

Mentona Moser (1874–1971), Clara Willdenow (1856–1931), and Pauline Bindschedler (1856–1933)

Mentona Moser was born into one of the most well-established Swiss families. Before she became a member of the Communist Party she had been thinking about going to university, but instead got involved in social work with the London Settlement movement. She was one of the leading figures founding the first welfare classes for women which was followed by the “Soziale Frauenschule” - the forerunner of “Soziale Schule”. During that time she mainly stayed with two women in Zurich. Clara Willdenow with whom she was romantically involved, and her friend Pauline Bindschedler. The relationship with Clara Willdenow broke 5 years later in 1909 when Moser got married. Mentona Moser’s autobiography, which talks about the years she stayed with Clara Willdenow and Pauline Bindschedler, albeit in an encoded way, allows an insight on the turn of the century which wasn’t given by other women’s narratives of that time. First, she used the phrase “lesbian love”. (Although you can only find it in the edition which was published in Switzerland, an edition printed in GDR does not contain these passages.) Since the phrase “lesbian love” was not common at that time, it is rarely found in contemporary texts.

Secondly, she proved herself as a “sexually emancipated communist” who does not need to deny this part of her life. In this way, her autobiography encourages the conjecture that at that time there were affairs, romances and relationships between women which today one would refer to as lesbian relationships: “... sie fühlte sich zwar als Mann, war aber auch im lesbischen Sinne kein Mann. Sehr verliebt und sehr eifersüchtig. Wir lebten in einem Sinnesrausch, der jahrelang anhielt. (... she felt as a man but was, in a lesbian context, not a man. Very much in love and very jealous. We had been sensually drunk for years.)” Finally, her narratives impart consciousness of belonging. She considered, for example, Oscar Wilde’s “The Picture of Dorian Gray” as the most impressive book of the time: “Der Inhalt entsprach der Atmosphäre, in der ich lebte, obgleich das Problem der Liebesbeziehungen zwischen Männern mir neu war. /.../ Ich gewann Einblick in das tragische Los, das den wenigsten Homosexuellen erspart bleibt. (The content reflected the atmosphere in which I lived, although I wasn’t familiar with the issue of romantic relationships between men./.../I got insight in the tragic fate

which only a few homosexuals are spared.)” When Wilde was charged, she read the files of his case which upset her a lot. However, in the thirties she agreed with the steps the Soviet Union took against homosexuals, and with the opinion that the homosexual life style was a bourgeois relict which would be contactious if not combated.

From Mentona Moser’s perspective the physicist and atheist Clara Willdenow was clearly an egoist. She wrote: “Für Fragen der Gegenwart und Zukunft zeigte meine Freundin nicht das geringste Interesse, sozialen Problemen gegenüber verhielt sie sich geradezu ablehnend, im Verkehr mit Niedrigstehenden benahm sie sich liebenswürdig, aber nur im Sinne von Vornehmheit verpflichtet, denn sie war ein ausgesprochener Herrenmensch und machte daraus keinen Hehl. (My friend did not show the slightest interest in contemporary social issues. Any kind of social problems met her disapproval. She did not show much respect for people of “lower” social status - she showed “correct” behaviour towards them, but only as far as her refined manners demanded. She was a person who openly thought of herself as “superior”.) According to Agnes Bluhm, a Zurich friend of Willdenow’s from university, Clara Willdenow was not only a very intelligent person but also a person with broad interests. Agnes Bluhm was so impressed with Willdenow that when Bluhm came to Zurich, she tried to become close friends with Willdenow. Both Agnes Bluhm and Mentona Moser stress Clara Willdenow’s strong personality and, in particular, describe her as “looking like a man”. There is a bit of critique in Agnes Bluhm’s words. In her opinion a student was not supposed to make a bad impression, but Willdenow obviously did not care. According to her, Friedrich Nietzsche, to whose circle of friends Willdenow belonged, beared her unconscious smugness with admirable indulgence. His sister lists Willdenow in her book “Nietzsche and the women” under “friendly encounters”. Another aspect of her personality is her interest in relish and the worship for the Greek ancient world. Clara Willdenow read and wrote in Greek. She had a deep sonorous voice, and complained a lot, being unwilling to play a female character, she would never be in a position to become an actress.

