

Discordant Legacy

The journalist Theo Anna Sprüngli (1880-1953) – better known as speaker Anna Rüling

Over a hundred years ago, on October 9th, 1904, Anna Rüling held the first famous lesbian political speech known worldwide about “Homosexuality and Women's Movement”. It took place at the annual general meeting of the *Scientific Humanitarian Committee* (SHC) (*Wissenschaftlich humanitäres Komitee, Whk*) in the *Prinz Albrecht Hotel* of Berlin.

The idea of creating a social movement to fight – not only – for the right of self-determination of homosexuals originates in the 19th century and is especially associated with Germany. Karl Heinrich Ulrichs (1825-1895) is renowned as the main inspirational source for the gay movement. The legal expert lived as a professed homosexual: Calling himself an Urning and his homosexual sisters “Urninds” he had unsuccessfully tried to establish an “Association of Urnings” representing homosexuals. In 12 brochures about “*Forschungen über das Räthsel der mann männlichen Liebe*” (Research about the mystery of love between men, 1864-1879) Ulrichs developed the first well-knit theory of innate (male) homosexuality. Derived from Venus Urania he coined the expression “Uranism.” In the beginning he published the work under the pseudonym Numa Numantis in order to protect his family. In the United States of America Karl Heinrich Ulrichs was celebrated in 2000 on Michael Lombardi-Nash's initiative, a historian from Florida. On the occasion of Ulrichs' 181st birthday a commemoration at his grave in Italian L'Aquila will take place in the end of August 2006.

Heinrich Hössli (1784-1864), a Swiss hatter, is regarded as Ulrich's predecessor; he had published two comprehensive books of about 700 pages altogether – also against criminalization of homosexuals: “*Eros. Die Männerliebe der Griechen, ihre Beziehungen zur Geschichte, Erziehung, Literatur und Gesetzgebung*” (Eros. Love amongst men in old Greece, their relationship towards history, education, literature and legislation, 1836/1838)

Anna Rüling is *the* name of one of the lesbian pioneers. In autumn 1904, on October 9th, she spoke in front of the *SHC* and an interested audience of about 300 people, hitherto known as the first political speech about lesbians. Some weeks later on October 27th – again in Berlin – she repeated her lecture during a public congregation of the liberal, bourgeois anarchic *Association for Human Rights* around Johannes Holzmann (1882-

1914). According to the police report about 130 people attended, among them about 60 women.

Viewed from our perspective Anna Rüling's speech is more than exceptional and of great importance: Generally, there is hardly any contemporary evidence of lesbian women at the turn of the 19th/20th century. Those few documents which have come down to us were written in sexologist contexts, where lesbian love usually was pathologized.

During her lecture Anna Rüling criticized ignorance and tabooing of homosexuality by the old Women's Movement. Even those women who had been living together for decades and were relating to each other deeply did not call themselves *homosexual*, a label constructed at the end of the 19th century.

Anna Rüling maintained that the Women's Movement was a "historico-cultural necessity" and homosexuality a "natural historical necessity", an "innate sexual instinct". This was politically more than brave at that time. She argued for female emancipation, against contemporary sexism and misogyny and also against any sexologist pathologizations of homosexuality.

Then a piece of scandal, today covered up with tolerance and liberalism. The cliché will go on, though, and with it the hope, 'it' might miss one's own daughter and that 'those' are not going to raise any children. And biological explanations come back with a vengeance again.

Since the middle of the 19th century sexology had developed to form a discipline in its own right and was based on several natural sciences, mainly in the context of medicine and psychiatry. Sexologist knowledge became the standard way of behaving for state and mainly legal discussions about homosexuality. Lesbian women weren't criminalized by legislation; however, since the turn of the century the expansion of paragraph 175 (criminalizing male homosexuality) on women was being discussed again and again: the main argument was the seductive charms on heterosexual women.

