

Three German Women

Three German Women:

*Personal Histories from
the Twentieth Century*

By

Erika Esau

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In Memory of

Thomas Elsaesser (1943-2019)

Film historian, filmmaker, cultural historian, and too late a friend. He guided this project with his enthusiasm and generosity. He was, for me,

"The path through the mirror"

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Nenn's Glück, Herz, Liebe, Gott! Gefühl ist alles!

—Erika Esau, Pasadena, California, May 2020

INTRODUCTION

“We can never entirely recover what has been forgotten.”
—Walter Benjamin, 1932¹

“What is the point of writing if not to unearth things?”
—Annie Ernaux, 2019²

The first years of the twenty-first century have seen a flood of stories in all mediums about the “forgotten” women of history, the “rediscovery”—or more correctly, the overdue recognition—of women’s achievements in every field of endeavor. These efforts are taking place around the world, as women’s voices are demanding movement toward real equality in every sphere. We have learned that women, and Afro-American women at that, were instrumental in the space race to the moon. Women scientists helped unlock the secrets of DNA. Women artists and inventors have created some of our most significant products of modern design, only to have men take most of the credit for their production. Current interest in World War II, the Holocaust, and Nazi Germany have led to articles such as “The Forgotten Women Scientists Who Fled the Holocaust for the United States.”³ In 2018, the 100th anniversary exhibitions commemorating German women’s suffrage brought to light the largely unknown leaders of the country’s women’s movements: Clara Zetkin, Helene Lange, and Hedwig Dohm.⁴ In the same year, Vienna’s Belvedere Museum presented a magnificent exhibition of the myriad of Austrian women artists who worked in the early 1900s, along with the much-lauded figures Gustav Klimt and Egon Schiele.⁵ The rectifying of these omissions addresses and, to some extent, validates the vigorous efforts of recent feminist writers and revisionist historians. Every day new books appear and new films and videos are produced that confront patriarchal attitudes with the factual evidence of what individual women have been able to accomplish. Against all odds, and often in the midst of tremendous political upheaval, these women contributed to significant societal and cultural changes.

This project is my personal contribution to this revision of the historical record, adding more stories to these exhilarating waves of “rediscoveries.” As a young woman of the 1960s and 70s, I experienced

directly the immense transformations that have affected women's lives in the last fifty years. Most of the time I was oblivious to the significance of these changes, or assumed that, having participated in a successful march or campaign, that progress had been made, and we would all then proceed toward ever greater enlightenment and inclusion. I assumed that I was never going to face any kind of oppression or discrimination myself just because I was a woman. Until I joined the workforce in academe, I naively believed that hard work and intellect alone would be rewarded without any obstacles caused by my sex. One of the reasons I assumed that my professional path would be a smooth one, evaluated on merit alone, was that I had as exemplary models the three women who are the subjects of this book. They had all overcome obstacles much greater than any I have ever had to face.

For many years I had thought about telling the stories of these women who had been such inspirations for me. I had even fantasized, some time in the 1980s, about writing a profile of Irmgard Rexroth-Kern for *The New Yorker*. It was the internet and the development of the blogosphere that led me to begin an affectionate documentation of my mentors, who had become, despite their tenaciously creative lives, nearly invisible in public discourse or in literary reminiscences. The first shock of realization of this invisibility came when I learned of Maria Steinberg's death. The death of her husband Robert Steinberg prompted, quite rightly, a reverent eulogy in several professional journals and at his university. It was only then that I learned that his beloved wife had died the year before. Despite her many achievements and her engrossing life story, I found no obituaries, no mention of her in any of the places where I would have expected to find some announcements of her passing.⁶ This lack led me to write one for her, and to decide to commemorate my other heroines. At first, these stories were only meant to be modest blog entries for the enjoyment of my friends and those who happened to stumble upon my blog.

