

Dr. Käthe Leichter. An Austrian Socialist, Pioneer of Social Science, and Jewish Nazi Victim and her Connections to Heidelberg University¹

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1. Introduction: A Biography as a Spotlight on University History in the Age of Extremes

When confronted with a present phenomenon, historians will tend to question it through a historical lens. Everything that exists around us can be historicized. In this way, the changes to which institutions, movements, social, cultural or ethnic groups, ideas, and practices have been subjected over time become visible. And, of course, this also applies to universities. Originating in the European Middle Ages, universities evolved into their present form over the course of centuries,² in a process of mutual influence by the societies that surrounded, produced, and shaped them. Thus, university history - pursued as part of an integrated history of society, a “general history from a social-historical perspective” [translated by the author]³ - is more than the self-referential, sometimes rejoicing navel-gazing of academics. Examining how universities were legally constituted in different time periods, how everyday life was organized at universities, how they related in different ways to their external environments, how the self-images of professors, faculty members, and students changed over time, and finally how different political systems intervened in their self-administration, research and teaching content, always provides information about issues larger than the universities themselves - about the development of the norms and value conceptions of societies as well as about the political agendas and the degree to which authority has taken hold in different state regimes.⁴

¹ This paper is a revised version of a lecture given by the author on the occasion of the official opening of the Käthe Leichter Forum of Heidelberg University on December 13, 2022.

² For a concise discussion of various periodization models for European university history, cf. Rainer Christoph Schwinges, "Universitätsgeschichte. Bemerkungen zu Stand und Tendenzen der Forschung (vornehmlich im deutschsprachigen Raum)," in *Universitätsgeschichte schreiben. Inhalte – Methoden – Fallbeispiele*, edited by Livia Prüll, Frank Hüther, and Christian George (Göttingen: V&R Unipress, 2019), 25-45, here 27 f. ; for a more detailed discussion of the upheavals in university history in the years around 1800 and again around 1900, cf. Martin Kintzinger, "Die Universität zehrt auch von ihrer Vergangenheit. Universitätsgeschichte vor der Zeitgeschichte als Programmatik und Politikum," in *Universitätsgeschichte schreiben. Inhalte – Methoden – Fallbeispiele*, edited by Livia Prüll, Frank Hüther, and Christian George (Göttingen: V&R Unipress, 2019), 49-84.

³ Jürgen Kocka, "Sozialgeschichte – gestern und heute," in *Paradigmen deutscher Geschichtswissenschaft: Ringvorlesung an der Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin*, edited by Ilko-Sascha Kowalczyk (Berlin: Gesellschaft für sozialwiss. Forschung und Publizistik, 1994), 15-31, here 17.

⁴ Cf. Schwinges, "Universitätsgeschichte", 28-31.

National Socialist rule from 1933 to 1945 certainly provides the most drastic material to illustrate this and clearly demonstrates the necessity of a comprehensively embedded university historiography. The rise to power by a Nazi movement with radical, social utopian ideas and a total claim of validity coincided with the increased implementation capabilities of advanced modernity and its sophisticated, efficient bureaucracy.⁵ The severe consequences of the Nazi “seizure of power” on German university life have already been made clear by historical research.⁶ A number of papers have also been written about the dismissal of Jewish and politically undesirable lecturers⁷ from Heidelberg University as well as about the exclusion or curtailment of “racially” and politically non-conformist students,⁸ so that the main features of this process of expulsion, which began in the spring of 1933, are well known.⁹ All in all, the university and its leadership – rectorate, deans, and senate – must be viewed as having blatantly failed.¹⁰ Whether due to cowardice or a lack of will, the scholars in Heidelberg did not offer any decisive resistance to the measures of the nazified state and Reich governments and, instead, limited their solidarity with the persecuted colleagues to a few timid and individual attempts at mitigation. Few lecturers and a not insignificant section of the student body were part of the driving force behind the university’s policies of “personelle Gleichschaltung” (hiring and firing) according to the anti-Semitic and political ideologies of the time.¹¹

According to historian Frank Engehausen, wherever the emancipation of Jews, which had begun in Germany in the late 18th century, was particularly advanced, the reversal

⁵ From the rich literature on the relationship between ‘National Socialismus’ and ‘modernity’, cf. the profound overview study by Riccardo Bavaj, *Die Ambivalenz der Moderne im Nationalsozialismus. Eine Bilanz der Forschung* (München: Oldenbourg, 2003).

⁶ Cf. as an overview Michael Grüttner, “Universitäten in der nationalsozialistischen Diktatur – Stand der Forschung,” in *Universitätsgeschichte schreiben. Inhalte – Methoden – Fallbeispiele*, edited by Livia Prüll, Frank Hüther, and Christian George (Göttingen: V&R Unipress, 2019), 85-103.

