

„Will they find me or won't they?"  
Gertrude Sandmann (1893-1981)

November 22, 1943. The most devastating air raid since the beginning of the war started in Berlin. Six hundred British and Canadian airplanes dropped thousands of explosive and incendiary bombs on the capital of the Reich for two hours in the middle of the night. Gertrude Sandmann sat in her hiding place, held her breath, and hoped that the bombs wouldn't find her. At the same time, every single attack-and they were coming with increasing frequency-was bringing her closer to the liberation she so desperately longed for, as macabre as that may sound. According to official records, Gertrude Sandmann no longer existed. In May 1943 the Nazis-obviously lacking better judgment-had declared Berlin to be "judenfrei," free of Jews. That was a matter that Minister of Propaganda Goebbels, as gauleiter of Berlin, had taken very seriously. But Gertrude Sandmann, her only "crime" lying in the fact that she was of Jewish descent, was still alive. Or rather, she managed to continue to exist. For a long time now the passionate painter had not been able to pursue the most important thing in her life, her art. The only thing that mattered was sheer survival. An "Aryan" family she was acquainted with had taken her in, and at that time she had already been living illegally for over a year in their apartment in the Treptow district of Berlin. She was lucky and made it through that night. Her hiding place wasn't hit, the Allied bombers changed course, and the all-clear signal sounded shortly after. But then footsteps suddenly thumped outside the door; the air-raid warden made his rounds of the apartments. There was nothing else for the delicate woman to do but quickly hide in a desk and hope that she wouldn't be betrayed by a sudden coughing attack. "Will they find me or won't they?" was the question a frightened Gertrude Sandmann kept asking herself until the war ended.

A white-haired elderly woman in a painter's smock stands before an easel in a studio overflowing with drawings. Before her is an almost completed portrait of a woman with a hat. She reviews it with a critical eye and makes a few final strokes. That describes a photograph of Gertrude Sandmann from the 1960s, twenty years after her life underground and her being banned from her profession by the Nazis. She worked with incredible zeal, producing an oeuvre of well over a thousand works in about sixty years. (It isn't possible to determine an exact count since there is no inventory of her works and many were destroyed during the war.) She was proficient and experienced in many techniques; usually she drew with chalk or charcoal, though she also painted with water color and pastels. Form was the most important element for her; color was an extra. Sandmann used a minimum of artistic devices to try to grasp the essence, that which was characteristic of a figure. She worked with omissions that were meant to stir the imagination, the capacity to see. Her drawings were an attempt to make visible to others the "unassuming beauty" of everyday life that she discovered in a sleeping woman or a burst chestnut. First and foremost her artwork was the product of her joy in seeing, not a means of social criticism, as was often the case for her "admired role model" Käthe Kollwitz.

No one knows why Gertrude decided to become a painter and very little is known of her childhood and adolescence. She grew up in Tiergarten, a well-to-do district of Berlin, in an assimilated Jewish family. Her father, David Sandmann, had become wealthy as a plantation owner in East Africa and a manufacturer in the liquor industry, and he had made a name for himself as a commercial judge and a civil deputy.

Shortly after completing her Abitur examination, in 1913, Sandmann started a course of study at the art school of the Berlin Association of Women Artists under Martin Brandenburg. "Up until the end of World War I, no woman was accepted to study at the Berlin College of the Fine Arts (called 'Academy' at that time), no matter how talented she was." This was written by Gertrude Sandmann, looking back at the obstacles facing women artists back then. "The consequence: Emancipated women founded the Berlin Association of Women Artists, which taught and exhibited works of women painters, graphic artists, and sculptors."<sup>1</sup> After the founding of this association in 1867, women could for the first time receive an institutionalized education to become professional artists. Among the twelve hundred members of this-still existing-association were artists such as Käthe Kollwitz, Paula Modersohn-Becker, Renée Sintenis, Jeanne Mammen, and Hannah Höch.

