

Hilde Radusch (1903–1994)

"Not a victim, always a fighter"

We take the path
into the fog
of the world
and have the courage
to make decisions.
And have the nerve
to make distinctions.

These lines from a poem by Hilde Radusch could be considered the guiding principle of her life. Even as a young woman of eighteen, she already showed the "courage to make decisions" by moving alone to Berlin and joining the Communist Youth Association. She later joined the German Communist Party and was particularly active in the Red Women's and Girls' Association, which was founded in 1925. Hilde left behind her parents' conservative, middle-class home in Weimar. Although her father, a mid-level civil service postal employee with staunch German nationalist convictions, had been killed in 1915 in World War I, he was able to give his daughter a sense of self-confidence that she would later use to tap her independence and endurance. This led to conflict between Hilde and her mother, a housewife, who had envisioned a life as a faithful housewife for her daughter as well.

In the Pestalozzi-Froebel House in Berlin, Radusch started training in 1921 to work in a day nursery. Once, when she was seeing off a female acquaintance at the train station and gave her a kiss goodbye, a horrified 'Oh, you're one of those!' slipped out of her friend's mouth. The remark totally surprised the young Hilde and marked the beginning of her search for her identity. "I was a real country bumpkin in those days," admitted Radusch, smiling, in a conversation I had with her in 1986. It took quite a while for her to realize that she was "different from the others," as it was put in a song by Selli Engler that was popular in the "ladies' clubs" back then. Lacking any lesbian role

models, the young Hilde found it easier to identify with men and male roles that she had read about than with the traditional image of women. "That is how I avoided developing an inferiority complex."

Radusch was unable to find work in a day care facility and instead found a job in 1923 as an operator for the telephone company, a branch of the post office. "It was a respectable job, not all too much money, but something for life. At least that's what we thought then." She was not "really happy" until she met her first girlfriend, Maria, while working for the post office, and they moved in together. In her leisure time, Radusch was politically active, writing articles for the *Frauenwacht*, the newspaper of the Red Women's and Girls' Association, and speaking publicly. She lacked the money necessary for frequent visits to the bars of the lesbian subculture. But she did have vivid memories of the neighborhood Toppkeller club on Schwerin Street, especially the Wäschetanz, the "petticoat dance":

"Skirts were rather long back then, and underneath we wore lace petticoats. So we danced, and lifted our skirts ever so slightly, and that was terribly sexy. Then came the polonaise, when you had to follow the leader, climbing over the chairs in the basement corridor in order to finally get that longed-for kiss. It was so exciting that women from all walks of life came, even actresses. It was always so crowded, and on Fridays you could hardly get in at all."

The Mali and Igel club on Luther Street was more exclusive, though no less fun. It was the preferred club of many actresses, the "crème de la crème." "Mali was a dream of a woman – slender, brunette, wearing loosely fitting, soft clothing and with that certain something that was irresistible." Radusch still radiated enthusiasm when speaking of her. "She had to dance with everyone there." Just a few years later, "beautiful Mali" would be forced to leave her homeland to avoid persecution as a Jew.

Radusch became a labor representative for the post office, appearing before the labor court for the women she worked with. At that time it was unusual for Communist Party members to be civil service employees, which is why the Party then nominated her for city office. When she had just turned twenty-six, she took on a three-year term as city councilor for the Party in Berlin. This was reason enough for the post office administration to dismiss her. In 1932 her career with the Communist Party also came to

an end: she was not renominated as city councilor, since the assistant head of the Berlin Communist Party wasn't able to get over her refusal to "send her pretty girlfriend over to his office" as he had requested.

The large gain in votes attained by the Nazi Party in the 1932 elections and the Nazis' public appearances gave reason to fear the worst, but, even so, the entire extent of the brutality that started in February 1933, first directed against the left-wing, was hard to imagine. As a former communist city councilor, and thus at great risk, Radusch was halfway prepared to have to go underground. "Now the cold days are coming / the test / The country holds its breath" – these are lines from her poem "The First Frost." As a former postal employee, she helped to set up illegal post office operations before being arrested on April 6, 1933, on account of her work in the Communist Party and the Revolutionary Trade Union Opposition, thus putting an end to further acts of resistance for the time being. She had moved out of the apartment she shared with Maria a few days earlier as a preventive measure in order not to put Maria at risk. As a tenured civil servant, Maria would have not been able to find a job were she tried for having contact with Hilde Radusch. "There was no future for our relationship since Maria suddenly hated communists," remarked Radusch laconically in reference to the sudden end to this love.