⁷ Cf. as an introduction to the topic Dorothee Mußnug, *Die vertriebenen Heidelberger Dozenten. Zur Geschichte der Ruprecht-Karls-Universität nach 1933* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 1988). See also the recent article by Frank Engehausen, “Antisemitismus an der Universität Heidelberg 1933 bis 1945,” in *Antisemitismus in der Akademie. Otto Meyerhof – Ein Forscherleben zwischen Ruhm und Vertreibung*, edited by Michael Schmitt (Leipzig: Hentrich&Hentrich, 2022), 59-83, here 62-70.

⁸ Recently, two articles appeared on the oppression of Jewish students and the systematic relegation of left-wing students in the Heidelberg yearbook on the history of the city by Norbert Giovannini, “Angewandter Rassismus. Jüdische Studierende in Heidelberg 1933-1945,” in *Heidelberg. Jahrbuch zur Geschichte der Stadt* 27 (2023), 77-95; Norbert Giovannini, “KOMMUNIST. Abgestempelt. Die Relegation sozialistischer und kommunistischer Studenten an der Universität Heidelberg 1933,” in *Heidelberg. Jahrbuch zur Geschichte der Stadt* 27 (2023), 97-110.

⁹ Cf. fundamentally on the National Socialist purge of the university Dorothee Mußnug, “Die Universität Heidelberg zu Beginn der nationalsozialistischen Herrschaft,” in *Semper apertus. Sechshundert Jahre Ruprecht-Karls-Universität Heidelberg 1386-1986. Festschrift in sechs Bänden, Vol. 3: Das zwanzigste Jahrhundert*, edited by Wilhelm Doerr (Berlin: Springer, 1985), 464-503. .

¹⁰ Cf. Wolfgang Uwe Eckart, Volker Sellin, and Eike Wolgast, “Vorwort der Herausgeber,” in *Die Universität Heidelberg im Nationalsozialismus*, edited by Wolfgang Uwe Eckart, Volker Sellin, and Eike Wolgast (Heidelberg: Springer, 2006), 1-3, here 1.

¹¹ Cf. Eike Wolgast, “Die Universität Heidelberg 1386-1986,” (Berlin et al.: Springer, 1986), 142-167.

of this progress by the National Socialists must have seemed all the more severe.¹² In the university milieu as a whole, but especially at the Ruperto Carola in the liberal “model state” of Baden, Jewish academics were at times offered promising career opportunities by the beginning of the 1930s.¹³ The darkest chapter in the history of Heidelberg University was thus paradoxically linked to a previous heyday of an enlightened academic culture.

This relationship between the highlights and the low points of Heidelberg's 20th century university history is reflected in a remarkable way in the biography of Käthe Leichter. Being Jewish one of the first women to receive a doctoral degree from Ruperto Carola,¹⁴ she and her doctorate stand paradigmatically for the incipient opening of the university to circles that had previously been excluded from academia. At the same time, as an emancipated Jewish woman whose political commitments placed her in the opposition, she was the virtual embodiment of the enemy of National Socialism. This provoked the university leadership, whose personnel was more ideologically (self-)aligned than Nazified, to revoke her doctorate and – even worse – to place her in the crosshairs the “Third Reich’s” persecution agencies, which eventually murdered her.

2. Dr. Käthe Leichter: The Traces of an Austrian-Jewish Biography in Heidelberg

Who was this woman, who was born and raised in Vienna, and developed lively political and social welfare activities in the 1920s and early 1930s in the metropolis of the “First Republic”, which had been created under the aegis of the Austrian Social Democratic Party after the collapse of the imperial and royal monarchy? And what connects this Austrian woman with Heidelberg? These are the questions that this paper seeks to address.

Marianne Katharina Pick, as she was named at birth, was born in 1895 into a bourgeois-liberal family in Vienna. A childhood preoccupation with Jewish religion and theology,

¹² Cf. Engehausen, „Antisemitismus“, 62; cf. on this aspect also Christian Jansen, Norbert Giovannini, "Judenemanzipation und Antisemitismus an der Universität Heidelberg seit dem 19. Jahrhundert," in *Jüdisches Leben in Heidelberg. Studien zu einer unterbrochenen Geschichte*, edited by Norbert Giovannini, Jo Hannes Bauer, and Hans-Martin Mumm (Heidelberg, 1992), 155-199.

