

## Special Section: Germany

### HISTORICAL PATTERNS OF A WOMEN'S PROFESSION IN GERMANY

by Helga Lüdtke

"After all, that is what every librarian secretly longs for: visible results, which, however, generally fail to materialize.... Only this explains why so many passionately pursue statistics, classification schemes, shelf arrangements and easily become comic figures to outsiders. Above all women, particularly if they do not have husbands and children, live for call number systems and accession lists and grow old with them. Take colleague Westermann as an example... who always worked faithfully, reliably, precisely, who was always present, without whom the library mechanism would have got tangled up, a supporting pillar so to speak, plain, mossy. Generations of young people, who knew everything better, held her in contempt and learned from her and scurried past her, driven by ambition, which she lacked, ready for confessions which she refused to make, a comic figure to be recorded in the inventory, a person whose heart belonged to this library exclusively. Strange, by the way, and surely to be explained more through history than biology, that the renunciation of fame, recognition, promotion, higher salary... the lack of ambition, the willingness to serve can be found much more often in women than men" (de Bruyn 1969, 29).

This emphatic portrait of an older public librarian in the 1950s by Günter de Bruyn, an East German writer and former librarian himself, can be read simply as an accumulation of stereotypes of female librarians — and, thereby, be shrugged off. But even stereotypes refer to lived and experienced reality through their simplification, exaggerations, and sexism. The old image associated with the female librarian of an earlier age — that of a mousy gray old spinster — may not have been applicable at all to individuals, yet, it would be incorrect to replace it with an image of a self-confident and ambitious female librarian derived

from our present, particularly feminist, point of view. Colleague Westermann, referred to above, reflects precisely the life and working conditions of educated women in the decades after the turn of the century and the reality of their working life which they helped to create. Yet the historical development of this typical women's profession is hardly known.

In 1979 "The Role of Women in Librarianship, 1876-1976" (Weibel 1979) presented, for the first time, a comprehensive account and analysis of librarianship as a women's profession in the United States. At that time German librarians were only gradually beginning to realize that they were working in a women's profession. Until then, library historians — almost without exception male — had hardly paid attention to the part of women in the development of public libraries. The names of female librarians, as well as their work, were forgotten.

Even in the histories of female work and professions in Germany, women librarians have been ignored. There might be several reasons for this. There were few female librarians when compared to other female-intensive professions and they were not independently organized as were elementary school teachers, welfare workers and commercial assistants. The only exception to this was during the period between 1907 and 1920 when the "Vereinigung bibliothekarisch arbeitender Frauen" was organized. Also, our librarians played a negligible role in unions or political parties, in contrast to the United States where women working in libraries have had their own organizations within and outside the influential American Library Association — Women Library Workers, ALA Feminist Task Force and the ALA Committee on the Status of Women in Librarianship. Women in Germany have seldom articulated their specific understanding of library work. Data referring to gender and the social and economic situation of librarians and library assistants have not been collected or recorded up to now. Although the first German female librarians were in close contact with the women's movement during and after the turn of the century, they remained restrained and the profession was hardly influenced by their activities.

Why should we be interested in the "young ladies" of library history? Librarianship was considered in Germany to be a "rep-

utable" profession for women, although without much of a reputation. Its female members referred to it as "befitting their rank", and more than 75% were recruited from the educated bourgeois class. Thus it is an occupation particularly well suited for developing an insight into the relationship between gender and professional life — and into the self-imposed handicaps to female emancipation. The study of women's role in the history of librarianship is not only of importance for comparative studies on women's professional work. It might also contribute to the project of changing the image of the profession, an image formed largely by men and one that must be questioned, especially during the training of new — female and male — librarians.

Librarianship developed here as a virtual model for "feminine" non-industrial employment. It supposedly required a special aptitude based on female disposition and capabilities and was characterized from the start by a lack of training, "women's pay" (i.e. significantly lower salaries compared to men doing the same or comparable work), exclusion from upper-level positions, under-representation on the boards of professional organizations, low levels of union organization, and the necessity of leaving the profession at marriage, which resulted in very high rates of unmarried, single women.

#### **"Functionalizing" the Feminine Character**

The assumption of physical and psychological differences in the nature of men and women were defined and accepted by German society long before the turn of the century. Both "gender characteristics", according to these conceptions, complemented one another and formed a harmonious unity. The domain appropriate to women was seen as the family and home — the private sphere — while the public sphere was reserved for men (Hausen 1976).

