

## **Elsbeth Killmer (1890-1957): A life with compromises**

On December 29<sup>th</sup> 1890, during the so called Gründerzeit of the empire (years of rapid expansion in several fields, from 1871), in Hessian Hanau /Main a girl called Elisabeth Friederike Anna Wilhelmine was born. Elsbeth, as she was called, was the only daughter of Anna Killmer and of the “Hofgoldschmied” (goldsmith of the court) and sculptor Ferdinand Killmer, famous beyond the borders of Hanau. Elsbeth was very attached to her father, who supported her talents in art from an early age – even if he might rather have had a son to later give him his studio. Elsbeth went to a school for young ladies, was taught in her father’s studio and after that educated in academic painting and sculpturing classes in Frankfurt / Main and Munich. If she wished to inherit her father’s studio some day we do not know. Such plans, if they existed, Ferdinand Killmer destroyed: he adopted one of his students, who – after his death – took over his studio and continued the business.

In 1918, the last year of the Great War, Elsbeth Killmer got to know a Jewish Russian dentistry student and civilian internee Leo Wisnia who became the father of her son in 1919. Even though the particular circumstances of their relationship remains unknown: the almost 30 year old artist probably shocked the bourgeois Hanau society because she did not at all think about to marry this man. Elsbeth Killmer, who took pride in being addressed Mrs or Ms (instead of Miss), now is a single mother that had to stand against discrimination by society and the law. She did hardly know how to feed her child and herself because after her parents’ death she lost all her wealth through war and inflation.

Around 1921 she left the restrictive milieu of her hometown and moved to the close by Main city of Frankfurt. Since the painter and sculptor could not afford a studio of her own she turned to craft industry for there was a much higher sales potential. She designed toys and produced highly imaginative dolls from cloth, wire and paint for “big and small people”. After that she went from shop to shop and sold her creations. Slowly she gained a reputation as an artist and a business woman. After her drafts not only many dolls but also jewellery, exhibitions, theatre costumes and pieces of scenery were carried out and her productions were exhibited at the trade fairs in Leipzig and Frankfurt. Apart from that she also turned to writing and published in southern German newspapers and magazines. One of her hobbies was antroposophy. Last but not least she played with passion – and apparently well –

piano. This “idyll” came to a sudden end when one day the police knocked at her door and took her allegedly neglected son from her, who was handed over to public care. This racket lasted hardly 24 hours, then she had her child back. But when the next day the press ripped the “bad mother” to pieces she decided to leave this city as soon as possible. In 1925, after journeys through southern Germany she moved to Berlin. “Jotwede, janz weit draußen” (Very far out) as it is said in Berlin slang – in a summerhouse in Berlin Hoppegarten Elsbeth spent her first winter freezing in the Reichshauptstadt [Capital of the Reich]. After a few months she changed to the smarter west of Berlin, to Halensee. There she moved from one furnished room to the next until she met the female painter Theo (!) von Autenried. The painter's two room flat in the Joachim-Friedrich-Street in Halensee she eventually take over. Finally she had found a home for the next years.

Although from time to time she designed some sculptures and painted – mostly still life, landscapes and portraits – by now she basically earns her living in the craft industry. “My mother had a practical talent, she had ‘golden hands’, even though she might not have been a great artist”, her son Lothar Killmer told me in an interview in 1994. (Part of her production now belongs to the doll museum in Radebeul near Dresden.) But Berlin seemed to have been even a rougher place than Frankfurt: “I was alone with my son in a tough fight for life”, was the balance of Elsbeth Killmer, who part of her life relied on public welfare.

Despite of this depressing financial hardship apparently she found time for leisure to work on a very different field. Elsbeth got in touch with the lesbian subculture and soon got contact to the homosexual organisation “Bund für Menschenrechte” (BfM) [Circle for Human Rights], that was founded in 1919 in Berlin and had its office in the middle of Berlin. Under the chairman Friedrich Radszuweit the BfM fought for the abolishment of section 175 (prohibition of homosexuality), supported the cause of social acceptance of homosexual men and women and the union of all homosexuals.