¹³ Engehausen, “Antisemitismus”, 60 speaks of a “comparatively liberal appointment practice at the University of Heidelberg, which did not reserve its professorships for members of Christian denominations” [translated by the author]. He points out that by 1914, 60 Jewish professors had already taught at Heidelberg University, cf. *ibid.*

¹⁴ Women's studies were not even officially permitted in the Grand Duchy of Baden until 1900. Baden was thereby even a pioneer in this respect in the German Empire, cf. for more detail Marco Birn, *Die Anfänge des Frauenstudiums in Deutschland. Das Streben nach Gleichberechtigung von 1869-1918, dargestellt anhand politischer, statistischer und biographischer Zeugnisse* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2015). Regular female teaching staff did not even exist at the University of Heidelberg at the time Leichter earned her doctorate. The first lectureship was assigned at the Faculty of Philosophy in the winter semester 1919/20, cf. Verena Türck, "Weibliche Lehrkräfte in den Personal- und Vorlesungsverzeichnissen der Universität Heidelberg von 1900 bis 1945," in *Wissenschaft als weiblicher Beruf? Die ersten Frauen in Forschung und Lehre an der Universität Heidelberg (Universitätsmuseum Heidelberg Kataloge, Vol. 3)*, edited by Susan Richter (Heidelberg: Universitätsmuseum, 2008), 8-12.

which she acquired primarily from her grandfather (named Rubinstein), a successful banker originating from Romania¹⁵, and less from her strongly assimilated parents, may have laid the foundation early on for the strong sense of justice that would later shape Leichter's life. "Despite complete emancipation from Judaism", as historian Herbert Steiner puts it, "she adhered to its best humanistic traditions".¹⁶ Her free-thinking nature, her ability to think beyond the social status quo and, as a pioneer in many fields, her willingness to repeatedly choose the difficult path by breaking conventions and opening doors – for herself and for others – developed early on. During her school years at the "Beamten-Töchter-Lyceum", a "school for the upper classes" and children of civil servants, she was notorious among teachers and the parents of her classmates for her rebelliousness and was even considered to be a ringleader.¹⁷

She spent part of her free time in the youth movement of the day, which she joined around 1912. This was a protest movement against the prevailing bourgeois moral concepts. Käthe appreciated the community and was particularly interested in discussing forms of self-organization of high school students and the reshaping of gender relations with her comrades of both sexes.¹⁸ However, the "abstract intellectualism"¹⁹ of the youth movement did not satisfy her. Later, she combined her love of hiking, an integral part of the youth movement, with social commitment and organized hiking tours for workers' children whose fathers had been drafted into the war and whose mothers had to work on the "home front" in the armaments industry. Teaching and supporting these children, being their "group mother", brought her into contact with the proletarian world for the first time.²⁰ Learning about the social situation and the hardships of the workers sharpened in Leichter both a desire to change social conditions²¹ as well as a proto-scientific interest in sociological issues.

This interest led Leichter to the University of Vienna, where she studied political science (Staatswissenschaft) from autumn 1914 onwards. She would have preferred to study law, but that was not possible for women at the time.²² Even in the field of political science, she was a rarity in those years of the late Habsburg Empire, and, as one of the

¹⁵ Cf. Herbert Steiner, "Biographische Anmerkungen," in *Käthe Leichter. Leben, Werk und Sterben einer österreichischen Sozialdemokratin*, edited by Herbert Steiner (Wien: Ibra und Molden, 1997), 9-223, here 24.

¹⁶ Ibid, 11.

¹⁷ Ibid, 21.

¹⁸ Cf. ibid, 35.

¹⁹ Ibid, 36.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Even before, as a child, her "strong sense of social responsibility and strong social spirit" [translated by the author] had bound her in solidarity with her parents' precariously employed domestic workers, ibid, 19.

²² Cf. Käthe Leichter, "Lebenserinnerungen," in *Käthe Leichter. Leben, Werk und Sterben einer österreichischen Sozialdemokratin*, edited by Herbert Steiner (Wien: Ibra und Molden, 1997), 231-381, here 356.

first female students²³, she had to fight for acceptance and recognition. The fact that she left her hometown in 1917, however, had only partially to do with gender discrimination. At that time, obtaining a doctorate in political science was not possible either for men or women and she had been aware from the start that it would therefore be necessary to take the final exam in a neighboring country.²⁴

Why Leichter chose Heidelberg to finish her doctorate and not any other German or Swiss university is unknown. What we do know is that she soon met Max Weber, who would become her academic teacher and doctoral supervisor. In addition to working on her dissertation, Leichter proved in Heidelberg that she had also matured politically into the person she would later be remembered as - a determined pacifist²⁵ and socialist. In 1914, she – like many left-wing liberals and even social democrats²⁶ – had welcomed the outbreak of war as a fight for freedom against tsarist despotism.²⁷ Later, in the fall of 1917, she founded a socialist reading circle,²⁸ which emerged from the famous Sunday circle in Max Weber's house and whose members included Ernst Toller²⁹ – the playwright and one of the later leaders of the Munich soviet republic.³⁰ The small group soon went beyond reading. Under the name “Cultural-Political Union of the Youth in Germany” (Kulturpolitischer Bund der Jugend in Deutschland), it engaged primarily in propaganda against the war, for international understanding, and for the elimination of social hardship through the anti-capitalist transformation of the economic order.³¹ A scandal soon broke out over a public appeal drafted by Toller, whom Leichter later characterized as “not one of the clearest, but certainly one of the most enthusiastic” of

²³ Cf. *ibid*, 357.