Gertrude Sandmann continued to study and work at various places inside and outside Germany. Between 1917 and 1921 she studied under Otto Kopp, of the Free Secession school, in Munich and in 1922 she took private lessons from Käthe Kollwitz, who evaluated her as "a very hard-working, remarkable artist" and expressed interest in her further development. In fact the two women stayed friends until Kollwitz died in 1945. Starting in the mid-1920s, Sandmann worked for an extended period of time as a freelance artist in Paris and Italy, participated in several art exhibitions in Berlin, and drew illustrations for magazines to earn her keep.

"When will artwork finally be judged according to whether it is good or bad, irrespective of the gender of the artist?" This critical remark made in the 1970s by Sandmann on the frequently disparaging appraisal of so-called women's art was no less applicable in the 1920s. The continued professional and social discrimination of women artists made it necessary to form a separate organization for women. She joined GEDOK, the German-Austrian Society for Women Artists and Friends of the Arts, founded in 1926, and was also a member after it was revived in the 1960s. In a manner expressing an openness by no means typical for the 1970s, she made the following remarks on the working conditions of women artists and her own self-conception:

„It is necessary or at least favorable for a woman artist not to live in a union that makes demands of her in the sense of a patriarchal role allocation; instead, she should have a union that neither impedes her work nor hampers her development, that is, one containing much that is reciprocal and companionate. This is why it seems lucky to me if a woman artist is a lesbian and if she can declare this without feelings of guilt. . . . Homosexuality is not merely a sexual variant, but a different attitude in many areas as a result of this predisposition. Just like Käthe Kollwitz, I also feel it is an almost necessary prerequisite that an artist not be uniformly man or woman, but clearly combine both of these, active and passive, even if this is not actually realized. It is true that the nature of the artist is homosexual or at least bisexual.“<sup>2</sup>

Even from the few existing works from her early period-the first drawing still in existence is from 1918-two characteristics are apparent. First of all, her preference for *drawings*, which she did not see as a provisional, preliminary work for a picture using another medium, but as a complete, authentic work of art in itself. Second, Sandmann's drawings are predominantly of women. Several nudes of pairs of women have been preserved from the period around 1925. It is truly remarkable how Sandmann was able to grasp the essence and create an erotic atmosphere with such sparing use of materials and so few powerful strokes! About her motifs, she said, "I draw women who have natural movements and express what they feel . . . and [I] draw faces that are not masks or are merely masks that I can see through-that is, people who are experienced in life and who have suffered-many types of people. I draw only women because I feel closer to them than to men, since I can experience their essence and their corporeality through my own femaleness.“<sup>3</sup>

Gertrude Sandmann discovered rather early on that she felt "closer to women than to men." At the beginning of World War I she had a relationship with Lilly zu Klampen, a girlfriend from her school days. Lilly founded the Soroptimist Club in 1929, among whose members were employed women and artists such as Tilla Durieux, Jeanne Mammen, and writer Tami Oelfken. Did this or another relationship with a woman incur her parent's displeasure, at a time when Sandmann was dependent on their financial support? In order to satisfy the demands of the family, in 1915 she married the physician Hans Rosenberg (brother of Expressionist poet Henriette Hardenberg), but the marriage, in name only, ended in divorce after only a short time.

During the Weimar Republic lesbians had a "much more difficult time than [they do] today, if they wanted to live according to their nature, and not in the closet: more severe resistance, confrontation, and pressure from the family, having to hide their lesbianism in most occupations, etc." Sandmann wrote these words in 1976, recalling those turbulent times. She warned of "misplaced nostalgia" and calling these the "golden" years, „because of neglecting the misery of the war-disabled and bereaved families, the inflation and unemployment, which also affected women considerably, and only reflecting on the great artistic achievements of the time, the exuberant zest for life, the reaction to years of psychological pressure from the war, only thinking of the easing of sexual taboos-Victorian morality was finally abandoned.“<sup>4</sup>

