, Preiswerk-Iselin considered their husbands or male relatives to be the reason for the rejections.⁶⁰

What were the reasons for the male rejection? In the following, three reasons are presented that explain the negative attitude of the important and wealthy men in Basel, and thus potential donors and financiers.

1. The upper classes in Basel mainly sent their children to boarding schools in the French-speaking Welschland, a region in western Switzerland. Away from home, the children were to receive an education befitting their status and improve their knowledge of the French language. Girls and boys were taught separately.⁶¹ Preiswerk-Iselin’s

58 Translation: “The expenses of my new apartment will cost me at least 1/3 more than I expected: that is a fatal blow to my plans!” (*Ibid.*, book 25, 13 January 1828, p. 10).

59 Translation: “What justification do I need from people at my age? For whom my thoughts and actions are not enough I must let them go.” (*Ibid.*, book 30, 29 March 1833, p. 34).

60 Cf. *Ibid.*, book 27, 23 January 1830, p. 15; *Ibid.*, book 27, 19 April 1830, p. 28.

61 Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi, for example, founded such an institute for daughters: Cf. Buol, C.: “Mädchenbildung im Geiste Pestalozzis.” *Bündner Schulblatt*, 12, 2, 1952.

grandchildren also attended such boarding schools. She herself, however, is unlikely to have attended as a young girl. Her father Isaak Iselin was opposed to this type of child education. He therefore advocated female education within the city walls of Basel. Convincing the middle classes of the benefits of inner-city children's education required considerable effort.

2. In Basel, the *Gesellschaft des Guten und Gemeinnützigen* (GGG for short)⁶² founded the *Basler Töchterschule* (a Basel girls' school) in 1813, where girls from the middle classes were educated. The very existence of the girls' school was also a reason for the failure of Preiswerk-Iselin's old age project. While previous efforts by a number of well-known Basel personalities, including Isaak Iselin, to found a girls' school had failed, this school persisted. The school was much more expensive than the schools for boys. When it opened, 35 girls attended the school; by 1815, the number had risen to between 52 and 66 pupils per month.⁶³ As there was already a girls' school within the city walls, potential sponsors probably saw no benefit in Preiswerk-Iselin's small and private girl's school.
3. Preiswerk-Iselin's project touched on two social boundaries: a gender boundary and a class boundary. She planned to run the school with a predominantly female teaching staff and under female leadership. The *Basler Töchterschule*, founded in 1813, also employed female teachers. However, most of them exclusively taught the aforementioned 'female work'. In addition, they earned significantly less than their male co-workers for the same working hours. Also, the head of the *Töchterschule* was always an older man with an unblemished reputation, as can be seen from a vacancy notice from the year 1814.⁶⁴ Preiswerk-Iselin's female-centered plan certainly stoked

62 The GGG, co-founded by Isaak Iselin, has been committed to social issues and education, especially female education, since its foundation in 1777. Cf. Opitz-Belakhal, Claudia: Von der Aufklärung zur Kantontrennung. In: *Basel – Geschichte einer städtischen Gesellschaft* (Kreis, Georg, Wartburg, Beat von, eds.). Basel: Christoph Merian Verlag, 2000, 150–185, 156.

