

Elisabeth Leithäuser (1914–2004)

"I threw myself into my private life"

"In 1933 I got involved in the active resistance. The couriers came with flyers; we also made flyers ourselves and went out and pasted them on the advertising columns at night. I can still see us in some private garden colony in Kassel and we would say, 'I'll make the flyers, you paste, and you keep watch.' Karl Wloch – he was editor of the *Rote Fahne* [organ of the German Communist Party, trans.] he later made a real career for himself over in East Berlin – anyway, he often brought materials to Kassel and gave them to comrades. I always went with him, and we pretended we were a couple; whenever it got dangerous we would lean against the wall and start smooching. But they caught us pretty soon and we got arrested."

Elisabeth Leithäuser recalled these dramatic moments of her youth when I visited to interview her in 1986. She had been adopted in 1915, when she was one, by a wealthy widow from an old and respected Friesian family who then lost all her money through inflation. Leithäuser grew up in Kassel. Tensions with her adoptive mother, who held on to bourgeois prejudices, were apparent early on.

"It made me so angry and rebellious. Like when my mother said, 'When you grow up, you'll get to know a nice man and we'll invite him over and you'll get engaged, and when I'm old, I'll live with you both.' Back then, at fourteen or fifteen, I knew I didn't want that. But at the time I didn't know what I wanted instead."

At seventeen Leithäuser became politically active. Together with her schoolfriend Margot, she joined the Kommunistischer Jugendverband (KJV), the Communist Youth Association, which is why they both ended up failing their Abitur examination.

"Part of the reason I joined the KJV was surely my opposition to the whole impoverished upper-class bourgeois fantasy world of my adoptive mother, but that wasn't all. Or else I never would have stayed with it; I might even have become a National Socialist or given up politics altogether."

A short time later she discovered her lesbianism:

"I always considered bisexuality to be a great advantage in life – a broader range of experience. Relationships to women always encompassed a wider, more differentiated spectrum of emotions." Men were much more "sex objects" for her.

"In 1932, after they had already thrown me out of school, I was allowed to go on a school trip to the country with my girlfriend Margot. All at once there was something there that changed the atmosphere, our relationship to one another – it really was sudden. It happened in the dormitory, and of course we were absolutely quiet. That first night it was as overwhelming as it was quiet. I can still see the two of us, really early the next morning, at the top of Mount Meissner. We were intellectual girls who had already read Marx, *Das Kapital*, and so on. So we both sat there and either she or I said, 'What happened last night, that was definitely lesbian; everyone knows that often happens during puberty.' We were very objective about it – that peculiar night would not repeat itself. But it did repeat itself, and repeat itself, and repeat itself. We almost ate each other up."

In order to come to terms with this first sexual experience – "You are so deathly alone with yourself during adolescence" – she started keeping a diary. One day she came home to find her mother reading it.

"I hated her so much; I really wanted to kill her. That was such an appalling breach of trust! There was quite a scene that night. That's the reason I broke things off with my mother. In retrospect I know that she was infinitely despairing and sad that the child she had wanted so badly – you know, I was adopted – was sexually different. Sexuality was something that my adoptive mother never wanted to deal with anyway. Even earlier I hadn't had a very good relationship with her. And we had a lot of differences in other respects also. She often told me, even at a very early age – I must have been three or four – 'If you aren't good and well-behaved, I'll disown you!' That made an impression on me very early and it was clear to me that there were only two ways to go: either to constantly clamber up to someone, so that nothing would happen to me, or to rely totally on myself and no one else, to do everything alone and independently. That's what I did, but of course I had to pay a price. An emotional price.

"Even my mother agreed that we could no longer live under one roof, and I moved out. But the story with my girlfriend had already ended long before. Our friend

Ruth went through it all with us, shaking her head, and she saw that we were breaking up, since Margot then got into her first relationship with a man and has been straight ever since. But then came the Gestapo and jail. Ruth, Margot, and I were taken into custody twice for short periods of time. That really had an effect on me. Once, when we were waiting to be interrogated, three or four comrades from our youth group were taken past us, bloody and beaten, to intimidate us.”

In March 1934 there was a trial against two dozen members of the KJV in the state of Hesse, including Elisabeth Leithäuser and her two friends. The charges were preparation to commit high treason.

“The Gestapo inspector who was responsible for us righteously committed perjury in our favor during the trial. That's why we got off lightly – we were acquitted. I was banned from staying in Kassel. In 1945 we tried to find the inspector to help him, but all we found out was that he originally came from the marriage fraud division in Cologne and was forced into the Gestapo.”

One of the main defendants in the trial, Willi Belz, described in detail the resistance actions of the Kassel youth group in his book *Die Standhaften* (The Steadfast).

