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Aktuelles und Kommentare

Mobilising Working Women in Red Vienna: Käthe Leichter and the Vienna Arbeiterkammer[1]

Jill Lewis

Käthe Leichter neé Pick was born in 1895 in Vienna. She was a socialist, economist, sociologist, journalist, and broadcaster, an anti-fascist and one of the leading activists and campaigners for the rights of working class women in interwar Vienna. 90 years ago, in June 1925, she was appointed to head the newly created Referat für Frauenarbeit der Kammer für Arbeiter und Angestellte Wien (Frauenreferat) and remained in this post until February 1934. As will be shown below, it was there that she pioneered detailed studies of the lives of working class women in Austria and influenced the way in which similar studies were undertaken internationally through her work with the International Labour Organisation (ILO). She established a network of Viennese women drawn from diverse class backgrounds to carry out the research for these studies, in particular encouraging working class women to speak in public and to publish articles. Leichter's main goal was not just to report on the lives of working women, but to mobilise these women to fight for their rights. She did so as a socialist rather than a feminist. The rights of women would only be won, she argued, as part of the battle for the rights of all the oppressed. This belief remained strong throughout her life.

1 I would like to thank the Kammer für Arbeiter und Angestellte Wien and the Internationales Forschungszentrum Kulturwissenschaften (IFK) for their generous support for the research for this article.

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1. The Birth of the Frauenreferat

It is doubtful that Leichter herself was the inspiration for the founding of the Frauenreferat in 1925. Unlike Adelheid Popp[2], Anna Boschek[3], and Rosa Jochmann[4], she did not come to women's politics through the ranks of the women's trade union movement. Although she had been politically active during the First World War, there is no evidence that she joined the Social Democratic Party (SDAP/Sozialdemokratische Arbeiterpartei) before 1918. Her encounters with the bourgeois wing of the women's movement during the war disappointed her:

> Je mehr ich mir die Frauenrechtlerinnen ansah, desto mehr war ich der Ansicht, daß sowohl die politische als auch die wirtschaftliche Gleichberechtigung der Frauen nur im größeren Rahmen einer Bewegung, die die soziale Umgestaltung überhaupt anstrebte, nicht aber innerhalb eines Vereines, in dem Frauen vor Frauen Reden hielten, errungen werden könne.[5]

Her opinion of bourgeois feminism never changed. Leichter was an intellectual and a socialist before she became engaged in women's rights.

The Arbeiterkammer and its Frauenreferat were both products of shifts in class and gender relations at the end of the First World War, when the Habsburg Empire fell and a new Socialist-led coalition came (briefly) to power.[6] Workers' demands could not be ignored in the immediate post-war period. Arbeiterkammern were set up by Austrian law in 1920 to act as the workers' version of the Chambers of Commerce and Industry,

2 Adelheid Popp (1869–1939) was the first female member of the Executive Committee of the SDAP (1904–1933) and the editor of the "Arbeiterinnen-Zeitung" (1915–1934).

3 Anna Boschek (1874–1957) became the first woman to be a member of the Central Committee of the SDAP in 1890. She was one of the first women to be elected to the Austrian national parliament in 1919. Cf. Walter Göhring ed., Anna Boschek. Erste Gewerkschafterin im Parlament, Wien 1998.

4 Rosa Jochmann (1901–1994) began work in a sweets factory during the First World War. She was later a shop steward in the Chemical Workers' Union, becoming its secretary in 1925. Cf. Franz Richard Reiter ed., Wer war Rosa Jochmann?, Wien 1997.

5 Lebenserinnerungen von Frau Dr. Käthe Leichter, während der Haftzeit im Landesgericht Wien geschrieben (1938–1939) und als Kassiber von Frau Frida Nödl aus dem Gefängnis geschmuggelt. Dokumentationsarchiv des österreichischen Widerstandes (DÖW): 2211/04383, 188. This copy of the memoir was typed by Käthe Leichter's secretary at the Arbeiterkammer, Henriette Denk. The version which was printed in Herbert Steiner's biography is based on the Denk typescript and contains alterations including to the title. The title in the original text which was handwritten by Käthe Leichter is "Kindheitserinnerungen". DÖW, 2211/10491b. Cf. Herbert Steiner, Käthe Leichter: Leben und Werk, Wien 1973.