The events growing out of my next effort provided the real impetus to write this book. As I began research into the life of my first art history teacher Anna Spitzmüller—Austria's first woman curator, one of the last members of a family that had served Emperor Franz Joseph in the Austro-Hungarian Dual Monarchy—I found some written evidence of her scholarly work, but nothing compared to that of the men in her family, even at the museums where she had worked for forty years. I decided that she at least needed an entry in Wikipedia. After submitting my completed and well-researched page to the gatekeepers of the online encyclopedia, I received a response saying that the submission was rejected because there

was not enough secondary literature written about her to justify her inclusion—that she was, in effect, deservedly forgotten if no one had yet seen fit to write about her. When I responded that the lack of information about this worthy individual was the reason I wrote the piece, and after persuasive arguments from other contributors who were themselves addressing the paucity of entries for accomplished women, the overseers eventually relented.⁷

This incident, and the dearth of recognition of my other subjects in public documents, made me realize that their stories needed to be told, before they became entirely “forgotten” women, as so many others have been. Each of them came from prominent families in which the accomplishments of the men had been noted and written about, while the women of the families had not. Each of their stories offers exemplary evidence from a woman’s point of view of what daily life was like during the most turbulent periods in twentieth-century European history, and more specifically, in the German-speaking realm.

These three women were born in the first years of the last century: 1903, 1907, and 1919. Two of them, Maria Weber and Irmgard Kern, were born in Berlin, into prosperous families of the *Bildungsbürgertum*, the intellectual upper-middle class so prevalent and revered in the German cities of the Wilhelmine years and into the Weimar Republic of the 1920s. The historian Fritz Stern describes the term *Bildungsbürgertum* as “that goal of self-formation and education that sprang in part from knowing and exulting in the great works of culture, the classics, poetry, music and the arts.”⁸ As daughters of this class and with educated parents, they were privileged enough to receive the best schooling available to girls and young women in the Prussian capital—an education for girls that was hard earned. Only in the early years of the twentieth century was advanced education available to females in Germany. As the American feminist Katherine Anthony reported in 1915 in her study of women’s movements in Germany, admission to higher education in Prussia was chiefly the result of the concerted efforts by recently formed and consolidated women’s groups: “After twenty years of hard labor, they have achieved comparative success in the form of the modern Lyceum, which has at last replaced the old-fashioned Tochterschule. The dearly bought Lyceum is only one instance of the high cost of even the moderate reforms accomplished by the woman’s movement.”⁹

Of an even more elite station, Anna Spitzmüller was a daughter of the aristocracy of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Born in the Moravian provinces but raised in the imperial capital of Vienna, she, too, had forward-thinking parents, at least in terms of educating girls. When Anna

was young, the first secondary schools for females in Austria had opened only a few years before, even in cosmopolitan Vienna. The Spitzmüller family lived a few streets from the first of these, the Mädchenschule Rahlgasse, opened in 1892. Anna studied with some of the earliest and greatest woman educators of the era. Most of her young adult years, however, took place in what Marjorie Perloff has called “the shaky little Republic of Austria between the two world wars,” when the old imperial order ended and that world of privilege and cultivation disintegrated.¹⁰

The women grew up as dutiful daughters of cultivated society in these vibrant metropolises in politically chaotic and clamorous times. They witnessed, were affected by, and in some cases participated in, many of the transformations that define the coming of modernity, revolution, and political disruption in Central Europe. While none would have considered themselves active feminists, these women nonetheless were pioneers, having professional lives made possible by the century’s gains in the sphere of women’s rights. Maria Weber became a mathematician who worked with Nobel Prize winners such as Richard Feynman, had famous scientists such as William Feller as her advisors, and married one of the best mathematicians of her day; they were recognized by many as a professional team. Anna Spitzmüller studied with the great Viennese art historians, became Austria’s first female art curator, and was instrumental, along with the American “Monuments Men,” in saving Austrian art treasures from confiscation by the Nazis as well as pilferage by the Allies after World War II. Finally, Irmgard Rexroth-Kern became a journalist who wrote for the same papers as Walter Benjamin did, knew all of 1920s Berlin’s literary and cultural figures, interviewed the American author Thomas Wolfe, and at university worked with such names as Karl Jaspers, Karl Mannheim and Paul Tillich. Each woman in her own way had to confront the tragedies of the twentieth century, political and personal. Each persevered and contributed, perhaps unknowingly, to the increasing participation of women in public life.