²⁴ Cf. *ibid*, 356 f. However, full equality of status for female students at the law faculty had also not been achieved until 1919, cf. Doris Ingrisch, "Gender-Dimensionen," in *Universität – Forschung – Lehre. Themen und Perspektiven im langen 20. Jahrhundert*, edited by Katharina Kniefacz et al. (Göttingen: V&R Unipress, 2015), 337-361, here 338.

²⁵ The attribute of pacifist pervades the literature about Käthe Leichter. For a different interpretation, cf. Gabriella Hauch, *Frauen bewegen Politik: Österreich 1848-1938* (Innsbruck/Wien/Bozen: Studienverlag, 2009), 238, who argues that although Leichter was against the Great War, the presumption of a general pacifist attitude can be attributed to the “phantasm of women's peacefulness”.

²⁶ Cf. Herfried Münkler, *Der Große Krieg. Die Welt 1914-1918* (Berlin: Rowohlt, 2013), 252, 260. This perception was also prevalent in the social democratic milieu of 1914, cf. Walter Mühlhausen, *Friedrich Ebert 1871-1925. Reichspräsident der Weimarer Republik* (Bonn: Dietz, 2006), 73 f.

²⁷ Cf. Steiner, „Biographische Anmerkungen“, 36.

²⁸ Cf. Jill Lewis, "Käthe Leichter: 'Max Weber als Lehrer und Politiker'," in *Intellektuelle in Heidelberg 1910-1933. Ein Lesebuch*, edited by Markus Bitterolf, Oliver Schlaudt, and Stefan Schöbel (Heidelberg: edition schöbel, 2014), 171-189, here 172.

²⁹ On Ernst Toller's political biography in general cf. Dieter Distl, *Ernst Toller. Eine politische Biographie* (Schrobenhausen: Bickel, 1993).

³⁰ On Ernst Toller's role as a leading revolutionary of the early Munich Räterepublik of 1919 cf. *ibid*, 39-78; Georg Köglmeier, "Ernst Toller in der Münchener Revolutions- und Rätezeit," in *Ernst Toller und die Weimarer Republik. Ein Autor im Spannungsfeld von Literatur und Politik*, edited by Stefan Neuhaus, Rolf Selbmann, and Thorsten Unter (Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, 1999), 27-46.

³¹ Cf. Judith Wisser, "Entracte eines revolutionären Dichters – Ernst Toller in Heidelberg," in *Intellektuelle in Heidelberg 1910-1933. Ein Lesebuch*, edited by Markus Bitterolf, Oliver Schlaudt, and Stefan Schöbel (Heidelberg: edition schöbel, 2014), 341-352.

the group.³² The Intelligence Office of the Supreme Army Command (Nachrichtenstelle der Obersten Heeresleitung) took action against the students. Some were drafted into the military, Toller fled to Berlin, and Käthe Leichter, as an Austrian, was expelled from Germany. Shortly thereafter, in January 1918, she appeared in Vienna as an agitator for the oppositional “Left Radicals”, who participated in the January Strike (“Jännerstreik”), in which more than 700.000 workers throughout the Habsburg Monarchy took to the streets to demonstrate against their highly precarious living conditions and to express their expectation of peace.³³ The legalistic, restrictive, and, at best, wait-and-see attitude of the Social Democratic party executive disappointed Leichter. “The personal experiences Käthe gained during the January strike”, Steiner speculates, “may have been decisive in her later always belonging to the left in the socialist movement”.³⁴

After some time had passed, it became possible for her to return to Heidelberg – but only for the purpose of defending her dissertation over a short period of two weeks.³⁵ In the summer of 1918, following a successful viva on July 22, she was awarded a doctorate in political economy from Heidelberg University. In his evaluation, Max Weber, explaining the grade ‘magna cum laude’, expressed his surprise that this work on “The Trade Relations of Austria-Hungary with Italy” had not been written by “an elderly statesman, experienced in trade policy, but rather that “a young girl was able not only to gather and master this vast material, but could also characterize with such certainty the economic and political conditions, the requirements set for the commercial contracts” [translated by the author]³⁶. This was an expression of great esteem but simultaneously demonstrated a patriarchal paternalism that even Max Weber, a liberal-minded promoter of women, was not immune to.

