



Vock, Anna (1885-1962)

by Hubert Kennedy

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Because of her continuous and longtime involvement, Anna Vock was the leading activist in the early years of organizing homosexual women and men in Switzerland in the 1930s.

According to the registration records of the city of Zurich, Anna Vock was born in Anglikon (Canton Aargau), Switzerland, on January 13, 1885. Nothing is known of her family or education, and her private and professional life still lies largely in darkness.

The women's club "Amicitia" (Friendship) was formed in Zurich in August 1931, with Laura Thoma as president and Anna Vock as secretary. Its purpose was to bring lesbians out of their isolation and give them a sense of solidarity, but it was so discreetly advertised as a "women's club" that non-lesbian women also joined.

In October 1931, however, Thoma and Vock met with leaders of a newly organized "Excentric" club for homosexual men and agreed to meet jointly with them. It was also agreed that the women would bring only other lesbians. To this end, "Amicitia" was dissolved and replaced by a new club with the same name, but open only to lesbians.

The first joint event of the men's and women's clubs was a dance on January 2, 1932, at which Laura Thoma and August Bambula (of Excentric) surprised those in attendance by presenting the first issue of the new journal *Freundschafts-Banner* (Banner of friendship). This journal, after several name changes, became *Der Kreis* (The circle) in 1943, which name it kept until its demise in 1967. This journal is the most important, regularly issued European homophile publication.

The police, of course, were always suspicious of any homosexual organization. Their spies correctly reported that Amicitia was formed for the protection of the women's own interests and the cultivation of true friendship. A police report also noted: "The board of 'Amicitia' currently consists of 2 persons, the president and the treasurer, the first also acting as secretary. They are also involved in editing the *Freundschafts-Banner* The particulars of the two women are as follows: Frau T. (divorced), born 1901, office worker; Fräulein Vock, Anna, born 1885, office worker, Zurich. The two women, who have an intimate relationship and because of their [sexual] disposition are already in our files, live with a third woman in a common household."

In April 1933, after the men's club had broken up, Vock, who was now acting as president of "Amicitia," decided to invite the men to build a common club for homosexual men and women to fight for their common cause. It was named Schweizer Freundschafts-Verband Amicitia (Swiss Friendship Association Amicitia). The journal *Freundschafts-Banner*, which had ceased publication in November 1932, began anew in April 1933 with Anna Vock as editor. She changed the name to *Menschenrecht* (Human rights) in 1937. It and the minutes of the organization, which were kept by Vock until 1938, are the only witnesses of the existence of a functioning, politically active group of homosexual women and men in Europe during the period of Nazism in Germany.

In addition to the threat that Nazism posed, the gutter press magazine *Scheinwerfer* in Zurich also attacked the group, resulting in their losing their meeting place--and Anna Vock losing her job when *Scheinwerfer* published her name and address. When Vock paid them back by accusing the editor of *Scheinwerfer* of slander, a legal action resulted in an agreement of the two parties not to attack one another. But that editor later started another paper, *Guggu*, which likewise attacked the group, causing a further loss in membership.

Although Anna Vock, Laura Thoma, and August Bambula originally used their real names in the publication, it is not surprising that many other contributors used pseudonyms; and in 1934 it was decided to use only pseudonyms. Vock's pseudonym was "Mamma" (an Italian diminutive of "mamma," i.e., "little mother"). Since her real name was well known, this was probably already her nickname.

In 1934 Karl Meier first appeared in the journal with the name R. Rheiner. He also used the names Gaston Dubois and, later, Rolf. Vock gradually gave more and more responsibility for *Menschenrecht* to Rolf, but she remained responsible for the women's pages and for the personal ads.

Because of the personal ads, Vock was accused by the police of "pandering." Rolf later recalled that she was "convicted by a judge who threatened all homosexuals with Hitler's methods." The judgment was, however, overturned by a higher court and the judge who had convicted her was himself convicted a half year later of having relations with female defendants.

Because the journal incurred financial difficulties, Rolf took over the editorship in 1943, renaming it *Der Kreis*, and remained editor until the journal folded in 1967. As editor he only used the name Rolf; his real name Karl Meier never appeared in *Der Kreis*.

Meier had worked closely with Anna Vock and remained her greatest admirer. She remained in contact with him until her death in Zurich on December 14, 1962, even though women were no longer members of the group organized around *Der Kreis*.

Even during the 1930s there began a gradual shift of dominance in the organization from women to men. The reason for the withdrawal of women is not entirely clear, though it appears that the women were dissatisfied with the group's emphases on legal reform (which affected only men, since lesbian relations were not illegal) and on the social defamation of male homosexuals. Germany, after all, was Switzerland's next-door neighbor.

Rolf concluded his obituary of Vock in the January 1963 issue of *Der Kreis* with the words: "Farewell, Mamma. Your name will forever remain bound with our cause in Switzerland. You prepared the ground on which we must build. We hope we shall succeed." That issue also had a note of thanks from the woman who was Vock's longtime companion for some five decades. The identity of Vock's companion is still unknown.

When Anna Vock and others founded their first organization, homosexuality was illegal in Switzerland for men, but not for women. However, she was a strong advocate of equal treatment for all, and she was militantly opposed to the sodomy law, which was finally repealed in 1942 as part of a general revision of the Swiss penal code.

The revision had been discussed from 1928 until 1939, when a plebiscite finally approved it. As part of the revision, the age of consent for homosexual acts was set at 20, even though the age of consent for heterosexual acts was 16. And women, who had not been mentioned in this context before, were now included. Despite this development, which in effect penalized lesbians, the discussion concerning the adoption of the new penal code focused only on homosexual men. Even Vock, who wrote about it, mentioned only how the changes in the revised code would affect men.

In retrospect, the most striking aspect of the adoption of the new Swiss penal code is that it took place at a time when anti-homosexual laws and attitudes in neighboring Germany were hardened by the Nazis.

The legal reform in Switzerland is one reason why, as Vock's *Menschenrecht* gave way to Meier's *Der Kreis*, the tone of the journal became less militant. No longer threatened by arrest and possible imprisonment for consensual homosexual activity, homosexuals in Switzerland were less concerned with political reform. But another reason may well have been the personal viewpoints and temperaments of the two editors. Vock was clearly the more militant of the two, and far quicker to assert and defend her positions.

Vock's presence was strongly felt in the early Swiss movement for equal rights. She deserves credit as a pioneer activist.

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About the Author

Hubert Kennedy has published in several fields and several languages. Among his books is a biography of the German pioneer of gay liberation, Karl Heinrich Ulrichs. He has also translated the gay novels of John Henry Mackay.