Berlin and Vienna: the contrast between these two cities in the twentieth century could not be more stark, despite their common language and, by the 1910s, abundant cultural exchange and interaction. Berlin represents the new, and after the routing of the conservative Prussian monarchy after World War I, the modern: the European model for all things of the future. The ancient imperial capital Vienna, by contrast, especially after World War I had caused the extinction of the centuries-old multicultural Austro-Hungarian Empire, remained burdened by an illustrious past. For many decades it could not quite overcome this legacy and establish a modern identity. The fates of my trio mirror the vagaries of

history as played out against these cities' responses to and initiation of sociopolitical decisions outside women's realms of influence.

The title of the book, "Three German Women," requires explanation, as the inclusion of Anna Spitzmüller's story, centered entirely on her life in Vienna, Austria, brings up the delicate issue of what constitutes "German" identity in the multicultural soup that was the Habsburg Empire—an issue that still haunts Central Europe today. As my own intellectual and aesthetic predilections developed most profoundly during my time in Vienna, I am clearly aware that contemporary Austrians have been compelled by horrific historical circumstances to distinguish themselves vigorously from their more powerful neighbor Germany. These politically determined distinctions, however, are national rather than cultural, and the idea of "nationhood" is, in the case of this region, a modern construct. As native speakers of German and as members of the ruling class of the Dual Monarchy, the Spitzmüller family identified with Germanic culture and language, as did so many of the Empire's citizens. Anna's uncle Alexander Spitzmüller describes this cultural affinity and the vexed question of German nationalism very well in his memoirs: "I am convinced that what we used to call the German cultural community in the old monarchy is and remains an undeniable historical, cultural-political tendency, and has nothing to do with political aspirations."¹¹ Austria as it exists today is entirely German speaking, but with a culture and political life as separate from the German nation as Switzerland's is. In this spirit of cultural affinity, I felt justified in incorporating my Austrian woman into this title. Besides, "Three German-speaking women" or "Three Women of the German-speaking Realm" was just too awkward to be considered as an attractive title.

As this project progressed and as I uncovered more astonishing details about the lives of these women, my purpose in recounting their stories broadened. They had to endure the terrible catastrophes that European history imposed upon them in the bloody century in which they lived, but endure and survive and succeed they did. Initially, I thought I would write an additional chapter placing their lives into the context of their time and place, emphasizing specifically the advances and setbacks that German women confronted in gaining access to education and living intellectual lives with professional careers. In the end, I have decided to let their stories speak for themselves. In the case of Irmgard Rexroth-Kern, her story as I could reconstruct it gains strength by the inclusion here, as an Appendix, of her extraordinary autobiographical reminiscences, published anonymously when she was only twenty-seven. Translating her text gave me great insight into, and concrete information about, the daily

life of a young German girl of “good family” in the early decades of the century. If for no other reason than seeing this memoir brought to a larger audience, I wanted to bring this book to publication. The second Appendix, from the unpublished manuscript of the brother of Maria Weber Steinberg, Jan Webber, recounts in vivid detail what life was like on a country estate in 1920s Germany—a world and lifestyle as distant from our own as that of the Austro-Hungarian Empire of the nineteenth century.

At the end of each chapter, I have included a timeline chronology juxtaposing significant dates in the women’s lives against the larger events taking place in their locations at the same time. I begin each chapter with a short account of how I met them, and how our lives affected each other’s. The chapters also include, in separate sections, information about the men in their lives (and one woman!) who gained prominence in their fields and who exerted influence on them as fathers, husbands, important relatives, friends, or literary models. Additional information and reference to further readings appear in the notes. I am a fan of notes that contain more than simple bibliographic information, as a way to include interesting details that would not easily fit into the text itself.