Thus, Leichter's short time in Heidelberg finally came to an end. And yet this period of her life had been a formative one. Not only did she successfully complete her studies, but she also gained her first genuine political experience here. Last but not least, her relationship with Max Weber had a lasting effect on her, even after his death. In 1926, Leichter published the warmly admiring essay “Max Weber as Teacher and Politician”³⁷,

³² Käthe Leichter, “Max Weber als Lehrer und Politiker,” in *Der Kampf. Sozialistische Monatschrift* 19 (1926), No. 9, 374-385, here 383.

³³ Cf. Borislav Chernev, “The Great January Strike as a Prelude to Revolution in Austria,” in *Twilight of Empire. The Brest-Litovsk Conference and the Remaking of East-Central-Europe, 1917-1918*, edited by Borislav Chernev (Toronto/Buffalo/London: University of Toronto Press, 2017), 107-152.

³⁴ Steiner, „Biographische Anmerkungen“, 48.

³⁵ Cf. Lewis, „Käthe Leichter“, 174.

³⁶ As cited in *ibid.*

³⁷ Leichter, „Max Weber“.

in which she attempts to pay tribute to the great bourgeois-liberal thinker from a Marxist perspective without making the deceased into something he was not.³⁸

When the Republic was proclaimed by Social Democratic Party, the Christian Socialist Party, and the Greater German Peoples Party in late 1918, theoretical and *realpolitische* disputes about the realization of a socialist society were being conducted in Austromarxism.³⁹ Leichter, now one of the party's most distinguished economists, participated in these debates and sympathized with the Soviet movement.⁴⁰ As an employee of the State Commission on Socialization, she was given the opportunity to work on translating her ideals into practical policy.⁴¹ Although sweeping nationalization, which Leichter certainly had hoped for, was not feasible, many reforms between 1918 and 1920 in the field of social policy brought concrete improvements for the working classes.⁴² In 1925, by which point the First Republic was largely consolidated and basic decisions on economic and property policy had been made, Leichter left the socialization commission and found a new mission in the establishment of politics for women in the Austrian trade union movement. Until the end of the Republic, she headed the newly-founded Women's Department of the Vienna Chamber of Labor. Today, we would probably describe her advocacy for proletarian women as an early form of "empowerment" - she taught courses, encouraged women workers to publish their own texts, and generally fostered their abilities to actively and efficiently pursue their own causes.⁴³

In 1925, she had also had her eye on an assistantship at the famous and newly-founded Frankfurt Institute for Social Research, demonstrating that she still very much considered herself a scholar.⁴⁴ Although she ultimately did not return to Germany, Leichter combined her political mission with her sociological studies at the Chamber of Labor. An "artificial contradiction" between scholarship and activist commitment did not exist for her.⁴⁵ According to historian Veronika Duma, this "conception of a

³⁸ Thus, the convinced Marxist Leichter formulates: "It is precisely in his position towards revolution as well as towards socialism in general that the real tragedy of Weber's political position lies. The man who, in analyzing social processes, repeatedly uncovered poorly veiled economic interests, for whom the whole of history was a confirmation of the principle of combat, and who was himself an upright fighter, nevertheless remained inwardly alien to socialism throughout his life" [translated by the author]. *Ibid*, p. 382.

³⁹ Barbara Serloth, "Käthe Leichter: Eine unorthodoxe Sozialdemokratin im austromarxistischen Umfeld," in *Die Revolutionierung des Alltags. Zur intellektuellen Kultur von Frauen im Wien der Zwischenkriegszeit*, edited by Doris Ingrisch, Ilse Korotin, and Charlotte Zwiauer (Frankfurt a. M. et al.: Lang, 2004), 205-224, here 206.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 210.

⁴¹ Cf. Lewis, „Käthe Leichter“, 174.

⁴² Cf. Serloth, „Eine unorthodoxe Sozialdemokratin“, 218.

⁴³ Cf. Veronika Duma, "Engagierte Wissenschaft. Die Sozialwissenschaftlerin Käthe Leichter," in *Die Soziologie und der Nationalsozialismus in Österreich*, edited by Andreas Kranebitter and Christoph Reinprecht (Bielefeld: transcript, 2019), 329-342, here 330.

⁴⁴ Cf. Hauch, *Frauen*, 239.