According to Anna Rüling the public awareness of homosexual women was not as great as that of gay men due to the legal criminalization of the latter only, she supposed. But "emotional pressure" due to discrimination of society was extremely high, as Anna Rüling noticed, especially because lesbians had to manage life on their own, both socially and economically. A rather controversial call from Anna Rüling was that the Homosexual and

the Women's Movement should "help each other to achieve rights and acceptance" and settle this "injustice" for good. More specifically, she explained, the Women's Movement shouldn't raise "the homosexual question to a level of exceptional importance" – however, it should deserve "due respect". According to Anna Rüling it was the "duty" of the Women's Movement to support the homosexuals' fight, because the feminists too were fighting "for the right of free personality and self-determination". Furthermore she referred to homosexual feminists in the movement in a rather provoking manner.

Anna Rüling explained the close relationship between emancipation of the two movements in a very impressive and plausible way. Maybe it was exactly because of that she was being criticized so strongly: In 1904/05 an anonymous text appeared in the messages corner of the main paper of the "*Centralblatt des Bundes deutscher Frauenvereine*" (Central Paper of the Organization of Women's Associations in Germany). It carried the heading "Schamlos freche Agitation" (Barefaced and impute agitation) and was presumably the doing of Marie Stritt (1855-1928), editor of the paper. Her article expressed clear dissociation and repugnance against lesbians and gays. The spokeswoman of the more moderate wing of the middle-class Women's Movement, Helene Lange (1848-1930), had expressed her anger about Ruling's speech, too. Not least because of her own fear to be thought homosexual. After all she had been living and working with Gertrud Bäumer (1873-1954) for decades, who later on drifted off from political liberalism to nationalism, too.

Anna Ruling's controversial speech had been published under the heading "Welches Interesse hat die Frauenbewegung an der Lösung des homosexuellen Problems?" (Which interests does the Women's Movement have to solve the homosexual problem?) in an edition of the famous *Jahrbuch für sexuelle Zwischenstufen* (Annual for Sexual Intermediate Stages). Its editor in the name of the SHC was doctor Magnus Hirschfeld (1868-1935) from Berlin. Incidentally, the text version of the Rüling speech in the annual was referred to by Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986) in her major work "The second sex"; de Beauvoir adopted the estimation that about 20% of all prostitutes were homosexual.

In the SHC itself the Rüling speech seemed to have triggered or simply fuelled a fundamental dispute. However, the content of the speech does not seem to have been the issue, for it would not have been of any political interest for most of the men; it was rather the very fact that Miss Rüling had called herself a homosexual and obviously seemed to

be proud of it. The political task of informing about homosexuality instead of idolizing it was being discussed in the SHC with great vehemence. Almost none of the men in SHC wanted to disclose their personal “affection” to the public. This was regarded as harmful for any objective science.

The SHC was a scientific-political association, which mainly informed about sexuality and pursued lobbyism for the abolition of criminal law paragraph 175 (referring to homosexual men). The association had been founded in 1897 by Magnus Hirschfeld, editor Max Spohr (1850-1905) from Leipzig, railway official Eduard Oberg (1858-1917) and Prussian Lieutenant (retired) Franz-Joseph von Bülow (1861-1915). It can be regarded as some sort of start for the Homosexual Movement dominated by men. Although not free from contemporary sexism, they looked for allies in the sexual reformist wing of the Women’s Movement. It took 13 years until the first woman was finally appointed to the office of a representative in 1910: The writer Toni Schwabe (1877-1951), later on Helene Stöcker (1869-1943) as well as Johanna Elberskirchen (1864-1943), who was strongly committed to homosexual politics and the publishing of sexual-scientific work. Like Anna Rüling she also called herself homosexual openly.

Anna Ruling's personal and political courage at the age of only 24 years cannot be estimated high enough: Speaking about sexuality in front of a great, cross gender and differently oriented audience was a taboo at that time both in general and for women particularly. Furthermore she outed herself as a homosexual and took even pride in it. A call for sympathy might have led to some appreciation in 1904, but surely not the self-confident demands in Ruling's rhetoric.