6 The SDAP was the largest party in the coalition which governed the Austrian First Republic from February 1919. It withdrew in October 1920 and went into opposition. For the following 14 years the party concentrated on building a socialist alternative in the capital, Red Vienna. Cf. Jill Lewis, Red Vienna: Socialism in One City, 1918–27, in: European Studies Review, 13, 3 (1983), 335–355.

which had been established in the nineteenth century. They were to be the voice of manual and white collar workers. Their remit was to submit and comment on proposals for social legislation, to represent workers in discussions on the economy and the labour market, and to collect statistical data and submit reports on labour issues, including employment, contracts, and working and living conditions. Initially no distinct provision was made for issues which affected women specifically. Workers were workers, whether men or women, and the role of female labour was considered to be marginal to the economic process. Data on women workers could be found, but it was patchy.[7]

But gender politics had also changed dramatically and not only in Austria. Women's groups lobbied the Paris Peace Conference in 1919 to demand the right to make recommendations on female labour legislation. In 1919, the International Labour Organisation, itself born at this Peace Conference, set up a Commission on the Employment of Women and adopted the Washington Conventions. The latter confirmed protection for working mothers before and after childbirth, restrictions both on night work for women and children and on employment in 'unhealthy processes'.[8] The ratification of the protection policy provoked immediate condemnation, particularly from bourgeois women's groups, whose members argued that such policies undermined the fundamental battle for gender equality.[9] But then they did not face the same problems as their working class sisters.

Austrian women trade unionists and the Frauenreferat were to play a key role in defending protectionism by providing solid evidence that working women wanted and needed legal protection. They did this by the simplest and most unusual, radical and effective means – they collected data and asked women workers themselves what they thought. In 1923, the International Federation of Working Women met in Vienna to discuss the lives of working women. Soon after, Anna Boschek, a leading Austrian trade unionist and champion of outworkers and domestic servants, called on the Arbeiterkammer, of which she was a member, to set up a data-base on women's work in Austria. The Referat für Frauenarbeit der Wiener Arbeiterkammer was founded two years later and Käthe Leichter was given the task of running it. This choice was not obvious. Born into a liberal Viennese Jewish bourgeois family in 1895, she was at heart a political activist and an academic with a doctorate in political science from Heidelberg University which had been awarded in 1918.[10] Moreover, she had shown little interest in women's

7 Cf. 75 Jahre Kammern für Arbeiter und Angestellte, ed. by Bundesarbeiterkammer, Wien 1995.

8 Cf. Carol Riegelman Lubin and Anne Winslow, Social Justice for Women: The International Labor Organization and Women, Durham 1990, 23.

9 Cf. Regina Wecker, Regulierung und Deregulierung des „kleinen Unterschieds". Nachtarbeitsverbot und Konstruktion von Geschlecht, 1864–1930, in: L'Homme. Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft, 11, 1 (2000): Normale Arbeitstage, ed. by Christa Hämmerle, Karin Hausen and Edith Saurer, 37–48.

10 The University of Vienna did not award doctorates in Political Science (Staatswissenschaft) to either men or women until 1919.

work before 1925. Leichter had worked as an economist in the Socialisation Commission since 1919, but had been sacked at the end of 1924 for political reasons. Up until then, her primary interest had been the socialisation of the economy and worker participation in management. She had published only one article on women. Her subsequent dedication to the study and mobilisation of working class women was, therefore, not a deliberate decision, but the result of circumstances. She was in the right place at the right time.[11]