⁴⁵ Duma, „Engagierte Wissenschaft“, 329.

committed science, which was analytically and methodologically ambitious at the cutting edge of academic discourse and at the same time aware of its social responsibility”,⁴⁶ led her to study the issues and phenomena that most concerned her biographically and politically. These were, “the working and living conditions of women workers, [...] the gendered effects of the (world) economic crises in the 1920s and 1930s, and [...] [the] rise of fascism and National Socialism”.⁴⁷ Her publications “Handbook of Women's Work” (*Handbuch der Frauenarbeit*) from 1930⁴⁸ and “This is How We Live” from 1932⁴⁹ document the everyday work and life of contemporary working-class women with attention to detail. They are pioneering works of critical social research.⁵⁰ We can even view Leichter as the mother of all later women's and gender studies because, for the first time, she adopted a methodological change of perspective and allowed the women she was researching and interviewing to speak for themselves rather than objectifying them.⁵¹

In addition to her professional and scholarly activities in the Vienna Chamber of Labor,⁵² Käthe Leichter was active in the Social Democratic Labor Party. At the district level, she worked primarily on issues of education and women's policy. At the party congresses, to which she was almost always delegated,⁵³ she was quite critical of the party leadership and gave fundamental theoretical and strategic speeches.⁵⁴ In 1933, the right wing of the party prevented Käthe Leichter from being elected to the party executive committee.⁵⁵

Käthe Leichter's life changed abruptly in the spring of 1934 with the establishment of the Austro-fascist regime under Chancellor Engelbert Dollfuß. After the civil war-like, violent elimination of social democracy in the "February Struggles", Käthe Leichter, a well-known social democrat, her husband Otto Leichter, a politically active social democratic newspaper editor, and their two sons Heinrich (*1925) and Franz (*1930) left the country for Switzerland. They returned in September 1934 to ensure the underground survival of the banned “Social Democratic Labor Party” and to work subversively against Austrofascism. During these years, Leichter was one of the leaders

⁴⁶ Ibid, 340.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Käthe Leichter, *Handbuch der Frauenarbeit in Österreich*, edited by Kammer für Arbeiter und Angestellte in Wien (Wien, 1930).

⁴⁹ Käthe Leichter, *So leben wir... 1320 Industriearbeiterinnen berichten über ihr Leben. Eine Erhebung* (Wien, 1932).

⁵⁰ Also worth mentioning in this context is the even earlier sociological study Käthe Leichter, *Wie leben die Wiener Heimarbeiter? Eine Erhebung über die Arbeits- und Lebensverhältnisse von tausend Wiener Heimarbeitern* (Wien, 1923).

⁵¹ Cf. Duma, „Engagierte Wissenschaft“, 329.

⁵² Although named „Vienna“ Chamber of Labor, this Organisation was responsible for Vienna, Lower Austria, and Burgenland.

⁵³ Exceptions were the party congresses of 1921 and 1923, cf. Hauch, *Frauen*, 237.

⁵⁴ Cf. Steiner, „Biographische Anmerkungen“, 132-147, here in particular 132.

⁵⁵ Cf. Hauch, *Frauen*, 237.

of the “Revolutionary Socialists”, which was made up of the rest of the old Social Democratic Labor Party, and maintained close contact with, among others, Bruno Kreisky, who then was a socialist youth functionary and would later become federal chancellor.⁵⁶

The situation for Leichter, her husband and their two sons became even more precarious when Austro-fascism ended with the so-called “Anschluss” of Austria to the Greater German Reich in March 1938, which was implemented by Hitler and welcomed by a majority of Austrians. Otto Leichter and the children were able to leave the country in time. Käthe Leichter's planned departure to Paris via Tschechoslovakia was thwarted by her arrest by the Gestapo on May 30, 1938.⁵⁷ Leichter was captured just hours before she was going to leave the country because she was betrayed by Hans Pav, a comrade, the former sports editor of the “Arbeiter-Zeitung” and one of the Leichter family's closest friends. His informant activities not only caused Leichter's doom, but, according to the historian Wolfgang Neugebauer, also destroyed the rest of the central organization of the Revolutionary Socialists, who had largely scaled back their activities with the “Anschluss”.⁵⁸ This ended Käthe Leichter's life in freedom. While in “protective custody” (Schutzhaft), Leichter was transferred from the provisional prison of the Gestapo headquarters to the prison of the Vienna Regional Court (Wiener Landgericht). In September, a judicial arrest warrant was issued on suspicion of the crime of preparation for high treason. In May 1939, the trial on the charge of high treason was discontinued. In the meantime, however, the Gestapo had become aware that Leichter had smuggled several secret messages out of her cell with the help of a socialist-minded prison guard. This provided a basis to bring new charges, this time for incitement to abuse official authority. Finally, in October 1939, the Vienna Regional Court delivered its verdict. It sentenced Leichter to four months imprisonment. The fact that she had already served more than this amount of time on remand did not help Leichter. Because convicts belonging to the socialist resistance were generally sent to concentration camps after serving their sentences,⁵⁹ the Gestapo certainly did not allow Leichter, both a resistance fighter and a Jew, to escape. Outside the courtroom, she immediately was arrested again and soon after deported to the Ravensbrück women's concentration camp.⁶⁰

⁵⁶ Cf. Steinert, “Biographische Anmerkungen”, 148-166.

⁵⁷ For the dramatic sequence of events leading to the arrest, cf. *ibid*, 172-175.