63 Cf. StABS, Erziehung W3 (1814–1847), Töchterschule, Lehrer; and W12 (1815–1860), Töchterschule, Jahresrechnungen.

64 StABS, Erziehung W2 (1814–1829), Töchterschule, Rektorat.

contemporary fears of ‘Weiberherrschaft’ (female domination).⁶⁵ At the same time, Preiswerk-Iselin was also confronted with the female education- and reading-addiction-debate around 1800. As Esther Baur noted, Preiswerk-Iselin’s educational aspirations quickly reached “the limits of what is permissible for female socialization”.⁶⁶ In addition, women were at risk of being labeled with the flaw of a ‘Lesewut’ (reading mania) or ‘Lesesucht’ (reading addiction) if they appeared to consume an excessive amount of literature.⁶⁷ Such women were quickly considered unfeminine and were frowned upon in society. Preiswerk-Iselin therefore rightly asked the following question: “Schwierig wird es wohl seyn zu bestimmen in wie fern Bildung für das weibliche geschlecht zuträglich sey! Noch weit schwieriger die Urtheile der Welt darüber nicht zu verletzen: den worüber wird so verschieden geurtheilt!”⁶⁸ In the end, her skepticism proved correct. Preiswerk-Iselin also caused offense from a class boundary perspective, by planning a school for girls from different social classes. This was not in line with established norms. She firmly rejected the offer to run a servants’ school instead, which would have contradicted her personal values and goals regarding her old-age project.⁶⁹

Concluding remarks

The diary passage “Wie bebe ich vor dem Gedanken zurück, ein altes unnützes Weib zu werden” of the then 68-year-old Basel citizen Anna Maria Preiswerk-Iselin was the starting point for this research extract.⁷⁰

65 Cf. Simon, Einleitung, 10.

66 Original: “Ihr Bildungswille führte an die Grenzen des für eine weibliche Sozialisation erlaubten.” Baur-Sarasin, Esther: „Reflexionen einer gebildeten Baslerin“, *Basler Magazin*, 25, Basel, 27 June 1998, p. 8.

67 Banki, Luisa, Wittler, Kathrin: Historische Praktiken der Lektüre in geschlechtertheoretischer Perspektive. Zur Einführung. In: *Lektüre und Geschlecht im 18. Jahrhundert. Zur Situativität des Lesens zwischen Einsamkeit und Geselligkeit* (Banki, Luisa, Wittler, Kathrin, eds.). Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2020, 12.

68 Translation: “It will probably be difficult to determine to what extent education is beneficial for the female sex! It is even more difficult not to violate the judgments of the world about this: for what is judged so differently.” StABS, PA 511a (304-03-04), Tagebücher der Anna Maria Preiswerk-Iselin, book 12, 1815, p. 13.

69 *Ibid.*, book 27, 16 March 1829, p. 40.

70 Translation: “How I shudder at the thought of becoming a useless old woman.” See footnote 1.

Remaining a useful member of society and keeping herself meaningfully occupied for her own physical and mental well-being, even in old age, was essential for Preiswerk-Iselin and was also expected by the community. Using her as an example, the aim of this article is to exemplify the strategies used by ageing women to find new roles and secure their place in bourgeois society of Basel around 1800. Due to her status and her deceased husband's wealth, she was in the comfortable position of not having to worry much about provision for the elderly, which was particularly important at a time when there were no institutionalized pension funds.

In line with the images of old age of her time, the diarist described herself as being old in her mid-50s. By then, she explicitly recognized signs of aging, such as in a diary entry at 55 where she detailed her physical and mental limitations. Contemporary depictions of life's stages often marked 50 as the onset of old age, coinciding with menopause for women. With this, their previously intended role as mothers receded into the background. Preiswerk-Iselin's perception of her age was influenced by these norms and by comparing herself to other people of her age. Her self-perception and societal expectations of old age varied depending on the context and her own physical condition. Maintaining physical health and finding meaningful tasks was essential for avoiding dependence and facing social marginalization. Preiswerk-Iselin navigated these societal and expectations and personal challenges with resilience, adapting her activities and seeking to maintain her agency and social relevance even in old age. Being a grandmother was one such possibility, but that was not sufficient for her.

Getting older, Anna Maria Preiswerk-Iselin experienced significant changes in her life that influenced her increased diary writing. As her children married and became independent and her husband passed away, she had more time for herself, yet rarely felt negatively lonely. Her social behavior shifted from engaging in bourgeois socializing, which was crucial for maintaining social status, to focusing even more on family interactions. This change was partly due to her decreasing physical strength and poor hearing, which made social gatherings exhausting and uncomfortable. Despite her withdrawal from wider social activities, Preiswerk-Iselin did not become an entirely isolated and sullen elderly woman. She cherished visits from her children and grandchildren, whom she often hosted at

her country estate. However, she still felt a sense of loneliness particularly when they were leaving again. Writing in her diary became a solace during these times. As she aged, Preiswerk-Iselin found stability and comfort in her family, which became increasingly important against the backdrop of an uncertain future. This aligns with Koselleck's concept of the sense of time around 1800. Preiswerk-Iselin's close bonds with her family led her to plan a building project outside the city gates of Basel to facilitate more frequent and convenient family visits, emphasizing her enduring commitment to her role as a grandmother and family matriarch.