Gertrude Sandmann-who had been a member of the left-wing Independent Social Democratic Party of Germany (USPD)<sup>5</sup> while studying in Munich, since it was the only party that had voted against the war-must have observed the growing threat to the democratic Weimar Republic with

concern.<sup>5</sup> She quickly recognized that the coming to power of the Nazis would lead to nothing good and she went to Switzerland. Sandmann had to return to Germany in 1934, however, since she was unable to extend her residence and work permits in Switzerland. In the same year she was expelled from her professional association, the Reich Association for Artists, because of her "non-Aryan" heritage. In their racist fanaticism, it obviously did not interest the Nazis that she had withdrawn her membership in the Jewish community center in 1926 and maintained no registered religious affiliation since then. In April of the following year, 1935, President of the Reich Association for the Fine Arts Hönig issued the final ban, preventing her from pursuing her occupation as an artist. The Reich association was part of the Reich Culture Chamber under Goebbels and membership in the appropriate subsidiary association was a prerequisite for artistic activities in the Third Reich. Members deemed unreliable or unsuitable were expelled or not allowed to join in the first place. Besides Jews and "Jews of mixed blood," political unreliaables, and the "mentally deficient," this included homosexuals as well.

As a "non-Aryan" and "as such [not possessing] the necessary reliability and suitability for the creation of German cultural assets," Hönig denied her admission to the Reich Association for the Fine Arts, although Sandmann had never even applied. The rejections were automatically sent to all "non-Aryan" artists on the basis of professional registration lists. Hönig also prohibited her "further professional activities as a painter or graphic artist," which meant that she was no longer allowed to teach or exhibit or sell her work. As a result, in the years that followed she became even more dependent on her inheritance from her father, who had died in 1917.

As well as was possible under the circumstances and with a growing scarcity of materials, Sandmann continued secretly to draw. She had to use magazine photographs as models. Of the few preserved works from the Third Reich, pictures entitled "The Cowering Woman" or "The Emigrant Woman" demonstrate her artistic confrontation with the times. Her being treated like a criminal by the state and her art being banned as "degenerate" were among the worst experiences she had during the Nazi period.

Her sister, Vera Mastrangelo, who became an Italian citizen through her marriage to an Italian man, had their parent's house at Am Karlsbad 11, in Berlin, transferred to her name in 1939 to save the family from losing it through "Aryanization," as the Nazis referred to the expropriation of "Jewish property." It was a clever move, but it didn't prevent the house from being destroyed during an air raid in 1944. Nevertheless, until 1942 it provided Sandmann and her mother Ella a place to hide.

Sandmann had decided once again to flee and, through arrangements made by an English art dealer, she succeeded in the summer of 1939 in obtaining one of the few visas issued for England. Her friend, Ann K. Hartwin, a writer, had already managed to flee to England, but Sandmann could not bear to leave her mother alone in Berlin, since she had become seriously ill. Germany started World War II in September 1939, and Sandmann's mother died one month later, but by then the English visa had become worthless.

Although the anti-Jewish terror was designed from the very beginning to force Jews to emigrate, numerous ordinances made it increasingly difficult to do just that. The situation was made even worse by the restrictive asylum policies of most prospective host countries. Hardly any chance to emigrate remained once the war had started, and soon afterward the trap snapped shut for good. Emigration was entirely prohibited from October 1941, making it virtually impossible for Jews to escape Germany. At the same time, the Nazis starting deporting the Jewish population.

Hundreds of anti-Jewish laws and measures that gradually stripped Jews of all their rights affected Gertrude Sandmann as well, making it more and more difficult for her to survive. Starting in January 1939 she was forced to replace her "Germanic" middle name, *Tusnelda*, which owed to her parent's love of their homeland, with *Sara*, and as of September 1941 she had to wear the Jewish star, which made her more visible as an outcast and subject to abuse on the street. She was required to hand in all jewelry and valuables and - there was no end to the treachery - she had to pay a share of the fine of one billion marks for the damages incurred in the pogrom night of November 1938. Sandmann's very bad state of health saved her from having to perform slave labor. In the summer of 1942 her only uncle, Arthur Wolfgang, and her aunt were deported to the Theresienstadt concentration camp and killed. The Jewish population of Berlin, which amounted to 160,000 people in 1933, was reduced to a fourth of its original size through expulsion and deportation.

In November 1942 Sandmann was directly threatened with deportation since she had not performed any slave labor and was thus not proven to be "useful." After being unable to obtain an entry permit to go to her sister in Italy, she decided to take the only path remaining open to her and went underground. She fled her own apartment on November 21, 1942, leaving a note announcing her suicide to the Gestapo, who appeared at her door shortly afterward and stole everything. Suicide was an act of desperation not uncommon within the Jewish population, their backs up against a wall, in those days.