⁵⁸ Cf. Wolfgang Neugebauer, *Der österreichische Widerstand 1938-1945* (Wien: Edition Steinbauer, 2015), 70 f.

⁵⁹ Cf. *ibid*, 74.

⁶⁰ Cf. on the course of the investigations and court proceedings Steiner, “Biographische Anmerkungen”, 176-187.

Even though Leichter's actual sentence was relatively lenient, the fact that it involved imprisonment meant that it also had other negative consequences elsewhere.

In Germany, the regime had created a legal basis for universities to revoke the doctorates of academics who had fallen out of favor politically, as a symbolic underpinning of their ostracization. The Ministry of Culture in Baden standardized this procedure in 1938, leading to a rapid increase in the revocation of doctoral degrees, which had only been a sporadic practice up to that point.⁶¹ According to the guidelines, which the faculties immediately implemented by amending the doctoral regulations, the revocation of a doctoral degree was mandatory in some cases. In other cases, however, the universities or more precisely a committee composed of the rector and the deans could exercise latitude at their own discretion. This was the case with Käthe Leichter, as her sentence did not include the deprivation of her civil rights, and she had not been stripped of her German citizenship under the Law on the Revocation of Naturalizations of July 1933.⁶² After her conviction was reported to Heidelberg, however, the majority of the deans and the rector, Paul Schmitthenner, decided on December 7, 1939 that Leichter's offense – smuggling secret messages in the remand prison – was too serious to allow her to retain her PhD.⁶³ Thus, she was one of 47 Heidelberg doctoral degree holders who had their titles revoked by the committee on the basis of a criminal conviction, while 16 other proceedings did not result in the loss of the degree.⁶⁴

Käthe Leichter was informed of the decision to revoke her doctorate – she had to confirm it with her signature while in the Ravensbrück concentration camp.⁶⁵ Of course, this whole process must have been secondary to her at this point in time. For more than two years she lived in Block 11 of the Ravensbrück concentration camp, which was specifically for Jewish prisoners. Even there, Leichter resisted the National Socialist system whenever possible. She advised her fellow resistance fighter, Rosa Jochmann, “to not forget that you are not a factory counsel here, you must always pretend to obey orders because the SS is always right, but you must also do everything to sabotage and deceive the SS and protect the inmates” [translated by the author].⁶⁶ She also organized

⁶¹ Cf. Werner Moritz, "Die Aberkennung des Dokortitels an der Universität Heidelberg während der NS-Zeit," in *Zwischen Wissenschaft und Politik. Studien zur deutschen Universitätsgeschichte. Festschrift für Eike Wolgast zum 65. Geburtstag*, edited by Armin Kohnle and Frank Engehausen (Stuttgart: Steiner, 2001), 540-562, particularly 544.

⁶² Cf. *ibid.*, 543.

⁶³ Cf. Lewis, "Käthe Leichter", 175; for the exact procedural rules of the committee cf. Moritz, "Aberkennung", 548 f.

⁶⁴ Cf. *ibid.*, 549.

⁶⁵ Cf. Steiner, „Biographische Anmerkungen“, 187.

⁶⁶ Cited after Neugebauer, *Widerstand*, 272.

conspiratorial cultural activities and even May Day celebrations for her fellow prisoners.⁶⁷

After more than two years in the women's concentration camp, Leichter was selected as part of the so-called "Aktion 14f13" or "Inmate-Euthanasia", which took place in German concentration camps from 1941 to 1944 and marks the transition from "euthanasia" into the "Holocaust". In March 1942, she was taken to the Bernburg killing facility in what is now Saxony-Anhalt, where she was murdered in a gas chamber.⁶⁸ Some historians see a causal connection between the murder and Leichter's subversive behavior at Ravensbrück;⁶⁹ however, as a "full Jew" in the sense of the Nazi racial doctrine, it is improbable that she would have survived the Second World War regardless of her resistance activities.

3. Conclusion: Remembering Käthe Leichter

Käthe Leichter's murder is tragic and painful to reflect upon. However, the only way to truly understand what the rule of the inhumane Nazi regime and the policies of persecution and extermination really meant on an experiential-historical level is to allow ourselves to be confronted by the concrete, individual fates and the individual life stories of the victims of National Socialism, which can be encountered directly in the history of one's own city, region or university.

Our university also played a part in this system of injustice. The decisive university bodies bent to the pressure - sometimes willingly, sometimes with resignation - and not only during the "purge" of teaching staff from 1933 to 1935. They also revoked doctoral degrees, which had originally been awarded according to academic criteria, even though they would have been free to choose not to. In this way, they allowed themselves to become the instruments of the political rulers and their non-scientific "völkisch" ideology and racial doctrine and even actively supported the rule of injustice. All doctoral degrees revoked for political reasons after 1933 were formally restored by the university senate in December 1946.⁷⁰ However, those affected or, if they had not survived the Nazi terror, their relatives often did not learn of this for decades because the responsible university bodies did not deem it necessary to inform them of the

⁶⁷ Cf. *ibid*, 272 f.