To remain a useful member of the community, Preiswerk-Iselin embarked on a project to improve female education in Basel. She thus followed in her father's footsteps. She had long been interested in this topic. Her planned school aimed to educate girls across social classes, preparing them for their roles as wives, mothers, and heads of households, rather than for professional careers. This approach aligned with Enlightenment ideas prevalent in Basel, emphasizing the importance of education for women within traditional societal roles. Although progressive for its time, Preiswerk-Iselin's vision was not revolutionary. The educational project reflected her commitment to contributing to society and improving the status of women within the accepted norms – and up to the limits of those norms – of her era.

Despite aligning with enlightened ideals about remaining useful in old age, Anna Maria Preiswerk-Iselin's project to establish a girls' school ultimately failed. Numerous factors contributed to this failure, including a lack of family and social support, financial constraints, and societal attitudes that favored female education only within certain boundaries. Preiswerk-Iselin's children opposed the project, possibly out of concern for her health and for their own financial implications, whereas her younger sister Esther supported her throughout the years. Preiswerk-Iselin's determination to pursue her school project persisted despite these obstacles, which was also due to her increasing indifference to others' opinions on her as a person and on her behavior, as she aged. Her vision of a school with a predominantly female staff that catered to girls from various social classes challenged the prevailing gender and class norms. Basel society, including potential male donors and influential figures, generally preferred to send their children to

prestigious boarding schools in French-speaking parts of Switzerland and supported existing institutions like the *Basler Töchterschule*, which already provided education for middle-class girls. Preiswerk-Iselin's ambitious and progressive plans for female education were seen as transgressive, potentially threatening established social orders. Her skepticism about societal acceptance of her educational aspirations was well-founded. Ultimately, her efforts were met with resistance, since her approach did not align with the traditional, hierarchical structure of Basel society.

The findings are of course limited to women from the wealthy educated middle classes in a Protestant urban society around 1800. Preiswerk-Iselin's diary as a source offers insights into the personal life of the ageing writer over a period of 44 years. Drawing on the prevailing norms and notions of age in her temporal and local context still allows a certain degree of generalization. It has been shown that ageing women did not necessarily withdrew themselves from social life and were content with their proscribed role as grandmothers, but actively sought ways to remain meaningful.

Bibliography

Archival sources

- » Staatsarchiv Basel-Stadt (StABS), Erziehung W2 (1814–1829), Töchterschule, Rektorat.
- » Staatsarchiv Basel-Stadt (StABS), Erziehung W3 (1814–1847), Töchterschule, Lehrer.
- » Staatsarchiv Basel-Stadt (StABS), Erziehung W12 (1815–1860), Töchterschule, Jahresrechnungen.
- » Staatsarchiv Basel-Stadt (StABS), Leichenreden (LA), Leichenrede für Susanna Paravicini-Preiswerk, 22. 5. 1843.
- » Staatsarchiv Basel-Stadt (StABS), PA 511a (304-03-04), Tagebücher von Anna Maria Preiswerk-Iselin, 32 Hefte, 1795–1839.

- » Staatsarchiv Basel-Stadt (StABS), PA 511a (304-03-07), Aufsatz von Anna Maria Preiswerk-Iselin, 1815.
- » Staatsarchiv Basel-Stadt (StABS), Vogtei J5, Einzelne Fälle freier Mittelverwaltung (1717-1878).