At eighteen, Leithäuser moved out of her mother's home and went to live with her friend Ruth and her father. A short time later, in 1933, she started a relationship with a man twenty years older than she and moved to Frankfurt to live with him.

“I found it strange that Anton responded so strongly once when I was with him on Kaiser Street in Frankfurt and saw a very attractive woman. I said to him, ‘Look at her!’ and I guess I turned around to watch her. Immediately his antennae came out. Later on he said to me that he had thought then of asking me to go back to Kassel, because he had already lost a woman to another woman once and he didn't want to go through that again. But then he did go through it again; it was terrible, really horrible. My whole life I kept being confronted with that – that men can't stand it when a woman has a relationship with another woman. A serious one, not just a little affair – hopping into bed, where all three of you can do it. If it's serious, then they are hurt down to the core, much worse than if they lose their girlfriend to another man.

“Back then I had to have an abortion, since Anton was still married and I was only nineteen. It was all incredibly complicated. Abortions are absolutely dreadful. I'm really not the mother type, but it really is as if part of your soul is scratched out. After that abortion I felt really bad; I lived on sleeping pills. My relationship to the man was very disturbed and there he was, always with his passionate demands!”

Around the same time, 1933–1934, Leithäuser began her first serious relationship with a woman. Elga was seven years older. She was a pharmacist and the two women met in Elga's pharmacy.

“Elga had already had a significant relationship to a woman. When I met her she was together with a man training to be a pharmacist, but they broke up on account of me. There was a strong human attraction between us. In my significant relationships, the most important thing was human intimacy, closeness, liking the person. I didn't want to just lie in bed with the women – I had high intellectual standards. After all, I had studied Marx and read all the big-name authors who were banned later on. Unlike Anton, Elga was simply there for me; not at all servile, passive, or dependent as he was – not at all. The totally natural intimacy – I'm a woman, she's a woman – is definitely a common basis that makes contact with one another so effortless, and it was like that my whole life! That's how my first relatively long relationship got started.

“For Elga and me there were some terribly difficult years, because Anton wouldn't go along with it. He was at his emotional limit. He was extraordinarily talented; I owe a lot to him, and that made the whole thing a lot harder than if he were some dumb macho male who had nothing but hormones in his head and was good for nothing besides.

“Elga really suffered because of my simultaneous relationship with him – we lived together. She tolerated it and cried. Then in 1937 I had a child with him. I could have had an abortion, but I didn't want to. When the child was born, I left Anton because I projected onto the baby all my negative feelings toward his hysteria and the loud, terrible scenes that he caused us, ripping up our passports and all that. So for three years I left the baby in the private children's home where I had given birth. After that I took her to live with me and my girlfriend. Two years later the air raids started in Berlin, and from 1943 to 1945 we gave her to anthroposophic friends who had an estate in the Black Forest. But I could never make up for that, those first years she spent without me.”

In early 1938, Leithäuser moved to Berlin permanently, where Elga had already been living and working for quite a while. Their first residence was with two women in a furnished apartment in the Wannsee area, at the outskirts of Berlin.

“They were also a couple, but we never talked about private life. Back then we were very discreet, of course, but then again not *that* discreet, and to experienced eyes we were very much together. We weren't even in that apartment in Wannsee for eight days and we came home from the city and the place had been ransacked; the Gestapo had been there. I was known because of the trial and was questioned by the Gestapo several times during the Nazi period. I was subpoenaed; I was so incredibly afraid. I remember how, on Burg Street, where there was also a Gestapo office, the man who interrogated me was trying to get me to be an informant. He said, ‘Sure, you're banned from going to Kassel, but we could loosen that up again. You still have your two friends there. Maybe we could work something out?’ One of my friends got active in 1942–1943 in a resistance group again and they made things difficult for her. I said, ‘You know, communism was a folly of my youth; I've given it up so totally that I broke off contact with my two friends there.’ And he said, ‘We know about your private life; you, and not only you . . . we have a list of these women . . .’ Did he say *lesbians* at the time? I think so. I know it really shocked me. I didn't react to the accusation of being a lesbian. He said it and I didn't respond. That was the best thing for me to do. I lived together with Elga in one apartment and wasn't yet married then. The Gestapo was always around for the whole twelve years, and even if they did leave us alone, relatively speaking, they could have come back at any moment.”