2. The Studies of Working Women

Within weeks of taking up her position in the Frauenreferat, Leichter had defined its central tasks. The first was to compile and consolidate empirical and statistical information on the lives of working women, drawing on existing sources such as reports from *Krankenkassen* (health insurance schemes), trade unions and factory inspectors.[12] The second was to encourage and influence legislation on the protection of women workers. She began by organising studies of those whom she described as the "Stiefkinder der sozialen Gesetzgebung",[13] notably domestic servants and outworkers *(Heimarbeiterinnen),* women who had been largely excluded from the social insurance system which had been established after the First World War. The influence of Anna Boschek in framing this agenda was obvious, but the modern research techniques that were used, such as questionnaires on a large scale, sociographics and statistics, carried the stamp of Leichter's academic training. As such, the studies were part of the pioneering sociological and political research which developed in Vienna in the 1920s and 1930s. The findings of the surveys, published between 1927 and 1932, constitute the first detailed, descriptive, and statistical analyses of the lives and experiences of female workers not only in Austria, but possibly anywhere else. A preliminary account of the first study, based on 2,831 questionnaires filled out by members of the Association of Domestic Servants, was published in the "Arbeiter-Zeitung" on 29 June 1926.[14] The use of questionnaires was not new, but the scale of the investigation and the nature of the analyses, using sociographics and statistics, were innovative in the study of women's work. Leichter applied the same method in the later studies of outworkers in 1928 and again in "So leben wir", a detailed study of the lives and work experiences of 1,320 women indus-

11 Cf. Gabriella Hauch, Käthe Leichter, geb. Pick. Spuren eines Frauenlebens, in: Archiv. Jahrbuch des Vereins für Geschichte der Arbeiterbewegung, 8 (1992), 97–122.

12 Cf. Käthe Leichter, Frauenarbeit und Arbeiterinnenschutz in Österreich, Wien 1927.

13 "Step-children of the social legislation". Käthe Leichter, Das Referat für Frauenarbeit der Wiener Arbeiterkammer, in: Handbuch der Frauenarbeit in Österreich, ed. by Kammer für Arbeiter und Angestellte in Wien, Wien 1930, 542–557, 546.

14 Käthe Leichter, Wie leben unsere Hausgehilfinnen? Eine Erhebung über die Arbeitsverhältnisse von 2831 Wiener Hausgehilfinnen, in: Arbeiter-Zeitung, 29.6.1926, 9; cf. also Leichter, Referat, see note 13.

trial workers which was published in 1932.[15] The questionnaire for this study was drawn up by Lotte Radermacher from Paul Lazarsfeld's Österreichischer Wirtschaftspsychologischer Forschungsstelle. It contained over eighty questions divided into nine sections, beginning with basic personal details, but expanding into a full examination of the women's day-to-day experiences of work and family life, including relations with husbands, children and male fellow workers. The interviewees were asked about their training, hours of work, pay, unemployment, leisure time, homes, housework and child care. They were also asked what they felt were their greatest problems at work. Four thousand questionnaires were sent out and a team from the Frauenreferat worked with seventeen women trade unionists to carry out further interviews and analyse the data. The results illustrated vividly the plight of working women in the economic depression which followed the Wall Street Crash, and in particular the 'double burden' of working wives and mothers. It was published at the very time that married women were losing their jobs on the grounds that they were 'Doppelverdienerinnen', part of two-wage households.[16] But this study showed that one in three of those interviewed was the sole breadwinner in the family. More than 60 per cent of married women did all the housework and 95.3 per cent reported that they would give up work if their husbands earned enough to keep the family.