Published works

- » Audrey, Georges: Auf der Suche nach dem neuen Staat (1798-1848). In: *Geschichte der Schweiz und der Schweizer* (Mesmer, Beatrix, ed.). Basel: Schwabe, 2006⁴, 527–638.
- » Banki, Luisa, Wittler, Kathrin: Historische Praktiken der Lektüre in geschlechtertheoretischer Perspektive. Zur Einführung. In: *Lektüre und Geschlecht im 18. Jahrhundert. Zur Situativität des Lesens zwischen Einsamkeit und Geselligkeit* (Banki, Luisa, Wittler, Kathrin, eds.). Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag 2020, 7–27.
- » Baur-Sarasin, Esther: “Reflexionen einer gebildeten Baslerin”. *Basler Magazin*, 25, Basel, 27. 6. 1998, 8.
- » Botelho, Lynn A.: “An Idle Youth Makes a Needy Old Age”. The 17th century. In: *A History of Old Age* (Thane, Pat, ed.). Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2005, 113–173.
- » Botelho, Lynn, Ottaway, Susannah R., Kugler, Anne (eds.): *The History of Old Age in England 1600–1800*. London: Routledge, 2008–2009.
- » Buol, C.: “Mädchenbildung im Geiste Pestalozzis.” *Bündner Schulblatt*, 12, 2, 1952, <https://doi.org/10.5169/SEALS-355796>, accessed: 3 March 2026.
- » De Capitani, François: Beharren und Umsturz (1648-1815). In: *Geschichte der Schweiz und der Schweizer* (Mesmer, Beatrix, ed.). Basel: Schwabe, 2006, 447–526.
- » Ehmer, Josef: Zur Stellung alter Menschen in Haushalt und Familie. Thesen auf der Grundlage von quantitativen Quellen aus europäischen Städten seit dem 17. Jahrhundert. In: *Gerontologie und Sozialgeschichte. Wege zu einer historischen Betrachtung des Alters* (Conrad, Christoph, Kondratowitz, Hans-Joachim von, eds.). Berlin: Deutsches Zentrum für Altersfragen, 1983, 187–215.

- » Göckenjan, Gerd: *Das Alter würdigen. Altersbilder und Bedeutungswandel des Alters*. Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2000.
- » Göckenjan, Gerd: Hilfebedürftigkeit als Rahmug der Statuspassage ins hohe Alter. Zur Geschichte einer unsicheren Statuspassage. In: *Moderne Lebensläufe im Wandel* (Leisering, Lutz et al., eds.). Weinheim: Deutscher Studien Verlag, 1993, 177–191.
- » Göckenjan, Gerd, Taeger, Angela: “Matrone, Alte Jungfer, Tante. Das Bild der alten Frau in der bürgerlichen Welt des 19. Jahrhunderts.” *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte*, 30, 1990, 43–79.
- » Hebeisen, Erika: *“Leidenschaftlich fromm”. Die pietistische Bewegung in Basel, 1750-1830*. Köln: Böhlau, 2005.
- » Imhof, Arthur Erwin: *Die Lebenszeit. Vom aufgeschobenen Tod und von der Kunst des Lebens*. München: C. H. Beck, 1988.
- » Joerissen, Peter, Will, Cornelia (eds.): *Die Lebenstreppe. Bilder der menschlichen Lebensalter*. Köln: Rheinland Verlag, 1983.
- » Jung, Theo: Zeitgeist im langen 18. Jahrhundert. Dimensionen eines umstrittenen Begriffs. In: *Frühe Neue Zeiten* (Landwehr, Achim, ed.), s.l.: transcript, 2014 (Mainzer Historische Kulturwissenschaften 11), 319–356, <https://doi.org/10.1515/transcript.9783839421642.319>, accessed: 7 September 2025.
- » Jung, Theo: „Das Neue der Neuzeit ist ihre Zeit. Reinhart Kosellecks Theorie der Verzeitlichung und ihre Kritiker“. In: *Moderne: Kulturwissenschaftliches Jahrbuch*, 2011, 172–184, https://www.academia.edu/1842174/Das_Neue_der_Neuzeit_ist_ihre_Zeit_Reinhart_Kosellecks_Theorie_der_Verzeitlichung_und_ihre_Kritiker, accessed: 6 September 2025.
- » Kleinau, Elke, Opitz-Belakhal, Claudia (eds.): *Geschichte der Mädchen- und Frauenbildung*. Frankfurt a.M., New York: Campus Verlag, 1996.
- » Koselleck, Reinhart: *Vergangene Zukunft. Zur Semantik geschichtlicher Zeiten*. Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1979.
- » Kreis, Georg, Wartburg, Beat von (eds.): *Basel - Geschichte einer städtischen Gesellschaft*. Basel: Christoph Merian Verlag, 2000.

