

## **Margarete Knittel (1906–1991)**

"I was very careful about what I said"

Whether their son – and it would definitely be a boy! – should be named Friedrich or Gerhard was cause for heated discussions between Margarete's parents. When, instead, a daughter was born in September 1906, "they were so disappointed they hadn't even chosen a name for me," said Margarete Knittel, amused. I visited the then eighty-year-old woman in 1986 in her apartment in the Schöneberg district of Berlin. She figured she must have been "born" with an attraction for women, since her interest in girls alone was already apparent at an early age. She defined homosexuality as an "innate natural predisposition," a definition that was also propagated by the well-known sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld. This led to her having a positive sense of identity, since she felt that whatever was "innate" couldn't be bad or reprehensible.

Margarete Knittel grew up as an only child in the Friedrichshain district of Berlin. When she quarreled with her mother, who set the tone in the family, her father was always on his daughter's side. He worked as a master joiner, and his daughter inherited his love for the theater and opera. Margarete was only seventeen when she got her first job, after graduating from commercial school. Initially she worked as a stenographer and then as an official with a growing area of competence in a large real estate management firm. This was her workplace for the next twenty years.

It was at dancing lessons that she discovered that love among women existed and that there were clubs frequented exclusively by women. "At the time I found it appalling. At first I didn't want to admit that I myself belonged to this group of women," she recalled. "I had always heard that love and sex among women was something reprehensible."

At nineteen, at the birthday party of a girlfriend, she met her "secret love" from her schooldays again. She had already been interested in her from a distance for a long time. "Lucy and I fell in love; she was my first great love. She was already experienced in lesbian love and seduced me. Only then was I able to accept my nature and that we are just plain different from the others!" But two years later Margarete suffered her first great disappointment: Lucy got married.

Her second girlfriend, Else, introduced her to *Die Freundin*, the most popular magazine for lesbians in the Weimar Republic, and other magazines like *Garçonne* and *Die Freundschaft* (Friendship). She finally succeeded in overcoming her "inhibitions" and dared to go to a bar with a lesbian clientele for the first time. The Zauberflöte, the Magic Flute, run by Kati Reinhard, was located right next door to her office on Kommandanten Street at the Spittelmarkt.

"It had been very difficult for me to convince my girlfriend to go with me to the Magic Flute. She was very afraid that her sister or mother would find out. Right away, we ran into two women who lived in Else's building who were just as surprised to meet someone they knew. I said to Else, 'They're just as afraid as you are. They don't want anyone to find out either,' and I walked up to them. One of the women was getting divorced and was afraid she'd be deemed the guilty party in the divorce if her husband found out the true reasons for terminating the marriage. She didn't have any reason to be afraid of us."

In the Magic Flute and other clubs – like the Geisha Bar on Augsburger Street, Dorian Gray on Bülow Street, the Monocle Bar, or Mali and Igel, the favorite club of artists – Margarete Knittel got to know the homosexual subculture and its "codes." She learned dances meant "just for 'mommies' and some just for the 'boys' " and she made more and more acquaintances. She remembered those times as the "golden" twenties, in spite of skyrocketing inflation. Knittel, who wore suits and had short hair, liked to go dancing and met lesbian writers such as Ruth Margarete Roelling, whose life story also appears in *Days of Masquerade*, and the women who worked for *Die Freundin*.

Margarete moved out of her parents' home when she was twenty-two. "You with your women all the time." Her mother's digs showed that she suspected something of her daughter's nature. She felt Margarete should find a man and get married instead. No such luck. Some of Margarete's friends, on the other hand – "they were all bisexual; you could never be sure" – later did get married. A lack of understanding or even attacks by the family made – and still makes – life difficult for many women. Käthe, whom Margarete met in 1930 through a personal ad in *Die Freundin* and who was her partner for the next eight years, had suffered a lot:

"Earlier, Käthe had been together with the daughter of a tenured civil servant and her parents eventually found out about them. The father was beside himself; he wanted to have her put away. There were incredible fights, but the two of them said

they were staying together and that they would rather kill themselves than break up. But once when they were walking across the Oberbaum Bridge on the way home, the father was suddenly behind them and said, 'You both wanted to jump off the bridge, didn't you? Well jump!'"