The management of the research teams which produced these three sociographical investigations was as unusual as the scope of the studies.[17] Data was assembled by a network of women from diverse backgrounds – politics, academia, and trade unions – and the most modern sociographic techniques were employed. "So leben wir" predates the famous study of unemployment, "Marienthal", by Marie Jahoda, Paul Lazarsfeld, and Hans Zeisel by more than a year.[18] The framework for the studies of working women can be attributed to Leichter herself – she had the necessary economic and sociological training and academic contacts. Her organisational skills and charisma also enabled her to create an effective network of women who carried out the investigations. And yet, Käthe Leichter was an outsider in the world of working class women when she

15 Leichter, Frauenarbeit, see note 12; Käthe Leichter, Wie leben die Wiener Heimarbeiter? Eine Erhebung über die Arbeits- und Lebensverhältnisse von tausend Wiener Heimarbeitern, Wien 1928; Handbuch der Frauenarbeit in Österreich,Wien 1930; 'So leben wir ...'. 1320 Industriearbeiterinnen berichten über ihr Leben, Wien 1932.

16 The Doppelverdienergesetz was introduced on 15 December 1933, but restrictions on the employment of married women predated this in some provinces. In March 1931 the women's conference of the Free Trade Union movement passed a resolution warning against the legal, social and economic consequences of a law banning or restricting the working rights of married women. Cf. Walter Göhring, Käthe Leichter und die Freie Gewerkschaftsbewegung, in: „Man ist ja schon zufrieden, wenn man arbeiten kann". Käthe Leichter und ihre politische Aktualität, ed. by Institut für Gewerkschafts- und AK-Geschichte, Wien 2003, 82–83.

17 See note 15.

18 Marie Jahoda, Paul F. Lazarsfeld and Hans Zeisel, Die Arbeitslosen von Marienthal. Ein soziographischer Versuch über die Wirkungen langdauernder Arbeitslosigkeit, Wien 1933.

took over the Frauenreferat in 1925. Her Jewish roots were well-known and she did not hide her bourgeois class background – she refused to speak Viennese dialect.[19] She was a bourgeois socialist activist, an intellectual and a Jew. According to her secretary, Henriette Denk, she had encountered anti-Semitism in the Arbeiterkammer when she was first appointed.[20] She was undoubtedly the intellectual force in the socialist women's network and well known for her ability to mobilise working class women, but she was also part of a team of leaders. Her main contact with working class women came through female trade unionists. This collaboration produced a formidable partnership: the experience, intelligence and political activism of women like Anna Boschek combined with Käthe Leichter's intellectual ability, knowledge of modern sociological methods and organisational skills were the key to the achievements of the Frauenreferat. Leichter herself acknowledged the close relationship between the Frauenreferat and the women's trade union movement in her report in the "Handbuch der Frauenarbeit": "Die Arbeiterkammer steht im Dienst der Gewerkschaften, das Frauenreferat der Kammer im Dienst der gewerkschaftlichen Frauensektion."[21] When Anna Boschek was appointed leader of the newly created Frauensektion of the Free Trade Unions in 1929, Leichter joined the Frauensektion committee, representing the Arbeiterkammer.

Leichter's aim was not merely to chart the lives of working women, but to empower them by giving them information and a voice and platform to fight for their interests. The Frauenreferat initially published a monthly bulletin for women trade unionists covering union and social policy issues both at home and abroad. In 1927, this was expanded to become an eight-page supplement entitled "Frauenarbeit", published in "Arbeit und Wirtschaft" (a journal founded by the Arbeiterkammer and Österreichischer Gewerkschaftsbund in 1923) and edited by Käthe Leichter. "So leben wir" used isotypes to illustrate complex statistical data – isotypes which had been developed by Otto Neurath and which Leichter had been using in "Arbeit und Wirtschaft" since 1928.[22] Like Neurath, one of her principal aims was to communicate with workers clearly and simply. She used modern media, working with Wilhelmine Moik[23] on a series of monthly radio broadcasts called "Radiostunde für arbeitende Frauen", in which women, including many trade unionists, spoke about current issues, as well as

19 Interview with Franz Leichter, Oxford 14 April 2011. Franz Leichter (born 1930) is the younger son of Käthe and Otto Leichter.