Soon after, the two women moved to a newly built apartment in the Charlottenburg district of Berlin. It “already had an air-raid shelter, since the Nazis were preparing for war. As far as privacy was concerned, we had absolutely no problems there. Actually, we didn't have any problems with that at all. I don't know if something to do with social status, with material wealth and security let us act differently. Or how would it have been if we had been very poor or in a working-class house, since there the men tend to let out their aggressions more? The lease was in her name, since she had a better income. We were both unmarried at the time; she didn't even embellish herself with stories of a fiancé or a potential marriage. We paid our rent, looked respectable,

and behaved ourselves. When the pharmacy almost went up in flames, my girlfriend, who just happened to be on the night shift, worked like crazy to help put out the fire and she was given an award. Because of the uncertain political situation on account of me, we were really glad to have it. We hung it near the door so the block leader would see it when he stood outside.”

After her release in 1934, Leithäuser supported herself with casual jobs and help from her partner. She had also learned the "broadcasting trade" from Anton, who was a radio writer and had been banned from working at the Radio Saarbrücken broadcasting station because of his connection to her.

“When I came to Berlin it wouldn't have been a problem for me to go to the Reich broadcasting station, since they desperately needed young, talented women writers or reporters, and I always had a talent for writing. But I didn't do that; I didn't want to. My girlfriend totally agreed with me that I not try to work for the Reich broadcasting station. I was unemployed for the twelve years – I didn't have to make any compromises. I had odd jobs, worked as a secretary on an hourly basis, because I didn't want to have a permanent job under any circumstances.

“I was really lucky with the three bosses I had. The last one was incredibly happy that he had someone who wasn't a Nazi, since he had contact to resistance groups himself and was a representative for a geopolitical publishing house. There were all the really big names in the letters I wrote – Canaris, von Trott zu Solz, and others [who were involved in the July 20, 1944 coup attempt, trans.]. Then I had another boss who was also happy he didn't get a Nazi woman. I even told him my whole story; you had a sense back then of whom you could tell. You developed extra senses, instincts – it's either the Gestapo or it's people you could talk with. I was never wrong in my judgment. Of course you had to be careful. After the trial I threw myself into my private life and really didn't do anything political at all. In the fall of 1944 I could have had contact with a resistance group organized by Hermann Henselmann, a good architect from the Bauhaus school who later built that dreadful Stalin Avenue in East Berlin. I could have joined that group, but I was afraid, afraid of being interrogated again, afraid of ending up in jail again. But to this day I can't forgive myself for not having done it. I can't say that at the time I lived

in a constant state of fear, but I was always cautious – and not without reason – my telephone was tapped.”

Nevertheless, nothing could stop Leithäuser from going to the Leibniz-Klause, the Leibniz Den, one of the lesbian meeting places that still existed. In retrospect, she suspected that the Gestapo had known about the place.

“During the Nazi period – I think the war had already started – there was a women's bar, the Leibniz Den. The bar still exists to this day. I went there every once in a while. It was run by Roy, a woman with short blond hair. Roy definitely looked lesbian. It was a lesbian bar, that was obvious. There was no sign outside, but word got around. It was a small, quiet place. I picked up a woman there once. She was petite and wiry, with short hair. She wore a long, gray leather coat and said very openly that she worked for the Gestapo. There was something attractive about it for me, an evil attraction. I was with her two or three times; of course, I never told her anything about myself. It's possible that the Gestapo knew about the bar and just tolerated it. I mean, that's where I met that Gestapo woman. Maybe they just thought they wanted to keep an eye on us, and maybe that's what that Gestapo man meant when he spoke of that list.”

Elisabeth Leithäuser and Elga broke up on friendly terms in 1944. Elga moved to live with her new partner near Potsdam and Leithäuser lived together with Brigitte, who had a big apartment on Giesebrecht Street. Leithäuser left Brigitte in April 1945, although we were both totally prepared to experience the collapse together. Brigitte and I had also discussed how we would respond to rapes. But I just left her, because all of a sudden, Conrad, one of my boyfriends, was standing at the door and we both thought it was fate. Under fire, with dead bodies all around, we got married in April 1945. It was a war psychosis. But it couldn't work, and after two weeks I really went back to Brigitte, though our relationship never managed to recover from that. It was all my fault – you just can't do things like that. That's one of the few things I will never forgive myself for.”

May 8, 1945 – the end of the war – was the happiest day of Leithäuser's life. She quickly became an editor for the Russian-licensed radio station Berlin Rundfunk. Later she went to the U.S.-licensed station *RIAS* (Radio in the American Sector), did public relations work for the press, and worked for newspapers in Berlin and West Germany.

At fifty-seven years of age, she changed her career and ran a home for the rehabilitation of the mentally ill. (She had satisfied the prerequisites by attending university lectures during the twelve years of the Nazi period.) Elisabeth Leithäuser passed away in July 2004, after living her "third life" in the women's movement.

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