⁶⁸ Cf. Walter Grode, *Die "Sonderbehandlung 14f13" in den Konzentrationslagern des Dritten Reiches. Ein Beitrag zur Dynamik faschistischer Vernichtungspolitik* (Frankfurt a. Main: Lang, 1987); cf. more recently Astrid Ley, "Krankenmord im Konzentrationslager. Die 'Aktion 14f13'," in *'Euthanasie' und Holocaust. Kontinuitäten, Kausalitäten, Parallelitäten*, edited by Jörg Osterloh and Jan Erik Schulte (Paderborn: Brill Schöningh, 2021), 195-210; Ute Hoffmann, "Von der 'Euthanasie' zum Holocaust. Die 'Sonderbehandlung 14 f 13' am Beispiel der 'Euthanasie'-Anstalt Bernburg," in *Lebensunwert - zerstörte Leben. Zwangssterilisation und 'Euthanasie'*, edited by Margret Hamm (Frankfurt a. Main: VAS, 2005), 158-167.

⁶⁹ Cf. Neugebauer, *Widerstand*, 272.

⁷⁰ Cf. Lewis, „Käthe Leichter“, 175.

reinstatement.⁷¹ There is no appropriate reaction to the injustice, no compensation or “Wiedergutmachung”, as it is commonly but potentially misleadingly called in German, to be seen in this silent administrative act.

But what should real “Wiedergutmachung” look like? Today, with a separation of almost 80 years from the time of National Socialism, the most we can do is to deal in a dignified way with our own past and with the victims. Today, this can primarily be done by remembering. Fortunately, the efforts of our university to fulfill its responsibility and to commemorate the victims of National Socialism, some of whom were also victims of the Nazified university leadership itself, have increased in recent years. In 2019, the University Archive hosted an academic conference about the mathematician and pacifist Julius Emil Gumbel,⁷² who was dismissed from his position in 1932 in response to massive pressure from right-wing extremist student groups.⁷³ The opening of the Käthe Leichter Forum in December 2022 is the realization of another example of such a culture of remembrance that critically reflects on its own past.⁷⁴ The objective of this paper was to show why Käthe Leichter deserves a permanent place in the Heidelberg University memorial landscape. However, Käthe Leichter’s treatment in her home country demonstrates that we cannot take for granted that a meritorious pioneer of applied social research, a shining light of women's history, a courageous resistance fighter against National Socialism, and a martyr of the history of democracy, will receive adequate commemoration. Only a few days after the Käthe Leichter Forum for doctoral candidates was inaugurated in Heidelberg, the Austrian Minister for Women's Affairs, Susanne Raab (ÖVP), announced that the “Käthe Leichter State Prize for Women's Studies, Gender Studies and Equality in the World of Work” was to be redesigned and renamed, involving the removal of Käthe Leichter's name from the name of the prize.⁷⁵ This change, which was criticized by large parts of the Austrian public as an erasure of the memory of a Nazi victim, clearly shows that memory culture does not develop in a linear manner. Instead, the symbols of critical examination of National Socialism and coping with the past are the result of controversial processes of negotiation among various social interest groups and must, therefore, always be fought for and defended.

⁷¹ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 176. It was only in 2013 that Rector Prof. Dr. Bernhard Eitel presented Käthe Leichter's son, Franz Leichter, at his request with his mother's doctorate certificate in a solemn ceremony.

⁷² Conference “Emil Julius Gumbel. Mathematiker – Publizist – Pazifist”. Press Release No. 84/2019. URL: <https://www.uni-heidelberg.de/de/newsroom/emil-julius-gumbel-mathematiker-publizist-pazifist> [last accessed on May 22, 2023].

⁷³ For basic information on the Causa-Gumbel, see Christian Jansen: *Emil Julius Gumbel. Portrait eines Zivilisten*, Heidelberg 1991.

⁷⁴ Käthe Leichter Forum to be Opened: New Centre for Doctoral Candidates. Press Release No. 125/2022. URL: <https://www.uni-heidelberg.de/en/newsroom/kathe-leichter-forum-to-be-opened-new-centre-for-doctoral-candidates> [last accessed on May 22, 2023].

⁷⁵ Die Erinnerung an ein NS-Opfer wird getilgt (January 26, 2023), in: *Wiener Zeitung*. URL: <https://www.wienerzeitung.at/meinung/gastkommentare/2175876-Die-Erinnerung-an-ein-NS-Opfer-wird-getilgt.html> [last accessed on May 22, 2023].

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