No other woman openly professing to homosexuality was discussed more in academic and political writing at the turn of the 19th/20th century. Yet, until recently almost nothing was known about her biography. The anagrammatical pseudonym Anna Rüling, also Th. Rüling, served as a cover for the journalist Theo Anna Sprüngli.

Theo Anna Sprüngli was born in Hamburg, on August 15th, 1880. Her mother was Caroline Sprüngli, née Dangers (1855-?), and her father, Adolf Sprüngli (1844-?), a Swiss overseas businessman; he lived in Hamburg representing helvetic-consular interests. Sprüngli and at least one sister grew up in the “rigid atmosphere of a hanseatic household” she herself wrote. Up to now seven places where Theo Anna Sprüngli used to live and work are

known: Hamburg, Stuttgart, Berlin, Düsseldorf, Ulm, Blaubeuren (close to Ulm) and finally Delmenhorst. In her native town Hamburg she attended a school for young ladies and – as was fitting for a daughter of the middle classes – she took music and piano lessons. At the age of 17 she also started to write for the *Hamburger Fremdenblatt* (Foreigners' Paper of Hamburg). This later turns out to be the beginning of her journalistic career. In Stuttgart she finished the *Gymnasium* (grammar school) and went to Berlin after a short stay in Hamburg. There she worked for *Scherl* Publishers in 1905/1906, one of the greatest newspaper publishers of the metropolis at the Spree river – the newspapers *Der Tag* (The Day) and the *Berliner Tages-Anzeiger* (Daily Gazette of Berlin) belonged to it. Some years later the company fell into Alfred Hugenberg's hands (1865-1952), an infamous German nationalist.

From Berlin Theo Anna Sprüngli went to Düsseldorf, where she then lived and worked for 30 years: From 1914 on until the mid-twenties she wrote for the national-patriotic *Neue Deutsche Frauen-Zeitung* (New German Women's Newspaper), a newspaper which – in terms of the feminist rights movement – appeared rather moderate. It had evolved from the *Rheinisch-westfälische Frauenzeitung* (Rhenish-Westphalian Women's Newspaper) and was published later under the title *Der Bürger* (The Citizen). It then was led by men and traded under the name of *Offizielles Kluborgan des Deutschen Frauenklubs* (Official Paper of the German Women's Club). The journalist Sprüngli mainly wrote about music, news about culture and politics as well as cinema events. But we also find reports of journeys, texts about the "*Rheinische Frauenklub*" (Rhenish Women's Club), the "*Freiburger Hausfrauenbund*" (Freiburg Housewives' Association) and some commentary-like articles and book and music reviews in her repertoire. Furthermore she published two reference works about music: "Kurzer Abriß über die Musikgeschichte" (Short Outline of the History of Music, 1914, Tonger Publishers, Cologne) and "Das deutsche Volkslied" (The German Folksong, 1921).

In 1922 Theo Anna Sprüngli finally made a great journalistic leap forward to the *Düsseldorfer Nachrichten* (Düsseldorf News). Later on she worked for the *Düsseldorfer Lokal-Zeitung* (Local Newspaper of Düsseldorf), too. Additionally, she worked freelance for different newspapers, as for example *Bremer Nachrichten*, *Dortmunder Zeitung*, *Hamburger Anzeiger* and *Leipziger Neueste Nachrichten*, as she explained in a questionnaire for the *Reichskulturkammer* (Reich's Cultural Chamber) in November 1933.

The topic homosexuality she ventured to work on once more, this time literary. In 1906 a collection of novellas was published under the pseudonym Th. RÜling: "Welcher unter Euch ohne Sünde ist... Bücher von der Schattenseite" (Who amongst you is free from sins... Books from the shady side) at Max Spohr Publishers in Leipzig, known for sexual reformist and homosexual-political texts. Two of the stories are about gays, three of them about lesbians; two of these have a lesbian happy ending – rather unusual in Sprüngli's days. One of those affirmative texts takes up the autobiographical motif of music: In the novella "Mondscheinsonate" (Moonlight Sonata) two bourgeoisie women, *Hanna* and *Charlotte*, fall in love with each other. While one of them is expressing her longing love desperately at the piano, the friend shows up surprisingly, and starts to confess her love, too: "Hanna, my dear, now I know all about it, your play has told me what your lips were hiding; as I was not daring to hope that you would feel the same, I appeared cold, oh Hanna, how grave it had become to me. Thanks, thanks to fate, which led me here right on time." This revelation keeps protagonist Hanna from committing suicide.