When they came to arrest her at six o'clock in the morning, she managed to go to the bathroom and destroy notes about the illegal postal operations. She was accused, for lack of other "evidence," of possession of a cudgel that happened to be found during the search of her apartment. Radusch did not let herself be intimidated during the interrogation. When she refused to sign the inaccurate interrogation record, which would essentially have been a "confession of guilt," the matter was handled by two Gestapo men without further ado. She was put in "protective custody." "You had to protect the state from us," she said in her characteristic ironic undertone. "In a certain way we felt like heroes, since being imprisoned by the Nazis 'acknowledged' us as political opponents."

The police headquarters at Alexanderplatz was the first stage of her imprisonment. "At Alex, of the thirty-six prisoners in the room, we had two women who claimed to be masseuses and they started massaging each other right there in public. It

didn't take long for them to be taken out." After a month she was transferred to the women's prison on Barnim Street, where approximately two hundred "political prisoners" were held, who, in contrast to the "criminals," were not placed in solitary confinement. Together with the other women, she was able to fight for and achieve better conditions for prisoners. She had an affair with her cellmate, which helped her get through the time in jail, but since the "walls had ears," caution was necessary for survival. Hilde Radusch recalled her experience: "Love in prison is no lark. The warden's room was right next to our cell. One loud word in the absolutely silent night, one sigh, would have meant the cellar, that is, a bunker with stricter conditions and solitary confinement."

In September 1933 Radusch, along with other political prisoners, was given her freedom, or what the regime had left of it. But it could have been much worse for her; later, political prisoners were transferred to concentration camps as a matter of course. On her own, since her girlfriend had left her for good, she moved to a different district, to Berlin-Mitte, though she continued to be observed by the Gestapo. She had difficulty finding work and finally got a job as a manual laborer at Siemens, where she did illegal organizing in the factory. Her struggle for survival took over her life. In answer to my question whether or not she had ever thought of emigrating, Radusch said, "I'm German. That's my language, my way of expressing myself. What business do I have in other countries? They never would have even given me work!"

In 1939 – "by chance" – Radusch met the women with whom she had her second serious relationship, after having to do without a love life for years. "Back then, everyone was more faithful than ever before. Lesbian life practically only existed within a relationship." Fear of informants was one important reason she avoided unofficial meeting places or clubs, though she never considered hiding her lesbianism, for instance, by getting married. After all, she didn't "wear a sign" displaying it, she said, and the Nazis didn't take women too seriously in that regard anyway. Shortly after Radusch moved again, the doorbell of her apartment on Oranienburger Street rang:

"A very young SS man was standing there: 'Are you Miss Radusch? We'll take care of you! You all think when you move from one district to another that you're out of the hot seat! Well I'm going to see to it that you land back in jail as soon as possible!' He cursed the communists like there was no tomorrow. I didn't say anything, since he could

have used anything I said against me. I listened to the whole drive, and once he realized that I simply wasn't answering he stormed back down the stairs and was very aggravated that he had nothing to report. Then my neighbor came up behind me and said, 'I never would have guessed you would be so cowardly!' I told her I had my reasons. You don't always have to be brave; that isn't always the right way. I told her I had been the city councilor for the Communist Party and had already spent time in jail, and so on. After a while she told me that she had donated a lot to the Red Aid and, besides that, she was a member of the Damenclub Violetta, the Violetta Ladies' Club. Well, after that, things went very smoothly. After all, our rooms were right next to each other; everything was just great."

As Hilde Radusch and Eddy got to know each other better, they fell in love and realized they had similar views and life plans. Her neighbor became her companion for the next twenty-one years, often saving her life. "You are an honest person. I entrust my daughter to you," was Radusch's mother's warm-hearted judgment of her daughter's girlfriend. Eddy, who was six years younger than Hilde, was disabled and received a small pension, though it was not enough to live on.

She got the idea to open a private meal service, that is, a restaurant that didn't serve beverages. Eddy applied for the necessary permit, but the SS saw to it that it was denied because she lived with a woman who was "politically unreliable." "That's blaming the whole family for the crimes of one member," exclaimed Hilde, outraged. But Eddy couldn't be intimidated. She mustered the courage to demand her rights, and in 1941 she received a permit to start a meal service. She found a storefront in a building managed by her father on Lothringer Street in the Scheunenviertel [a poor district in central Berlin with a large Eastern European Jewish population before the war, trans]. The tables and chairs – "we painted them nice and brown; absolutely the right color" – had been left behind by Jews who had emigrated. Radusch kept a low profile and arranged getting rationed groceries, a task that became increasingly difficult. She was not allowed to work there officially, especially not to wait on tables – who knows, she could have whispered subversive information to the guests. . . . Nevertheless, she and Eddy showed small signs of resistance. When they hung the compulsory "Jews prohibited!" sign, they placed the menu in front of it.