Precisely this specifically "female social character" (Thürmer-Rohr 1988), which defines the limits of the sphere of women's activity, was used to pry open new employment opportunities for educated women in the late 19th century. At the same time, however, these ascribed attributes marked the new women's professions in a lasting manner. Almost all gender-specific attributes ascribed to women — such as devotion, modesty, depen-

dence, industriousness, self-denial, adaptation, purity, emotion, empathy, kindness, and tactfulness (Hausen 1976, 368) — can be found in those texts in which the first female librarians were assured that they, as women, had a special ability for library work. In these texts the organizational structures of the profession were also codified and legitimized — a male oriented hierarchy, female subordination, vertical segregation and lower pay for women.

#### **The Concept of "Organized Motherliness"**

Female librarians claimed the quality of "motherliness" for themselves from early on. They wanted to underscore the then insufficient female participation in public education and show thereby their own special ability for the profession even if their position within it was subordinate to that of their male colleagues. The representatives of the liberal women's movement, in particular Helene Lange and Gertrud Bäumer, took up the concepts of "femininity" and "motherliness" and advocated bringing these qualities to bear on the public sphere (Stoehr 1987, 226). They tried to use these concepts to mobilize and politicize women, to prepare them for activity outside the private sphere. The German women's movement did not want to do away with the division of labor between men and women altogether, but rather to overcome the unequal distribution of power between the sexes (227). Attributing the quality of "motherliness" to all women was not meant to limit them solely to marriage and motherhood.

Bringing "motherliness" into the public sphere was also seen as supportive of women without children (230). The integration of women into male professions — as in the case of librarianship — was not socially rejected because of a fear of women as competitors, but rather because such integration of women was only considered possible through a loss of female identity (232). Women in a men's profession would become "defeminized." The women's movement countered this concern by trying to legitimize the work of childless women by "abstracting 'motherliness' from actual motherhood" (235). Thus, "motherliness" increasingly became a key idea for an identity which all women had in common. The combination of career with marriage and motherhood seemed unreasonable, so the model of a working

wife was opposed on the grounds that it would discriminate against women and relegate them to an existence as "incomplete people" unless they performed twice as well as men.

The unmarried status of female doctors, lawyers, teachers and social workers [and female librarians — H.L.], undoubtedly had advantages for the creation and the consolidation of the 'solidarity of all women,' supposed to be the essential element of the female attitude to working life (236).

From the example of social work, as well as library work, it was possible to claim "that no basic difference should exist between the 'cultural tasks' of women in public and socially acceptable housework" (241). Such use of the concept of "motherliness" had an impact not only on the self-confidence of welfare workers (the "Volksmütter") (Zeller 1987; Sachsse 1986; Peters 1984), nursery school teachers, social workers (Riemann 1981, 1986), and nurses (Bischoff 1984), but also on the professional attitude of the first generation of female librarians.

#### The "Familialization" of Professional Work

Using nursing and social work as examples, it has been shown how the "familialization" of professional work was effected. The feminine qualities associated with nursing supplemented by technical/medical knowledge were "quite similar to the qualities of the ideal bourgeois housewife and mother" (Kickbusch 1987, 198). These feminine qualities, which were considered indispensable for family cohesion and household organization, were thought to be important in library work as well. For instance, in advising readers or working with children in the library. On the other hand, a high level of education, otherwise not normally expected of women (i.e. wide reading, knowledge of literature and foreign languages, broad and deep general knowledge), had to be acquired and demonstrated. In addition, the unmarried female librarian, as a potential wife and mother, had to subordinate herself to the patriarchal employer-employee relationship and otherwise prove her femininity (200).

A "librarian's family" analogous to the "doctor's family" (doctor = father, nurse = mother, patient = child), however, cannot be posited because in libraries, as opposed to hospitals, the patriar-

chal position is often lacking. In public libraries and reading rooms, at least in small and medium sized ones, the librarian was usually left on her own. However, in the larger library systems of the cities leadership positions were reserved for academically trained male librarians and it was an exception for women to rise within the hierarchy.