After 1933 they retreated into their private lives. Most of the lesbian clubs were closed, and Knittel's circle of friends started meeting in each other's apartments more and more often.

"I had an apartment across from my office, on a side street near the Spittelmarkt, and had it fixed up. Not until 1938, after the death of my mother, did I move in with my father again. We got along great; he was a person with a soul. He had his girlfriend and I had my girlfriends. My father accepted me unconditionally, though we never spoke about it. I always had large, beautiful rooms, and so we would meet there. Back then there was just gramophone and radio, but we had dance records and we would dance. Everyone brought something to drink, sometimes something to eat, but it was war, so there wasn't much.

"During the war we continued going out, but I don't remember where. One of the places we went to sometimes was a dance school in Mahlsdorf. Dancing lessons were allowed. So we had a half hour of dancing lessons and afterward we could just dance. But we only did that a few times, because the owner got scared.

"Nevertheless, a club was established during the war. A friend of mine who performed as a singer with an orchestra in the St. Pauli nightclub invited me sometimes. The song *Lili Marleen* was popular in those days. She had to sing that one a lot. A young girl joined us at our table and I said, 'It's very hard to find a place to meet.' She answered, 'We started a club; we call ourselves the Charlottenburg Rowing Club, and that's where we meet.' So clubs were founded with fake names."

Even before World War I this had proven a good strategy for creating legal meeting places. In 1905, for example, the Golden Ball "bowling club" was begun, and in 1916 the Cloverleaf "savings club."

In my conversation with her, Margarete Knittel stressed many times that even during the Nazi period she didn't experience "any difficulties whatsoever because of her nature." She said she never suffered any discrimination. Everyone – at work, in her apartment building – knew that she lived with women. "Of course I never spoke about it directly and never disclosed it," she admitted. Such contradictions were not unusual in her stories. She "instinctively" avoided compromising situations, and she

also changed her appearance. She attached great importance to "respectability" and inconspicuousness in public. "Of course we didn't kiss each other in front of other people, as is often done nowadays. I let my hair grow and usually wore dresses. The obvious way they dress today, no one walked around like that back then." The fact that she lived with her father from 1938 until his death in 1959 must have also served to protect her. Only one time was she harassed:

"Once while on vacation, my girlfriend and I were thrown out for 'immoral conduct.' The hotel owner had her room next to ours; either she had drilled a hole in the wall or who knows! It was in Hinterzarten in the Black Forest. We were returning from a walk and found a letter, 'Please leave our hotel tomorrow.' We asked, 'What do you have against us?' 'You have conducted yourselves immorally.' When I asked how she knew that, she said the maid had looked through the keyhole, but the room was so big, she would have had to look around the corner. I told her, 'We'll go, but we've paid for three more days and I demand that you refund us those three days.' 'You can stay,' she said suddenly. But then I didn't want to stay anymore."

Some of Knittel's friends entered into fictitious marriages out of fear of persecution. This was in response to the massive marriage propaganda of the Nazis. The Nazis tried to increase the rate of what they considered desirable births as an important condition for their aggressive expansionist politics. Indeed, because of continued criminalization of homosexual men in the repressive postwar period, many were forced to lead a double life then as well.

"My second girlfriend, Else, married Fritz, a homosexual secondary school teacher, in 1937. He was once at a bar with a friend – not back where people were dancing; they were sitting at the bar in front. There was a raid. He was able to talk his way out of it by saying they just wanted to have a beer and went into that particular bar by chance. The men in the back were all taken away, but the two of them were able to go home. At the school where he taught they said he should get married, since he was already forty. He got to know my girlfriend, though by then we weren't together anymore. Else didn't want her family to find out about her, so they just got married. She had a girlfriend and he had boyfriends.

"A friend of Fritz, whose parents had two cafés, was arrested right in the bakery, but then he was let go. He also got married, another marriage in name only. They got a divorce after the war.