The main thing these three women had in common was that I knew and admired them. They were, for me, living conduits into vanished worlds about which I wanted to learn more. The events of their lives still have an impact on our lives today. They did not know each other, although in some instances, their paths may have crossed, and their circles of friends, especially in the arts, intersected. In the beginning, I simply wanted to retrieve what I could of their lives, of their accomplishments and trials as women, to make sure they would not be entirely lost to history. As my research progressed, as I dug into primary sources in archives, another significant theme arose that their stories can illuminate. I hope that their examples will help to obliterate the enduring stereotype that Germans and Austrians who were alive when Hitler and his monstrous dictatorship came to power were either enthusiastic Nazis or radicals vehemently opposed to the regime. Each of these women was profoundly affected by the suppression of incipient democracy in their countries, but none of them were either active proponents or seriously engaged as political opponents. They had to make drastic, at times compromising, choices that determined forever the course their lives would take. Nonetheless, as with most people under Nazi rule, they did what they could to maintain some semblance of normality. They tried to get on with their lives and to preserve the best that their education and cultural heritage had given them. In a famous, and famously controversial, speech given at the Library of Congress in 1945, the grand man of German letters

Thomas Mann, then in exile, beseeched his audience to remember this fact. “There are not two Germanys, a good one and a bad one, but only one, whose best turned into evil through devilish cunning.”¹² In our present political climate, dictatorial impulses around the globe are, bafflingly, upending many of the gains made since that last world war, erasing for some the lessons we should have learned from the tumultuous history these women had to face. While we do not have to stand by in complete helplessness as these events out of our control occur, it is perhaps beneficial to be reminded that ordinary people should not necessarily be painted as traitors or heroes to a cause, as “good” or “bad,” if they are simply living their lives with as much grace and perseverance as they can.

Notes

¹ Walter Benjamin, “The Reading Box,” in *Berlin Childhood around 1900*. Trans. Howard Eiland (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), 140.

² Annie Ernaux, *A Girl’s Story*. Trans. Alison L. Strayer (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2020); quoted in Madeleine Schwartz, “Living Memory,” *The New Yorker*, April 20, 2020, 77.

³ Lorraine Boissonneault, “The Forgotten Women Scientists Who Fled the Holocaust for the United States,” *Smithsonian Magazine*, November 9, 2017. <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/forgotten-women-scientists-who-fled-holocaust-united-states-180967166/>

⁴ “100 years of female suffrage in Germany: the unknown story,” *TheLocal.de*, November 7, 2018. <https://www.thelocal.de/20181107/100-years-of-female-suffrage-in-germany-the-unknown-story>

⁵ *Stadt der Frauen: Künstlerinnen in Wien 1900-1938/City of Women: Female Artists in Vienna 1900-1938*, exhib cat., January 25-May 19, 2019 (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 2019).

⁶ Erika Esau, “Maria and other German-speaking women of influence,” <https://esauboeck.wordpress.com/2014/08/14/maria-and-other-german-speaking-women-of-influence/>; and Erika Esau, “Maria’s story,” <https://esauboeck.wordpress.com/2014/11/05/marias-story/>

⁷ “Anna Spitzmüller,” in English Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anna_Spitzm%C3%BCller

⁸ Fritz Stern, *Five Germans I Have Known: A History and Memoir* (New York: Farrar Straus & Giroux, 2007), 17.

⁹ Katherine Anthony, *Feminism in Germany and Scandinavia*, (New York: Henry Holt, 1915), 40.

¹⁰ Marjorie Perloff, *Edge of Irony: Modernism in the Shadow of The Habsburg Empire* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), xi.

¹¹ Spitzmüller, Alexander, ‘...und hat auch Ursach, es zu lieben’ (Vienna: Wilhelm-Frick-Verlag, 1955), 20-21. Translation by the author. Unless otherwise specified, all translations from the German in this book are by the author.