#### Library Work as "Housework"

In connection with the interest of the new women's movement of the '60s and '70s in the subject of "housework" and of the distinction between paid and unpaid labor, there have been some efforts to investigate the relations between the development of "social professions" and housework and to question whether or not women's professions in general can be defined as "close to housework" (for example, Riemann 1981, 1986; Beck-Gernsheim 1976; Klewitz 1989). While librarianship is not a "classical" women's profession in the sense that nursery school teaching, midwifery, nursing, etc. are, it is possible to show its "closeness to housework" (Garrison 1992; Lüdtkke 1992). As a "public housewife" (Riemann 1986) the librarian was responsible for the order, functioning and atmosphere of the library, and also for the education, the training and the well-being of its users. Thus, as it was supposedly part of a woman's nature to deal with children, she was "naturally" fit to do work that required her to communicate culture and education. When the qualifications for such work were seen as an aspect of woman's nature, needing only to be supplemented a bit with specialized knowledge and skills, monetary compensation was hardly deemed necessary. Thus, salaries were low, and the attitude of librarians to their *earnings* was ambivalent. For such "nice", "satisfying" and "suitable" work, they pursued higher salaries very reluctantly and when they did so it was more because they had to become economically independent than because they were aware of the worth of their work.

#### Gender Segregation, the Division of Labor, and Hierarchy

Women's occupations were distinguished, and still are today, by their helping and assisting functions (Beck-Gernsheim 1976). The entry of women into German public libraries at the turn of the century was possible and necessary because the library directors,

usually academics, were no longer able to handle the growing tasks and workload. Auxiliary workers, educated but willing to work for low wages, could be found among the highly motivated young women of the educated bourgeois class. Men stayed away from the lower ranks of library work, not because such work was considered exclusively the domain of women, but, rather, because of the poor working conditions and uncertain — sometimes stringent, sometimes loose — educational requirements. Women were simply excluded from positions of leadership and responsibility. Only after 1908, for instance, were women admitted to universities in Prussia and university degrees were often required for library positions. This state of affairs allowed a hierarchical, gender segregated system to develop in libraries — a system of organization that was only strengthened by the fact that public libraries were integrated into the rigid structure of longstanding municipal administrations.

A corresponding division of labor was derived from this vertical *gender* segregation: separate areas of competence and responsibility, and development of different skills. Within library work an additional division developed: cataloging and library work with children were considered the absolute domain of women.

In public libraries, female librarians had to compete with men on the same — that is, the lower and middle — level, particularly in times when jobs were scarce, such as after World War I and during and after the Depression. Such competition did not exist among other women professionals such as nursery school teachers, medical-technical assistants, midwives, nurses or welfare workers. Often enough, women learned what competition with men meant: "having to outdo them in terms of work efficiency and qualifications" (*Was soll unsere Tochter werden?* 1927,4). On the average, women librarians were better trained and educated than their male counterparts — a fact which is also true for the female-intensive occupations. Male librarians were promoted over women not because they possessed a good or even better education, but rather because of their "gender character" and their role as breadwinners for their families. The lack of male competitors offered the few men in this profession very favorable career prospects. Long-term careers for women librarians were not impossible, but were usually accompanied

by discrimination and resistance and promotion to leadership positions required women to be unmarried and, particularly, without children.

Today there still exists an uneven ratio of male and female library workers: of 100 library employees, 80 are females and 20 males; of 100 librarians in leading positions, 80 are males and 20 are females. One can see that it is as erroneous to assume a "factual matriarchy in libraries" (Rost 1990) as it is to generalize the idea of a "male dominated profession."

### Librarianship as "Life's Work"

In contrast to saleswomen or women office workers, whose average working life was relatively short (Nienhaus 1982), most librarians of the first decades after the turn of the century regarded their work as a *life-long profession*. Those who did not marry and stayed in their profession (about 95% were single) held very different life-expectations. They developed an orientation which made possible, and demanded, complete devotion to those they wanted to serve: readers and users of the library. More than a few librarians turned "inward", concentrating completely on the daily internal routines of cataloging, classification schemes and circulation procedures. For some of them the library became a substitute for family, or even became "family."