20 Cf. Steiner, Käthe Leichter, see note 5, 24 and 211, footnote 13. Hauch, Käthe Leichter, see note 11, 109.

21 Leichter, Referat, see note 13, 555.

22 Otto Neurath (1882–1945) was a founding member of the Vienna Circle, a sociologist, political economist and originator of the Isotype (International System of Typographic Picture Education/ Bildstatistik). Cf. Günther Sandner, Otto Neurath. Eine politische Biografie, Wien 2014.

23 Wilhelmine Moik (1894–1970) was the Women's Secretary of the Trade Union Commission from 1927 and a member of the Vienna City Council from 1932. Cf. Agnes Broessler, "Es hat sich alles mehr um's Politische gehandelt!". Wilhelmine Moik. Ein Leben für die gewerkschaftliche Frauenpolitik, Wien 2006.

their lives and their work.[24] She was an adviser on "Frauenleben, Frauenlos", a semi-documentary film produced by Boschek[25] and Moik, which was first screened at the 1931 meeting of the Labour and Socialist International held in Vienna. The film highlighted the realities of the lives of working women and featured Anna Boschek calling on women to unionise and oppose the expanding 'yellow' unions which had been set up with the support of employers in the 1920s to undermine the strength of the Socialist Free Trade Unions.[26] All three women worked on the "Handbuch der Frauenarbeit", which is itself an example of the close collaboration between female trade unionists, professional specialists and political leaders.

3. Clashes with Bourgeois Feminism

The story of the "Handbuch der Frauenarbeit" also illustrates the fundamental conflicts between the Socialist and the bourgeois women's movement. In anticipation of the Kongress des Internationalen Frauenbundes, scheduled to take place in Vienna in May 1930, the Bund der österreichischen Frauenarbeit (BÖFV) announced plans to publish a "Handbuch der österreichischen Frauenarbeit", including contributions by the socialist women's organisations. Months later, when it transpired that a member of the Heimwehr would also contribute, the Socialists withdrew. Leichter, who was heavily pregnant at the time,[27] swiftly organised a rival volume to be published before the BÖFV book. Only one woman contributed to both publications.[28] The contrast between the two volumes was stark. Whilst the "Handbuch der Frauenarbeit" concentrated on the work and rights of working women, with sixty articles written by trade unionists and socialist activists, the BÖFV's "Frauenbewegung, Frauenbildung und Frauenarbeit in Österreich" was primarily concerned with education and was written by professional women for professional women.[29] Leichter's disdain for bourgeois feminism had not abated.

A far greater clash erupted in the ILO in the late 1920s and early 1930s, when members of the feminist Open Door International[30] attempted to revise the Washington Convention restricting night work for women. This was part of a wider campaign by

24 Cf. Leichter, Referat, see note 13, 556.

25 For information on Boschek see note 3.

26 Cf. Jill Lewis, Fascism and the Working Class in Austria, 1918–1934, New York/Oxford 1991.

27 Käthe Leichter was married to the Socialist editor Otto Leichter (1897–1973) and had two sons, Heinz/Henry (1924–2010) and Franz (born 1930).

28 Hedwig Lemberger (1873–?), one of the first factory inspectors for women.

29 Cf. Margit Wolfsberger, Käthe Leichter. Eine Kommunikatorin der Ersten Republik, unpublished Diplomarbeit, Universität Wien 1996, 72.

30 The Open Door Movement was set up in the 1920s to oppose protective legislation for working women. In 1929 it became the Open Door International for the Economic Emancipation of the Woman Worker. Cf. Nitza Berkovitch, From Motherhood to Citizenship. Women's Rights and International Organizations, Baltimore 1999.

feminists to introduce equal rights reforms, a campaign which was vigorously opposed by Austrian female trade unionists, backed by the Austrian Free Trade Union Congress. In 1928, the Congress debated the issue of women and trade unions for the first time and passed a motion proposed by Anna Boschek to support the need for special rights for working women on the grounds that such protection was necessary to allow women to be both workers and also mothers and housewives. Boschek and the German trade unionist Gertrud Hanna led a successful defence of the ban on night work for women when the issue was again debated at the 1931 ILO meeting in Geneva.[31]