“My long-term girlfriend Friedel had a friend. I also got to meet him after the Nazi period. After the war he was arrested and spent two years in jail. Paragraph 175 still existed. My friend appeared in court as a witness, as his supposed fiancé. When he got out, he wanted to marry Friedel. She wanted to marry him too. But I said, ‘You can marry him, but then it’ll be over between us. I don’t want a married girlfriend, even if it’s just a fictitious marriage.’ And then she didn’t do it.”

After the Nazis came to power, Knittel quickly realized that Hitler was moving toward war. She often talked about politics with friends and acquaintances, who were all office workers, commercial secretaries, and executives, with the exception of one doctor.

“It was perfectly clear to all of us from the very beginning that there would be war. It started as soon as Hitler pushed up armaments. He would never have come to power if he hadn’t been financed by the armaments industry. It didn’t take much just to think about how it was in World War I. ‘We are going to win ourselves to death again, just like from 1914–1918,’ said a friend of mine. ‘Hitler got rid of unemployment’ is what they always said, but the other parties could have done that also. . . . And the autobahns? They were nothing but military roads for the soldiers to march down! I don’t know, the people that I got together with had a pretty clear picture of what was going on. On the other hand, the propaganda was so shrewd that the people were really taken in by it.”

This "clarity" and rejection of Nazism didn't lead her to take any personal or political action. She always "waited to see what would happen." Since she wasn't Jewish, Knittel suffered no racist persecution, and although she supported the Social Democrats during the Weimar Republic, she was never active politically. As was true for most of the lesbians in her generation, her chances of avoiding confrontation with the regime were quite good.

She only "collided with the Nazis" on isolated occasions, for instance, when she rented an apartment to her friend Lucy, who was married to a Jewish man. Or when she didn't participate in the mandatory march on May 1. Knittel described the ways in which the Nazis exerted pressure on the public to influence the election results for the last Reichstag elections on November 12, 1933. Labor and mainstream parties had already been outlawed. Despite all the manipulation, over two million voters boycotted the "election" and more than three million votes were registered against the Nazi Party.

“I didn't even want to go vote; all of a sudden a police officer stood at the door. ‘You haven't voted yet. Come with me!’ What was I supposed to do? I was given a number there; I was so afraid, I didn't have the nerve to vote for anything else. A co-worker of my girlfriend at the time said that various people were arrested for voting for something else. Somehow they had rigged the ballot boxes. People whom they suspected were registered. Later I received an order to attend an air-raid course. I didn't go, and was picked up by the police again. But, other than that, nothing happened to me. We were left in peace. But I was very careful about what I said.”

But no matter how careful someone was, no one was immune to denunciation. One wrong, careless word, even among friends, could lead to arrest and unforeseeable consequences to life and limb. A climate of fear – of both real and potential danger – poisoned the atmosphere.

“It happened at my girlfriend Else's birthday party. America and Russia had already entered into war with Germany. A brother-in-law of hers was there, and an officer and some woman from the Nazi women's organization. We had been drinking and I said, ‘The war will end with a total military defeat for us.’ A poke in a hornet's nest couldn't have been worse! Who were we fighting against, anyway? We were fighting against the most powerful nations in the world, against Russia and America; we didn't have a chance. The Nazi woman said, ‘I wish I hadn't heard that!’ The two men raced out of the room and I thought, Oh my God, what did you do now? But no one reported me.”

Whereas Knittel kept her distance from the Nazi Party, two friends of hers had had different motives for joining the Party. A third friend who worked in a lightbulb factory was ordered to join the Party and then fired when she refused.

“I wasn't in any Party organization. I mean, I administered Jewish capital; it was obvious that I wouldn't feel drawn to the Nazis. The only thing was that I had to join the Association for Female Office Workers in the twenties, and that was then incorporated into the German Labor Front by the Nazis. I just couldn't understand that people would let themselves be influenced like that! Around 1930 I once rode past the Sportpalast in the streetcar. Hitler had just held one of his first speeches there and a large group of women got on the streetcar. They were enthralled! I was horrified at the way they talked so enthusiastically about Hitler. I had the feeling it was mass power of suggestion.

