



Roellig, Ruth Margarete (1878-1969)

by Ruth M. Pettis

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Chronicler of Berlin's lesbian club scene of the late 1920s, writer Ruth Roellig was part of the lively gay counterculture of Germany's Weimar era. Although she survived the rise to power of the Nazis and lived well past the end of World War II, Roellig's most popular work was done during the Weimar period.

Roellig was born in Schwiebus, Germany on December 14, 1878, to a family in the restaurant and hotel business. She was sent to exclusive schools in Berlin and Saxony, where she studied to become an editor. Like many educated women--even in later eras--she had to support herself with secretarial work before advancing in the publishing industry.

Roellig began her writing career by publishing in literary magazines and newspapers. At the age of 35, she published her first novel, *Geflüster im Dunkel* (Whispers in the Dark, 1913), about a poet and his muse. Her travels in Finland and Paris provided settings for two other works, *Traumfahrt -- Eine Geschichte aus Finnland* (Dream Journey: A Story from Finland, 1919) and *Lutetia Parisorum* (1920). The latter work, a novel, is set amidst Parisian theater and circus life.

Returning to Berlin in 1927, Roellig immersed herself in Berlin's "world of women." In her Schöneberg district home, where she lived with a much younger woman partner and a pet monkey, she hosted parties for writers and actresses, and pursued interests in spiritualism and the occult.

Roellig is best known for her guidebook to Berlin's lesbian clubs, *Berlins lesbische Frauen* (The Lesbians of Berlin, 1928), which featured a preface by pioneering German sexologist and activist Magnus Hirschfeld.

After an introduction deploring religious attitudes toward lesbians and decrying discrimination against "priestesses of Sappho," Roellig describes the ambience and offerings of 14 Berlin clubs and dance halls that catered to lesbians. At this time in Germany, lesbians were not subject to criminal prosecution, but they faced ostracism and employment discrimination, and Roellig is keenly aware of such injustices. Indeed, her introduction must be considered a contribution to the literature of the German homosexual emancipation movement.

Hirschfeld's preface was featured prominently on the book's cover in order to characterize the book as a work of social significance rather than simply a guidebook for tourists. But perhaps the greatest function of *Berlins lesbische Frauen* was to alert isolated women to the presence of a larger lesbian community. As a measure of its success in this endeavor, the book underwent several printings.

In "Lesbierinnen und Transvestiten" (Lesbians and Transvestites), her contribution to Agnes Countess Esterhazy's 1930 collection *Das lasterhafte Weib* (The Vices of Women), Roellig again attacks prejudices against lesbians and other sexual minorities.

Roellig also published poems, articles, and short stories in outlets such as the lesbian magazine *Frauenliebe* (Woman's Love, which later became *Garçonne*) into the early 1930s. Her 1930 short story "Ich Klage an" (I

Accuse) deals with a lesbian struggling against authority; a novel, *Die Kette im Schoss* (The Chain in the Lap), about young Persian women living in Berlin, was published in 1931 and also features lesbian characters.

Roellig's career as a nonconformist writer was sidetracked when the Nazis came to power in 1933. Bowing to the political pressures of the new regime, Roellig joined the Reich Literature Association, membership in which was required for publishing during the Nazi period.

Under the Nazis watchful eyes, Roellig continued to write. Her novels, *Der Andere* (The Other, 1935), a mystery, and *Soldaten, Tod, Tänzerin* (Soldiers, Death, Dancer, 1937), a heroine tale set during World War I, complete with anticommunist and anti-Semitic references, include strong women characters who may be read as lesbian in highly coded terms, but they have generally been seen as pandering to romantic myths of the fatherland. The anti-Semitic references were probably necessary in order for Roellig to maintain good standing with the government; she is known to have offered shelter to a Jewish acquaintance on at least one occasion during this period.

Accommodationist strategies appear not to have helped Roellig very much. In 1938 *Berlins lesbische Frauen* was included on the government's list of "harmful writings" and banned from circulation. (In the 1980s and 1990s, however, it was reissued in German and French editions.)

Although her Berlin home was destroyed by Allied bombing in 1943, Roellig survived the war. After a brief period living in Silesia, she and her partner resided in Berlin with Roellig's sister in the post-war years.

Roellig lived to be 91. She died on July 31, 1969.

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About the Author

Ruth M. Pettis is the Oral History Project manager for the Northwest Lesbian and Gay History Museum Project in Seattle and editor of *Mosaic 1: Life Stories*, a collection of stories from the project's oral history collection. She has contributed articles and fiction to a number of gay and women's publications. She has an A.B. in anthropology from Indiana University and an M.L.S. from Simmons College in Boston.