Leichter wrote frequently about the need to extend maternity rights for working women and to retain the ban on night work, specifically praising the Austrian Free Trade Union movement for the stand it took against the Open Door International in 1928. Her networks, however, extended beyond Austria: she was a delegate at three of the Women's Conferences of the Labour and Socialist International, speaking at the Internationale Studienwoche in Brussels in 1936 under the alias of Maria Mahler.[32] She attended at least five meetings of the ILO and submitted reports on the situation of working women in Austria. In 1932, Marguerite Thibert, the head of the Women's Section of the ILO, responded to Leichter's review published in "Arbeit und Wirtschaft" of her study on the regulation of female labour.[33] Leichter and Boschek subsequently joined the ILO's Correspondence Committe on Women's Work. Leichter continued to work with the Committee after the outbreak of the Civil War in February 1934.

4. Socialist Politics

Käthe Leichter was a political activist and a radical Socialist. She was elected onto the Social Democratic Women's Committee in 1930, but appears to have been marginalised within the SDAP and failed to gain a place on its Executive Committee. She was dissuaded from standing for parliament by Otto Bauer, but was the first woman to be elected as a shop-steward at the Arbeiterkammer in 1931. The following year she was elected as chair of the local party in Vienna's First District. This was the highest official position she ever achieved in the SDAP, but it did give her the opportunity to take part

31 Cf. Walter Göhring, Anna Boschek. Erste Gewerkschafterin im Parlament. Biographie einer außergewöhnlichen Arbeiterin, in: idem ed., Anna Boschek. Erste Gewerkschafterin im Parlament, Wien 1998, 153.

32 As Käthe and her husband Otto were under police surveillance after 1934, she travelled and published using false names. Cf. Herbert Steiner, Um Demokratie und Freiheit: Käthe Leichter in der Illegalität, in: Walter Göhring ed., Käthe Leichter: Gewerkschaftliche Frauenpolitik, Wien 1996, 20.

33 Draft of a letter from Marguerite Thibert (no date, probably 1932) to Käthe Leichter. A hand-written note at the bottom of the letter refers to "an expert from the German-speaking world". A copy of this letter was kindly provided by Dr Françoise Thébaud.

in the Extraordinary Party Conference in October 1933, where she delivered a forceful attack on the party's strategy to oppose the growing political repression in Austria.[34]

Käthe Leichter's work at the Arbeiterkammer came to an abrupt end on 12 February 1934, when the Dollfuss regime ordered troops to open fire on socialist homes and buildings and banned the party, its newspapers and organisations. She and her husband, Otto, went into hiding and then fled to Switzerland, but returned illegally within months to work with the Revolutionary Socialists. Her precarious situation did not stop her from unsuccessfully trying to sue the Arbeiterkammer in September 1935 for failing to issue the three months redundancy pay she was entitled to after her dismissal.[35] After the Anschluss, she was arrested by the Gestapo in May 1938 and held in the Rossauer Lände and Landesgericht prisons in Vienna until December 1939, when she was transported to Ravensbrück concentration camp. She died in the Bernburg 'Euthanasia' Centre in March 1942, one of 1,500 women who were moved from Ravensbrück that spring and were put to death in "Aktion T4, Sonderbehandlung 14f13" (Operation T4, Special Treatment 14f13), an early experiment in mass gassing.

Käthe Leichter's name is synonymous with socialism, anti-fascism, and victimhood. But the major achievement of her life was the battle for the rights of working women, including equal pay for equal work, the extension of social security to all working women, protection for working mothers, and the exemption of women and youths from night work. She mobilised working women.

34 Außerordentlicher Parteitag der Sozialdemokratischen Arbeiterpartei Deutschösterreichs, Wien, 14.10.1933, Parteitag, Mappe 65A, Verein der Geschichte der ArbeiterInnenbewegung.

35 Cf. Neue Freie Presse, 11.9.1935, 9.