### Professionalization, Professional Status and Image

A profession which is not granted professional status by the public but which has always striven for it, tends to be intensely self-conscious. Hardly any other profession is as concerned with its image and status as are librarians of both sexes. The "interest in professionalization can be effectively carried through only when special training is required in order to work in the field" (Riemann 1981, 76). This training must be long enough "so that the society views the professional as possessing skills which are beyond the reach of the untrained layman" (Garrison 1992). Professionals stand out as *specialists* in their field, as experts, with certain, unmistakable competencies. It is, however, very difficult to revise widespread images of usually female-dominated occupations as non- or semi-professions, especially if these professions appear to remain "close to housework." This is especially true of librarianship as a female-intensive profession,

which can be performed in principle by volunteers (usually women) which consists of a significant number of "invisible" tasks and is still struggling for a theoretical base that would assure it's standing as a profession.

### Feminization

Garrison was the first theorist, in the United States, to use the concept of "feminization" in describing librarianship. Feminization is the process through which a profession comes to be dominated by women, characterized by low wages and second-class status, and considered an "appropriate" sphere for women ostensibly because the work involved is performed best by workers with "feminine traits" (patience, care-giving, selflessness, grace, the ability to tolerate boring, repetitious tasks and, at the same time, pay close attention to detail). Garrison describes the barely successful attempts by librarians to gain recognition as a profession and extends the effects of feminization to the uncertain status of the library as a cultural institution. Female librarians willingly adapted themselves to the roles established for them and assisted in maintaining a discriminatory status quo by their lack of striving for autonomy, lack of motivation for promotion, and their limited professional commitment. Feminist library historians like Suzanne Hildenbrand have, in the meantime, vehemently criticized this thesis because it shoulders most of the burden of responsibility for negative developments in the profession upon individual female librarians.

In this controversy the concept of the "complicity of women" by Christina Thürmer-Rohr could be useful. "Women have allowed themselves to be roped into a societal deed for men which has co-produced men's exaggerated sense of worth. Thereby women have made themselves accomplices in their own devaluation. "Complicity" is a category which brings into the open those mechanisms by which the male society articulates its demands on women. The functionalization of women, according to Thürmer-Rohr, and their disposition to functionalization are not only a matter of the past, but rather remain part of our present reality. Her provocative thesis of the complicity of women is applied particularly to "present history." "Exploring the historical roots of the existential misery of women" — the shutting out of women who shut themselves out — is appropriate. However,

it is not necessary to assume the *inevitability* of the reproduction of the old female social character as women change to fit present and developing social conditions.

"Our chance for transforming these societal conditions," she says, "lies in our own discoveries, in our joy of discovery; knowing more, seeing more, looking beyond oneself." But how can we search for discoveries as long as we are not able to "locate" our own history, to name our historical complicity rigorously enough? This book seeks to provide just such "location."

*Translated by Gisela Johnson*

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## ARCHIVES AND LIBRARIES OF WOMEN'S LITERATURE IN GERMANY: A SURVEY

by Dagmar Jank

Since the mid-70s there has been growing criticism of the existing archives and libraries, especially of the structure and classification of their collections. Points of criticism have been: 1) the lack of books and archives by and about women; 2) the inadequate library classification and subject catalogs for monographs, and incomplete "Findbücher" (finding aids) for archives; and 3) the very inconvenient opening hours, especially for women (FFBIZ 1989). That these institutions, which normally don't rate particular publicity, should find themselves in the crossfire of feminist criticism was the logical consequence of general dissatisfaction with the official system of education, which feminists saw as a "major tool for the maintenance and continuation of patriarchal values and structures" (Latz 1989, 11). Therefore, the establishment of women's archives and libraries was a logical element in a "comprehensive conceptualization of alternative education in feminist research projects" (26-27). According to this view education by, with and for women is only possible when material about women in the past and present is collected and made available at various centers. By the mid-80s a general and widespread dissatisfaction within the women's movement about traditional archive and library systems resulted in the establishment of many "autonomous" women's archives and libraries all over the Federal Republic of Germany.

In this development, the feminists were part of a historical continuum. The "old" women's movement had also initiated the founding of separate women's libraries. For example: the Allbemeiner Deutscher Frauenverein (General German Women's Association), the Verein Frauenwohl (Association for Women's Prosperity), and the Kaufmännische Verband für weibliche Angestellte (Commercial League of Women Employees) all had their own libraries in Berlin (Runkel 1979; Jank 1989, 1-6). The Commercial League's library was established with the help

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