

Ella Mensch (1859 -1935)

"Today at 2 o'clock in the afternoon passed away peacefully our dear, very admired friend Miss Dr. Ella Mensch, holder of the Grossherzoglich Hessischen Silver Medal for Art and Science, after severe suffering that she beared with great patience, in the 77th year of her life. Sadly missed by Ms. Hedda Graeber, Berlin-Spandau, 14 Ruhelener Street."

Was Hedda Graeber Ella Menschs life partner? Did she look after her and nurse her until her death or how could she be so well-informed about the death circumstances of her friend? We do not know.

That we do know the wording of the obituary notice we owe to Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche (1846-1935), the sister and executor of the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. In her estate lies this precious document because she and Ella Mensch corresponded with each other for 29 years (the unedited letters are kept in the Goethe-Schiller-Archive in Weimar).

The writer, journalist, scholar and women's rights activist Ella Mensch was a pioneer as a female student at a European university. Born in 1859 in Lübben (Spreewald/Brandenburg), she passed her teacher's exam in 1879 in Berlin before going to Zurich in 1880. There, probably as the first woman in the world, she studied German language and literature as a main subject. In 1883 she graduated with a dissertation in Linguistics. Holder of a PhD in German Studies, she lived in Darmstadt afterwards for many years. There she worked at the newspaper "Darmstädter Tageblatt" as a responsible for the theatre section and earned money on the side as a teacher of German and history at an institute.

As early as 1890, the founding year of the ADLV (The Universal German Association of Female Teachers), Ella Mensch joined this self-organization of female teachers, whose chairwoman until 1921 was the women's rights activist Helene Lange (1848-1930), the life partner of Gertrud Bäumer.

In 1893 Ella Mensch's first paper on the women's question was published; in 1895 she was, for a short time, one of the chairwomen of the German Women's Association Reform (Deutscher Frauenverein Reform) founded by Hedwig Kettler (1852-1937).

In 1902 Ella Mensch published her first novel. Behind the main character Ernst Münster we find the author herself. A key role plays the sister of the main character some of whose characteristics resemble Helene Lange. To this sister the main character laments his unhappy love before he dies of a broken heart. In 1903, "At the outpost. A novel of my

student time in Zurich" was published. Again an unfulfilled love is the central theme. This time the person in love, whose love is not returned, is a woman – just as the object of her desire. She dies – not of a broken heart, however, but as a heroine rescuing her beloved from drowning.

In her later novels Ella Mensch never took up lesbian love again. Love of the opposite sex, however, is implicitly rejected. In Mensch's texts it is shown as not compatible with the professional and personal development of a woman, and neither can it be justified by social constraints. By placing heterosexual relationships near theatres of war, as in the novels "Dangerous Streets" (1929) and "A Soul In Jail", Ella Mensch gives heterosexuality a somewhat martial character, as much as the author tries to attribute to the trauma of war that she suffered a cathartic effect.

Ella Mensch lived in a women-oriented and women-related sphere. When she came to Berlin in 1904, where she would stay until the end of her life, she became editor of the "Frauen-Rundschau" (formerly "Dokumente der Frau" by Marie Lang), succeeding Helene Stöcker (1869 – 1943). There she worked together with Marie Raschke LL D, amongst others.

Ella Mensch's position in the Women's Movement aimed at promulgating a humanitarian ideal that was based on an anti(hetero)sexual matrix. In that respect she was close to the "Moderates". The "Radicals" in the Women's Movement she she strongly opposed (see her paper "Iconoclasts In the Berlin Women's Movement", published in 1906). Polemics could not be avoided. Ella Mensch feared that condoning extramarital maternity or approving of the compatibility between profession and motherhood would devalue a celibate lifestyle and disparage the work and achievements of working, unmarried women. She had the deepest respect for female vigour and the willingness to achieve something. In longer treatises she paid tribute to the Prussian Queen Luise and the Hessian Princess Alice. Contemporaries like the writers Ida Boy-Ed, Frieda von Bülow or Emma Vely were personally close to her. She kept her friendships over many years, and she always encouraged other women to speak, to look after their own interests or to write down their memories. Together with the writer Anna von Krane (1853 – 1927) she edited a collection of poetry.

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