“A friend of mine, a business woman, was a member of the Communist Party. She even had a weapons cache in her business. And then, because she was afraid of getting arrested, she joined the Nazi Party. She died in a bombing during the war. Another one joined the Nazi Party because she thought at first she'd get something in return. There was a Jewish store – her competition, so to speak – and she convinced herself that she could earn more if that store was closed.”

Although the company that Knittel had worked for for many years belonged to Swiss Jews, that is, citizens of a neutral country, it was "Aryanized" and then confiscated. Knittel lost her job.

“The Jewish supervisory board member, a lawyer, had to leave, and our accountant was chosen as the new board member. The director also had to leave and the bookkeeper at the time took that position. So two Aryans took over the posts. The Swiss owners stayed. The accountant joined the [Nazi] Party and my supervisor joined the NSKK, the National Socialist Motorist Corps. They just did it to keep the company; neither one of them was a Nazi. In 1943 it was suddenly no longer recognized. The corporation, that is, the business houses, were confiscated as of January 1, 1944. The private pieces of property still had to be administered, but then most of them were bombed out.

“When I lost my job in November 1943 and my apartment was bombed out, my former supervisor said to me, ‘Do you want to go through all the nights of bombing here?’ I could have gone with my father to relatives in East Prussia. But what would I have done there? The Russians came through there first and, anyway, I never would have found work out in the country. I survived it, the nights of bombing. Nights in the air-raid shelter and during the day, when I still had my job, I'd go to the office and walk to the houses – public transportation wasn't running any more. Sometimes I spent the day in the air-raid shelter too. I experienced terrible bombing attacks, but I got through it alive.

“After I was fired, I went on sick leave, because, I said to myself, I didn't want to help prolong the war. They would have just put me in some munitions company. But that was too boring for me, and I took a job with a tax consultant.”

Toward the end of the war, Knittel traveled to Posen [now Poznan, in Poland, trans.], to visit her girlfriend. She was horrified at the way the Polish people were treated by the Germans. This visit made her especially aware of the far-reaching extent of the war crimes.

“I was only together with my last girlfriend during the war for about one and a half years. She worked at the employment office and only came to Berlin on weekends. During the war I spent three days with her in Posen. It was catastrophic how the Polish people were treated. It's amazing that any Germans at all got out of there alive! The first thing that happened to me there was that I got on the streetcar and the conductor, who must have thought I was Polish, shouted at me, ‘You must board the second car.’ When I told my girlfriend about it, she said, ‘Yeah, you have to wear a swastika.’ The Poles had to board in the back; they weren't allowed to ride in the first car. Every night there were shootings. I thought, Oh, when this is avenged. . . . During the war they once showed the bombing of Rotterdam in the weekly newsreel – those burning houses. I was so upset and said even back then – it was only the beginning of the war – ‘Just as these houses are burning, so will our houses burn,’ and that's just what happened.”

After the war and until she retired, Knittel worked as an independent real estate manager. She and Friedel lived together from 1946 until Friedel died in 1977. Friedel worked as an assistant departmental manager at KaDeWe, an exclusive department store. Knittel was active in the reviving lesbian subculture that was being rebuilt by Kati Reinhard, Lotte Hahm, and other women who had been active since the 1920s.

At an event where she was telling young women about her life, the eighty-year-old Knittel said that life was freer during the Weimar Republic than today. "Sometimes they laughed at us, but we were always accepted." Was this an example of the not uncommon phenomenon of viewing recollections of one's youth through rose-colored glasses? And what was the price of this supposed acceptance? Of course, she never had a relationship with a woman she worked with. "If someone falls in love with a co-worker and then is fired, it's her own fault." Self-censorship, avoiding conflict, and failure to see discrimination helped Margarete Knittel achieve a positive sense of identity. For her and for many other women born around the turn of the century, these were necessary means of survival in a repressive environment.

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Foto: Margarete Knittel, at far right, with friends, c. 1930 (© Claudia Schoppmann)

### **Proposal for quotation**

Author name, author first name year: text. Ingeborg Boxhammer/Christiane Leidinger: online-project lesbian history. translation by translator first name name (year).  
URL:<<http://www.lesbengeschichte.de>>