The illegal Communist Party leadership resumed contact with Radusch. Party women released from prison were sent to her, and she was to "nurse them back to health" or arrange them hiding places. She and Eddy were not always successful. They were unable to save Henny Lemberg, a Jewish communist who was a friend of theirs, from deportation to an extermination camp.

In August 1944 Radusch once again had bad luck that actually turned out better than expected. A friend of Eddy who was a police detective warned her of her imminent arrest within the scope of the so-called Operation Gitter. In view of Germany's impending defeat, Heinrich Himmler ordered that all representatives of the former labor and mainstream parties in particular be taken into "protective custody" on August 22, 1944. Between five thousand and six thousand people were arrested, and almost all of them were sent to concentration camps – for many of them certain death. Radusch, who had since found work in a bank, took the warning seriously and decided to go underground. She fled to Prieros, a small village outside Berlin, where she and Eddy had already organized a "second secret existence" in the summer of 1943, managing to survive in a primitive wooden shed.

“Theoretically, Eddy could have continued to run her restaurant, but then they would have asked her where I was. They could have beaten her to death and she never would have told, but then again the Nazis never believed her in the first place – she could have said what she wanted. As a result, she had to come out with me to the property, and that meant we both had to survive from December 1944 to April 1945 without food ration cards.”

Radusch "arranged" what they needed. Sometimes she was able to barter linens for a piece of meat, or gather wood in the forest to burn for heat, and, when all else failed, blackberry leaves served as a substitute for tobacco.

They were half-starved to death when liberation by the Red Army came. "It was all over. We were real citizens again, as is right and proper." As soon as the war ended, Radusch became active in reconstruction. She worked from June 1945 until February 1946 for the district offices in the Department for Victims of Fascism, which meant that she processed countless applications for support in the form of food, clothing, etc. As a long-standing Communist Party member, she came into conflict during this time with the

Russian and above all the German practice of communism. "Can the *goal* of socialism be achieved via a bad, totalitarian *path*? Does the end truly justify the means?" she asked herself. She decided to quit the Party, since she no longer agreed with its politics. She returned her membership book and officially announced her intention to leave. In order to take the wind out of her move, the Party leadership expelled Radusch in January 1946, saying it was on account of her relationship with a woman. She lost sleep from all the threatening letters she received. The Party didn't stop there; they even denounced her at the district offices, where she was still working. When she then went to her supervisor to explain, he had an entire file on her, including statements by three leading communists that she was a lesbian and thus could no longer be employed by a city agency. The "comrades" were successful, and Hilde Radusch was dismissed in February 1946. "It was really the end of all my illusions," she recalled, "A piece of my life's dream was destroyed." At forty-three, her health, too, was poor. Because of war-related rheumatoid arthritis, she wasn't able to work much longer, afterward receiving a very meager pension. Eddy opened a junk store that supported the two of them until she died of cancer in 1960.

You went
and no longer will I
hear the steps
that I awaited
not the voice
and not your laugh.
You went
and left me
alone.
To freeze, lonely . . .

Radusch had considerable difficulty getting over the loss of her partner, and continued illness made her life increasingly hard. She welcomed the new women's movement in the 1970s as a chance for many women to get involved in politics and represent their

own interests. She was involved in the founding of L74, a group of elderly lesbians in West Berlin, and other feminist actions, and she wrote poetry and prose, a passion for her since childhood. She lost her physical agility but retained a quick mind until the day she died at ninety. "I never saw myself as a 'victim,' but always as a 'fighter,' " is how Hilde Radusch summed up her life.

© Claudia Schoppmann (Berlin 2005)

Allison Brown (Translation, Berlin 2005)

from:

Claudia Schoppmann, *Days of Masquerade: Life Stories of Lesbians during the Third Reich*, translated by Allison Brown (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).

Hilde Radusch, *Zusammengeharktes* (Berlin, 1978). All poems appearing here [English by the translator] have been taken from this volume. I also recommend the television movie *Muss es denn gleich beides sein!* about Hilde Radusch, by Pieke Biermann and Petra Haffter, Federal Republic of Germany, 1985.

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>>