In order to make it look believable, Sandmann had to leave behind everything in the apartment, including her food rations card, which had already become necessary for survival, though as a Jew it hardly sufficed, as Jews were allotted a fifth of normal rations. Without the support of friends who helped at the risk of their own lives, it would not have been possible to survive underground. Gertrude Sandmann was lucky. Her partner, Hedwig ("Johnny") Koslowski, an artisan who Sandmann had been involved with since 1927, did not abandon her. Such behavior was by no means a matter of course in those days, when many "mixed" marriages and partnerships broke under the external pressure.

Hedwig Koslowski arranged a hiding place with the Grossmann family, friends of hers living in the Treptow district of Berlin. Sandmann remained hidden in a minuscule closet and lived on whatever Mrs. Grossmann could spare from her food rations and whatever Hedwig Koslowski was able to obtain. Anne Frank vividly described in her diary what it was like to live in hiding for months or even years. Like her, Sandmann also had to avoid making any sound whatsoever in the poorly insulated apartment; she could not stand near the window nor ever leave the apartment, even during the heaviest of bombings, which left her utterly helpless and vulnerable. Sandmann was only able to survive this time of utmost tension through autogenic training. Until the day she died, an unexpected knock at the door or ring of the telephone could terrify her and evoke horrifying nightmares.

By the summer of 1944, after being locked in for a year and a half, the situation became increasingly unbearable for her. She also didn't want to endanger the Grossmanns any longer; if it had ever been discovered through a bombing that they had hidden a Jew in their apartment, they would have had to reckon with the very worst consequences, either prison or concentration camp. Once again, Hedwig Koslowski succeeded in finding a hiding place for her, this time in an unoccupied summerhouse in Biesdorf, on the outskirts of Berlin. Because of the neighbors, she wasn't allowed to start a fire or turn on lights. Hedwig Koslowski and Susy Hermans, a long-standing friend of Sandmann from the 1920s, supplied her with food. Since she hadn't been able to draw for a long time already, she recited poetry, training her memory to keep sane.

In the fall she had to move again because of the cold. This time Hedwig Koslowski took her into her own apartment, which she shared with another artisan in the Schöneberg district. This is where Sandmann was living, emaciated at seventy pounds, when the Allied troops liberated Berlin. She was finally able to breathe a sigh of relief, along with approximately twelve hundred other Berlin Jews who survived the war underground as so-called U-Boats, submarines. An end had finally come to the years of living in fear of being discovered and the deadly consequences that would have followed, though serious health problems caused by conditions of a life underground persisted.

With the help of her partner, Sandmann soon found an apartment and studio on Eisenacher Street in the Schöneberg district, where she lived until she died. Shortly after the war, she started drawing again. "I don't have that much more time to live - if only I could buy time." That's how she once described her wish to be able to regain the time and creativity she was robbed of. It appears that the years she spent underground hardly had any impact on the *subject matter* of her work. She still concentrated on depictions of women. "But the vitality, the strength was broken by the experiences of the war," said Jürgen Lohse, who met Sandmann in 1957 and remained a friend until she died, about the impact of those murderous years.

Although she participated in several postwar exhibitions-in 1949, 1958, and 1968-only once, in 1974, did she have a solo exhibition, in the Vömel Gallery in Düsseldorf, which included forty-five more recent works. Eva Kollwitz described her works as follows in the exhibition brochure: "Works of pure joy mingle with those of severity; and she is fascinated again and again by simple objects of everyday life. . . . An eggshell shimmers like moonlight; a piece of fruit conveys the sensual experience of taste."