A crucial part was the publishing of certain magazines, that – thanks to the freedom of press in the republic – especially turned to a homosexual public. Possibly the most important magazine for lesbian women was “Freundin [girl friend]” published by the BfM with interruptions from 1924 to 1933 (from 1929 even once a week).<sup>1</sup> In 1926

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<sup>1</sup> Compare Katharina Vogel, Zum Selbstverständnis lesbischer Frauen in der Weimarer Republik. eine Analyse der Zeitschrift “Die Freundin” 1924-1933, in Berlin Museum (Ed.), Eldorado. Homosexuelle Frauen und Männer in Berlin 1850-1950. Geschichte, Alltag und Kultur, Berlin 1984, p 162-168.

Elsbeth Killmer published poems in “Freundschaftsblatt” [pages of friendship], one of the publications of the BfM. One year later, in 1927, she was editor in charge of “Freundin”. For this she was called “front fighter of lesbian world”<sup>2</sup> by the “Volkswart”, a right wing paper – which was probably not meant as a compliment. “Sometimes my mother took my hand and we walked – to save money – from Halensee to the Radszuweit Publishing House to pick up a small fee for some poem that was printed”, Lothar Killmer remembered. “By her friends and by me she wanted to be called Mumbo; she thought this would sound more gender neutral.”

From 1928 on Killmer’s name did not appear in the masthead of “Freundin” but until the end of 1932 a considerable number of her short stories, poems and – especially during the years of 1928/29 – several articles of theory in which she discussed basic questions or current problems like the “Schund- und Schmutzparagrafen [trash and filth section]”, which threatened to ban particularly the homosexual press. That also concerned the in its appearance rather harmless “Freundin”, that was not permitted to be published for about a year from the middle of 1928 on.

Elsbeth Killmer did not settle for writing: in the club rooms of the BfM in the Alexander-Palais in the Landsberger street she read out of her work and gives lectures on topics like “the normal and normal abnormal woman”, “the position of the modern women towards homosexuality”, “the necessity of homosexual enlightenment” or “friendship of marriage”. (Unfortunately those lectures do not exist any more.) For the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the BfM, which was solemnly celebrated in September 1929, she talked about “the equality of the homosexual woman”, that she was very concerned about. In a more straight forward organisation of the BfM she saw a measure to reach this goal. Therefore she invites her readers to not only to take part in socialising events and amusing dance nights but to fight together against “amoral moral views” and for social respect, not at least against section 175 through which “aware or unaware men and women are driven into marriages, that become a chain of sufferings”.<sup>3</sup> Although lesbians would not be persecuted by law the sole existence of this “section of disgrace” would lead people to socially proscribe, black mail and professionally destroy homosexual women wherever you can.”<sup>4</sup> Thus Killmer appealed to all lesbians to join the BfM in “first work” and to fight together for

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<sup>2</sup> Th. Böser, Die homosexuelle Propaganda und ihre Bekämpfung, in: Volkswart 22 (1929), edition 4, p 49-56.

<sup>3</sup> Prints of the lecture by Elsbeth Killmer, Aufruf an alle Frauen und Mütter, in: Freundin 5 (1929), edition 17, p2.

<sup>4</sup> Elsbeth Killmer, Margarethe, in: Freundin 3 (1927), edition 7.

improvements. At the same time she asked the heterosexual women in the women's movement "to reach their hand to their homosexual sisters, and also the heterosexual man, to join into the fight for freedom", because: "only unity makes you free!"<sup>5</sup> On the other hand Killmer's feminist goals always included the interests of heterosexual women. Such in the article "the homosexual woman and her job / profession"<sup>6</sup> she supported the view that having a job and the access to education had become a "basic question of life" and represented the key to emancipation. Despite all –still existing – obstacles women should aim for as high a qualification as possible and go for further education.

While you can read in "Freundin" what Elsbeth Killmer thought and wrote about 70 years ago, her private life, her personal relationships were hardly known. "Only very late I understood, that my mother was a lesbian", Lothar Killmer told me. "I do not know if she was this way from the start, meaning before the relationship to my begetter. The twenties I can hardly remember because I was still too young and the memory selects. In my memory there are names like "blonde Grete" and "black Grete" – when and how they were friends of Mumbo I cannot remember. We did not talk about things in the area of Eros, that was impossible in those days."

On those few photographs Lothar Killmer has from his mother she is together with a blonde and a dark haired woman, in fancy dresses, happily celebrating. Possibly these are those women, that were "very close" friends as the author wrote in an obviously biographical text with the title "Margarethe".<sup>7</sup>

The empowerment of the Nazi's also lead to the destruction of the BfM as well as the whole homosexual emancipation movement and to the prohibition of all the relevant magazines. Elsbeth Killmer tried to come through and to make it possible for her son to stay at the famous Grunewald-Gymnasium, although from 1934 on her release from school fees was withdrawn and also the maintenance of the father, who was emigrated to France was dropped.