- » Labouvie, Eva: In weiblicher Hand. Frauen als Firmengründerinnen und Unternehmerinnen (1600-1870). In: *Frauenleben – Frauen Leben. Zur Geschichte und Gegenwart weiblicher Lebenswelten im Saarraum, 17.–20. Jahrhundert* (Labouvie, Eva, ed.). St. Ingbert: Werner J. Röhrig Verlag, 1993, 88–131.
- » La Mettrie, Julien Offray de: *Man A Machine*. Chicago: The Open Court Publishing Co., 1912 (English Translation by Gertrude Carman Bussey), <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/52090/52090-h/52090-h.htm>, accessed: 6 September 2025.
- » Laslett, Peter: *Das Dritte Alter. Historische Soziologie des Alterns*. Weinheim, München: Juventa, 1995.
- » Maissen, Thomas: *Geschichte der Schweiz*. Baden: hier und jetzt, 2019⁶.
- » Moring, Beatrice, Wall, Richard: *Widows in European Economy and Society (1600-1920)*. Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2017.
- » Opitz-Belakhal, Claudia: *Die Gernlers. Eine Basler Familiengeschichte*. Basel: Christoph Merian Verlag, 2023.
- » Opitz-Belakhal, Claudia: Von der Aufklärung zur Kantonstrennung. In: *Basel – Geschichte einer städtischen Gesellschaft* (Kreis, Georg, Wartburg, Beat von, eds.). Basel: Christoph Merian Verlag, 2000, 150–185.
- » Rosenmayr, Leopold: *Die Schnüre vom Himmel. Forschung und Theorie zum kulturellen Wandel*. Wien: Böhlau, 1992.
- » Rosenmayr, Leopold: Lebensalter und Kultur. Ein Versuch vergleichender Soziobiologie und Soziologie. In: *Gerontologie und Sozialgeschichte. Wege zu einer historischen Betrachtung des Alters* (Conrad, Christoph, Kondratowitz, Hans-Joachim von, eds.). Berlin: Deutsches Zentrum für Altersfragen, 1983, 35–57.
- » Salathé, René (ed.): *Baslerische Landsitze einst und jetzt. Ein kommentierter Reprint*. Liestal: Verlag Baselland, 2021.
- » Schäfer, Daniel: Alte Frau = Alter Mann? Die Wahrnehmung von Matronen in der medizinischen Fachprosa des 18. Jahrhunderts. In: *Alter und Geschlecht. Repräsentationen, Geschichten und Theorien des Alter(n)s* (Hartung, Heike, ed.). Bielefeld: transcript, 2005, 135–154.

- » Schäfer, Daniel: *Alter und Krankheit in der Frühen Neuzeit. Der ärztliche Blick auf die letzte Lebensphase*. Frankfurt a.M.: Campus, 2004.
- » Simon, Christian: Einleitung. In: *Sozioökonomische Strukturen; Frauengeschichte/ Geschlechtergeschichte* (Simon, Christian, ed.). Basel: Helbing & Lichtenhahn, 1997, 1–12.
- » Stearns, Peter N.: *Old Age in European Society. The Case of France*. London: Croom Helm, 1977.
- » Stearns, Peter N. (ed.): *Old Age in Preindustrial Society*. New York, London: Holmes and Meier, 1982.
- » Thane, Pat (ed.): *A History of Old Age*. Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2005.
- » Troyansky, David: *Aging in World History*. New York, London: Routledge, 2016.
- » Von Greyerz, Kaspar: *Passagen und Stationen. Lebensstufen zwischen Mittelalter und Moderne*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2010.