Clara Willdenow was born in Bonn, and began her studies in medicine at Zurich University in 1884, and completed a dissertation in 1893. She spent 4 semesters in Bern where she became friend with Anna Eysoldt, who she met in medical school. Together with her husband, Willdenow participated in the official celebration of Käthe

Schirmacher's dissertation. Also invited were the students Anita Augsburg and Rosa Senger, the married couple Maria and Franz Blei, as well as Margarethe Böhm who was Schirmacher's companion at that time. At this party Clara Willdenow showed her sense for literature and the fine arts. She made a humorous speech on the several roles Käthe had played in world history while Augsburg and Blei were preparing for a faked oral exam. As a practicing physician Clara Willdenow opened an office for "Frauenkrankheiten und Geburtshilfe" (gynaecologist) near the Bellevue's in 1895, for which she established a phone connection one year later. Since 1900 she and Pauline Blindschedler had been registered in Seefeldstrasse 21. Mentona Moser joined them in 1904, shortly before all three of them moved together to Kreuzstrasse 44 in 1905. This shared apartment had a lot of interesting people visiting from all of Switzerland and also from abroad - as Mentona Moser later describes. She became friends with some of them - for example, with Pauline Bindschedler - Willdenow's companion, and her younger sister Ida Bindschedler (who later became the author of "Turnachkinder") - a bond which outlasted the relationship with Willdenow. Pauline Blindschedler kept house and was active in the "Fraternité" - the Swiss women association - which had been represented by Caroline Farner from 1886-91. For some time Pauline Bindschedler was responsible for the association's news on the editorial board of the Fraternité's journal "Philanthropin". Willdenow was not actively involved in the Fraternité but replaced Caroline Farner in her praxis in 1894. But she was on the board of founders of the "Union für Frauenbestrebungen" which was built from the boards of "Verein Schweizerische Bildungsreform" and "Rechtsschutzverein". The "Verein Schweizerische Bildungsreform", which was founded by Anita Augsburg among others, stands for equal rights for men and women in terms of child rearing and education. Very important for this association was the continuous work of Emma Boos-Jegher - a teacher and school director, but also of committed Zurich students and alumni. "Verein Schweizerische Bildungsreform" merged together with "Rechtsschutzverein" - founded by Emilie Kemplin in 1896 - to "Union für Frauenbestrebungen". In comparison with the size of other Zurich women associations the "Union für Frauenbestrebungen" was not that important but it was the far most progressive one. The "Union für Frauenbestrebungen" participated in the first Swiss women's conference in Genf in 1896 and in the foundation of the "Bund Schweizerischer Frauenvereine" (BSF). The list of public talks given by members of the "Union für

Frauenbestrebungen” contains the names of several women and men of socially critical, feminist or socialist backgrounds, among them a noticeable number of former female students and women who lived with women.

In the Bindschedler family Pauline was an outsider. The family tree does not contain an entry for the year Pauline died, and her sister Ida does not recognize her as one of the Turnachkinder in her autobiographic narrative. The Bindschedler family had one more child than the Turnach family in “The Turnachkinder in Winter” and “The Turnachkinder in Sommer”. Some people say that it misses the older half sister Emma who already had passed away by the time but some claim that it was actually Pauline who was left out. According to a Bindschedler descendent - who responded to an article about the Bindschedler versus Turnach family in the “Zürcher Tagblatt” in 1998 - it is obvious that Pauline was represented by Lotte Turnach - the faster, smaller and high-spirited sister with Ida (as Marianne Turnach) being the quieter and more serious sister, and that it must have been the half sister who was not portrayed. Until Ida Bindschedler had to give up her job, both sisters had stayed together in the apartment into which Clara Willdenow later moved. In 1897 Ida Bindschedler went to Augsburg to stay with her friend Emma Wachter. She wrote the books for which she later became famous. Emma and Ida had lived together until Ida’s death. Pauline and Clara moved once more. They stayed together 31 years.

© Regula Schnurrenberger (Zurich 2002)

Anita Winter (Translation, Berkeley/Erlangen 2005)

Recommendation for further reading.

- Chraz & Quer, Sieben Frauenstadtrundgänge in Zurich, Limmat Verlag Zurich, 1995, pages 195/96, 273/74, 290/91.
- Agnes Bluhm, Dank an meine Studienzeit, in Die Ärztin, Berlin, 1941, pages 527-535.
- M.S.Metz, Wer waren die Turnachkinder?, Eine Studie, Metz-Verlag Zurich, 1962.
- Mentona Moser, Unter den Dächern von Marcote, Meine Lebensgeschichte, Dietz-Verlag Berlin, 1985.
- Dies, Ich habe gelebt, Limmat Verlag, Zurich 1986.

References

[1] Hofmann, Annie (1928), Union für Frauenbestrebungen, Zurich 1893–1928, Zurich, p 24–25, 49.

[2] Schnurrenberger, Regula (1999) “Die keusche Blume der Freundschaft?” Ida and Pauline Bindschedler, in Die Lesbenzeitschrift, 13, Herbst 1999, p 14-17.

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>>