On reading Theo Anna Sprüngli's journalistic texts it becomes evident, that the pioneer cannot uncritically be lifted up to a historical role model for lesbians: The journalist was an ardent German patriot, a nationalist who said 'yes' to war. Sometimes she would employ an intolerable emotive and imperialistic style, for instance when stating with religious overtones that "the German culture ... is standing in the storm of warlike times and carrying its blessings into the enemy's conquered country. German art protected by German swords." Revealing phraseology. Culture supports politics and vice versa, just like the German proverb: *Am deutschen Wesen soll die Welt genesen* (German's nature heals the world).

In culture politics Theo Anna Sprüngli was not only a mastermind behind the scenes, she also directed an opera in a front theatre and was a political activist in relevant organizations: In 1915 she was head secretary in the local organization of the *Flottenbund deutscher Frauen* (Fleet Association of German Women). This organization had been founded in 1905 in order to support the political campaigns of the *Deutsche Flottenverein*, existing since 1898. The *Flottenbund* – just like for example the women's organization of the *Ostmarkenverein* and the female relief organization of the *Deutsche Kolonialgesellschaft* – was part of the central nationalist and colonialist amalgamations of women in the German Empire. The rural and urban housewives' clubs belonged to them, too: In the *Reichsverband Deutscher Hausfrauenvereine* (Reich's Association of German

Housewives` Clubs) the journalist Sprüngli was active in the press office. The central political aim of the association was the support of “the economical and moral rise of our German Fatherland”.

Up to now Theo Anna Sprüngli's life and work during the Nazi Regime can only be reconstructed fragmentarily. Presumably she was not a member of the NSDAP (National Socialist German Workers Party); as a publicist she was a member of the *Reichsverband Deutscher Schriftsteller* (Reich's Association of German Writers). In her file of the *Reichsschrifttumskammer* (Reich's Literature Chamber) there is no trace about her former homosexual-political speech nor any of her publications – obviously her silence about these issues never broke up.

In the late 1930s she moved away from Düsseldorf. From then on she seems to have no longer been working as a full-time journalist. At the municipal theatre of Ulm she then worked as a secretary, also entrusted with directing and the editing of scripts. Ten years later she got settled in Delmenhorst, a place between Bremen and Oldenburg. There she worked at the local theatre as a script editor and director and was responsible for marketing, too. In 1949 Sprüngli/Rüling gave her comeback as a journalist at the *Delmenhorster Zeitung* and the *Nordwestzeitung*. She continued to be active in journalism up to the time of what her colleagues referred to as an unexpected death on May 8th, 1953 at the age of 73. She was one of the first and oldest female journalists of the Federal Republic of Germany.

Extreme contradictions and inconsistency in Theo Anna Sprüngli's character and her work can show how politically ambivalent this figure is, specifically, when regarding her as a historical role model for (lesbian) women: her membership in right-wing organizations, with no indication of critical distance or any discernable standpoint; furthermore ardent nationalism and patriotism, also manifest in her glorification of the First World War (at least) – all this makes “complete” identification difficult and, if not to say, finally impossible for politically critical (not only lesbian) women. Feminist discourse in science and politics has begun to tackle problematic legacy in recent years. The politically ambivalent aspects in Theo Anna Sprüngli's work but still others that have to be criticized strongly are instances of a so-called “negative lesbian heritage”, as it is being called i. a. following Jean Améry. Yet, Sprüngli's views on homosexuality and her emancipative ideas about women and men, quite radical at the time, are called a “positive lesbian heritage”. Choosing to be

silent about one or the other side respectively, means standing in the way of a precise account of history, and – last but not least – trying to learn from the past, not only about the ancestors of emancipative movements.

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