"All of her life my mother was a rather unpolitical person. She tried to get through in her own way. By adaptation." That "Mumbo" obviously was a member of the Nazi women's organisation "NS-Frauenschaft" Lothar Killmer apparently did not know. Also that in a CV from 1934 in which she claimed to have been a national German in

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<sup>5</sup> Elsbeth Killmer, Was jede Frau wissen muß, in: Freundin 3 (1927), edition 9, p 2f.

<sup>6</sup> Freundin 4 (1928), edition 3, p5.

<sup>7</sup> Elsbeth Killmer, Wahrheiten, in: Freundin 4 (1928), edition 18, p 2f.

her youth her son today believes to be a diversionary tactic and not in accordance with the facts.<sup>8</sup> However: Around 1934 after having proofed her “Aryan” descent Elsbeth Killmer became a member of the Reichskulturkammer that was founded in September 1933 by Goebbels – a condition for working artists in the “Third Reich”.<sup>9</sup> At first as a “lyricist” she was in the Reichsschrifttumskammer, a subsection for writers. Her numerous publication in “Freundin” she certainly concealed. But since she mainly worked as a designer and it was only allowed to be member of just one professional association she later changed to the “Reichskammer of the fine arts” (section “sculptors and painters”).

Not until 1936 she got a permanent position in a company producing dolls. There she could put in her many talents – from designing own models to the arrangement of whole exhibitions like in the big department store Wertheim.

At the end of 1938 it was certified by the NSDAP that there were “no doubts against her concerning her political position”. Killmer’s correspondence with the Reichskammer until February 1944 has been preserved. Apparently she did not have any problems with this institution because of her homosexuality, maybe because it was not known.

Nevertheless danger came from a totally different direction: Lothar Killmer had fallen in love with the considerably older Anja Korn, who had moved in with them as a lodger. She belonged to a resistance organisation, the group “Sozialrevolutionäre Nationalisten [social revolutionary nationalists]” around Karl Otto Paetel and the high school student joined in. In November 1939 150 members of this group were arrested, among them Anja Korn and Lothar Killmer. They were taken to the notorious Volksgerichtshof [the court] for allegedly preparing high treason – the group among other things had spread antifascist leaflets. Although “Mumbo” could not prevent her son to be sentenced to five years of jail she succeeded to pull the wool over the Gestapo’s eyes in very crucial point: she vehemently denied that her son’s father had been a Jew. “Ask after my begetter “Mumbo” declared – a lady all over and majestic – as far as she knew it had been a Russian and nothing else. So it came”, Lothar Killmer remembers, “that in the run of the whole five years of custody, jail and KZ I was treated as “German”. That way she saved my life.”

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<sup>8</sup> Compare Barch Berlin (formerly BDC), file of Elsbeth Killmer.

<sup>9</sup> All details compare Barch Berlin (formerly BDC), file of Elsbeth Killmer.

The imprisonment of her son, whom she could only visit for a few times until the end of the war, was reason enough for Elsbeth Killmer to be cautious and act as inconspicuous as possible. When the bombing of Berlin began she made herself useful as "Luftschutzwart" [person responsible for air-raid shelters]. As the air-raids became stronger she managed to clear off to Hitzelried, a small village close to Füssen in Allgäu [near the Alps] and to come through by giving English lessons and puppet theatre shows. Thinned down to 40 Kilos she lived to see the end of war there.

The post-war years Elsbeth Killmer spent with her son, whom eventually she met again in autumn 1945 and his partner and later wife Anja, who also only just survived a number of years in jail, in Pappritz near Dresden. Both soon joined the KPD and wanted to work for building a democratic Germany. Elsbeth Killmer's staying in the SBZ [Soviet zone] had family reasons and was not a political statement. She lived of a small pension and the support of her son. If after she moved to Berlin-Friedrichshain in 1950 she tried to contact her former companions from the circle of her friend we do not know. On March 6<sup>th</sup> in 1957, at the age of 66 she died of cancer.

"Today it is a torture that certain questions concerning Mumbo I cannot answer anymore", said Lothar Killmer. "But back then those things were not as important to me so that I would have asked and then it was too late."

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