¹² Thomas Mann, *Germany and the Germans* (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, 1945), 18. <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/006168882>

CHAPTER ONE

“YOU MUST LOOK AT THE WHOLE THING, NOT JUST PART”: ANNA VON SPITZMÜLLER (1903-2001)



Fig. 1-1. Anna Spitzmüller, near Salzburg, 1969. Photo: Ginny Karber

“Vienna, to me it was the tuning fork for the entire world. Saying the word Vienna was like striking a tuning fork and then listening to find what tone it called forth in the person I was talking to. It was how I tested people. . . Vienna wasn't just a city, it was a tone that either one carries forever in one's soul or one does not. It was the most beautiful thing in my life.”

—Sándor Márai, 1942¹

Vienna was never the same after her first lost war. She changed little in losing her second.

—Janet Flanner, 1947²

We were a group of sixteen young American women (and one Indian!) who went to Vienna for our Junior Year Abroad in 1969-70. Some of us were German majors, and we all had studied at least some German, since all of our classes were to be conducted in German—or were supposed to be. Many of us were also interested in art history, so we were looking forward to visiting the legendary museums of the Habsburgs and examining the buildings and sculptures of this ancient capital city. Only later were we to realize how fortunate we were to encounter from the very beginning the most inspiring art historian that Vienna could have offered to a group of callow young women from America [fig. 1-1].



Fig. 1-2. Temple Buell College's Junior Year Abroad group to Vienna, 1970. Author is top row, second left. Photo: Temple Buell College Yearbook, 1970.

Dr. Anna Spitzmüller had been teaching groups of Americans at the Austro-American Institute of Education since 1930.³ Everyone called her "Spitzi," or in formal settings, Frau Doktor Spitzmüller. We met her the first night we arrived in Vienna, as we got acquainted with the families with whom we would be living that year[**fig. 1-2**]. After we settled in to our new homes, the Institute arranged a bus tour for us through Austria. Spitzi accompanied us on the tour. She told us about all the monuments we were seeing, including Carolingian ruins and a monument associated with Ottokar II of Bohemia. She had amazing recall and spoke perfect English. Despite the mandate that our classes be conducted in German, she often spoke to us in English instead, since she wanted us to concentrate on and understand the art. She was the most knowledgeable and amiable guide one could ask for. On this trip, we went as far as Kärnten (Carinthia), the southernmost province of Austria, a place she knew well and particularly loved. As we rode through the Austrian countryside and mountains, she regaled us with anecdotes and stories, sang songs, and was always concerned about our well-being. As we entered the Carinthian Valley in the middle of the Alps, my roommate and I suffered terrible headaches—the only time I ever had a migraine—which Spitzi explained was because of the famous Föhn winds. All Austrians believe that the Föhn can cause all kinds of ailments and explosive behavior, she said.⁴ She wrapped us in scarves and let us have dinner brought to our rooms[**fig. 1-3**].



Fig. 1-3. Spitzi in a dirndl at Melk, ca. 1990. Photo: Stephen Hemenway



Fig. 1-4. Spitzzi and my group at Klosterneuburg, Winter 1970. Photo: Author

Once we began classes back in Vienna, Spitzzi took us nearly every day to a museum or a monastery or walked around the city with us to talk about buildings. She never gave a lecture with slides in a classroom, except for a final exam. We went to the Kunsthistorisches Museum at least once a week, and would focus on one room or one painting or one collection each time. I can still see her standing in front of Rubens' *Portrait of Helene Fourment*, and saying that Helene looked like she had just stepped out of the bath—"to her husband's pleasure"—and we, naive ones that we were, would all blush. She knew everything about the history of the works in the Museum: on one occasion, she recounted how exciting it was when the conservationists cleaned Holbein's *Jane Seymour* and they saw for the first time that she had a black headdress, and that the background was blue. "It took a long time for this painting to speak to me, but she does now," she said, and we girls from the Midwest and California thought she was a little daft. When she noticed our attention flagging, she would say "Time for Apfelstrudel!", and we would go to the Museum's cafe for treats. When we took excursions to old churches and monasteries, still not heated and most of them chillingly frigid, she would bring a whole suitcase of sweaters for us mini-skirted ones, so that we would not be uncomfortable [fig. 1-4]. If we were on extended *Ausflüge*,

she would bring along her dog Asi. When we had stopped for coffee, she would often fall asleep—very briefly—and her head would dip into her *Schlag*. When she woke up, she would continue talking as if nothing had happened.

After a few weeks of visits to Vienna's many museums, she began to walk us around her city—she still referred to Prince Eugene of Savoy, the hero of the battle against the Turks in 1683 and creator of what is now the Belvedere Museum, as “our beloved Prince Eugene”—and would explain the architectural history of every building. Soon she would ask us, “So what is it?”, meaning who built it and when. When we would blink unknowingly, she would explain that the building was a Renaissance structure with a Baroque facade, and she would tell us how we could know that from the features that we could see. “You must look at the whole thing, not just part,” she would say.⁵ This on-the-spot analysis was the very best training a budding art historian could have received.

We had never met anyone like her. She was, we soon discovered, the daughter of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and of privilege—two categories about which we suburban American girls had only the vaguest concept. We admired her Baroque garnet earrings and brooches, which, she told us, were inherited from her grandmother or mother. As English speakers just trying to figure out in German when to use the formal *Sie* and the informal *Du* in addressing people, we were shocked when we heard one of the Institute's secretaries, a much younger, mousier woman, use *Du* with Frau Dr. Spitzmüller. We then learned that both Spitzzi and the secretary were of the aristocracy, and so would have been allowed such usage by tradition. These kinds of remnants of an older world order fascinated us tremendously.

She knew everybody and everything about Viennese art and its collections, and we only later recognized how privileged we had been in getting to meet such important cultural figures and to have experiences that only Spitzzi could have implemented. She once managed to arrange for us a display of many of the Kunsthistorisches Museum's amazing Rudolphine gadgets—all the clockworks and mechanisms created out of precious jewels and with intricate cog works constructed for Rudolph II of Prague in the sixteenth century. I can still see them, ticking across the floor of the Museum's *Kunstkammer*, tingling and chiming and twirling away.

Spitzzi took us to meet a real princess—a British woman who had married a Habsburg (or was it a Liechtenstein?) who lived in a Renaissance *Palais* and served us tea in delicate Biedermeier cups (we were terrified we were going to break them). The year we were in Vienna also saw one

of the first "rediscoveries" of the artists Gustav Klimt (1862-1918) and Egon Schiele (1890-1918). We all swooned over their artworks. Spitzzi consequently took us to meet Christian M. Nebehay (1909-2003), the son of Klimt's first dealer Gustav Nebehay (1881-1935). He still owned and sold in his gallery major works available by both artists.⁶ She had been acquainted with the father, and had known the son ever since he opened his gallery in Annagasse in 1946. Spitzzi was also a good pianist, and knew the musical world very well. Through her connections, we visited the home of the principal violinist of the Vienna Philharmonic, who allowed us to study his instruments along with his substantial collection of manuscripts and modern prints.

Then there was her apartment, on the Windmühlgasse, where she had lived since 1913. She invited us to visit there because on her living room walls were major works of art by Egon Schiele, Toulouse-Lautrec, and lesser known but just as wonderful artists such as Ludwig Jungnickel (1881-1965) [fig. 1-5]. Most of us had never been in a home that had real art on the walls, by artists whose names we knew. She told us that she had purchased many of them immediately after the War, often to help out destitute friends who had lost everything else and were willing to part with art in exchange for hard cash, or even food. According to her comments in her interview in 1993, the Jungnickel that dominated the walls in her sitting room were given to her as a gift by the artist.



Fig. 1-5. Ludwig Jungnickel, Study for *Paradies der Tiere* frieze, Palais Stoclet, Brussels, 1903. This may be the very drawing that Spitzzi had in her apartment. Photo: Phillips catalog, March 3, 2011, <https://www.phillips.com/detail/ludwig-heinrich-jungnickel/NY05>

After our academic year in the city ended in May, I stayed on in Vienna through the summer, and continued to see Spitzzi. She convinced me that I wanted to be an art historian, and I wanted to take advantage of