In 1968 over seventy of Sandmann's drawings were displayed in a collective exhibition in the House at Kleistpark in Schöneberg. In a review of her works, art critic Albert Buesche from the daily newspaper the *Tagesspiegel* correctly noted with amazement that she was "an artist by calling" who was not well-known although she had been unceasingly prolific in the decades following the war. Her being relatively unknown was certainly due in part to the fact that Sandmann refused to have exhibits "at all costs." From Käthe Kollwitz she had "learned" that in order to avoid endangering artistic quality, the artwork should if at all possible not have to serve as a means of support.<sup>6</sup>

A small financial compensation for the injustices she had suffered during the Nazi period secured a modest existence for Sandmann after the war. After her separation from Hedwig Koslowski in 1956, she shared her life with Tamara Streck, a former circus performer who worked as a professional driver. While Sandmann once trembled with fear for her survival underground, Streck's life took a different turn, since she was not Jewish. Within the scope of "artistic support for the troops," she performed tricks on the trapeze.

Sandmann avidly followed the initiatives of the new women's movement that was emerging in the 1970s and she supported various women's projects in West Berlin, such as the women's gallery *Andere Zeichen* (Different Signs). Her experiences in the 1920s showed her how important meeting places and groups for lesbians were. She once wrote the following about the significance of the clubs in discovering one's identity at the time of her youth:

„The clubs, the "subculture" so maligned today, represented the first step back then, the first and only and very much appreciated chance to come together with women like yourself and be freed from isolation-such an important beginning! . . . It was a great liberating experience to see that there are really so many women like yourself. You walked into the club as if you were "coming home"-this is where you belonged.“<sup>7</sup>

Because of her relatively privileged situation as an artist, she felt obliged "to speak up whenever possible for people like me." That's why in November 1974, already eighty-one years old, she supported, together with her friend Kitty Kuse, the founding of the Group L74, the first postwar organization for elderly lesbians in Berlin. Sandmann also occasionally worked on the magazine published by the group, UKZ (Unsere Kleine Zeitung, Our Little Newspaper); for years her drawing "Lovers" adorned the cover page of this magazine.\*

Tamara Streck died in October 1979 of pneumonia and occupational arthritis. The early death of her considerably younger partner-Streck was born in 1915-destroyed Sandmann's desire to live. She herself was suffering from cancer; the strong will that had helped her through so much had been broken and she refused any life-prolonging treatment. Gertrude Sandmann, who wanted to use her art to "create a greater sense of humanity" and build "bridges from person to person," died in January 1981.

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from:

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\* The here mentioned journal "UKZ" was published between 1975 and 2001. Compare Bornemann, Eva/Trachsel, Helga: Gruppe L 74 und die Zeitschrift UkZ (Unsere kleine Zeitung). In: Dennert, Gabriele/Leidinger, Christiane/Rauchut, Franziska (Hrsg.): *In Bewegung bleiben. 100 Jahre Politik, Kultur und Geschichte von Lesben*. Unter Mitarbeit von Stefanie Soine. Berlin: Querverlag 2007, S. 77-79. sowie Trachsel, Helga: *Vom Lesben-Zeitungsmachen. Anfang, Verlauf und Ende einer Langzeitbeziehung*. In: ebd., S. 238f. Annotation of the editors of [lesbengeschichte.de](http://lesbengeschichte.de)

Nachtrag zu zwei Ausstellungen und neuen Publikationen:

Ausstellungen:

2009 und 2011 fanden zwei Ausstellungen zum Werk von Gertrude Sandmann statt:

2009 in Potsdam und 2011 in Berlin-Schöneberg, Haus am Kleistpark:  
"Vom Sehen und Leben. Gertrude Sandmann, Retrospektive einer Künstlerin und Zeitzeugin",  
kuratiert von Dr. Anna Havemann.

Publikationen:

Bührmann, Traude: Gertrude Sandmann. o.J. Online. Portal Frauen Biografieforschung.  
<http://www.fembio.org/biographie.php/frau/biographie/gertrude-sandmann/>  
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Notes

1. Gertrude Sandmann, "Die Situation der Frau als bildende Künstlerin," *Unsere Kleine Zeitung* (hereafter UKZ; 1976), 2(1):25.
2. Gertrude Sandmann, in an interview with Cäcilia Rentmeister, February 1977; cited in Marcella Schmidt, "Gertrude Sandmann (1893-1981)," in Berlin Museum, ed., *Eldorado. Homosexuelle Frauen und Männer in Berlin 1850-1950* (Berlin, 1992), p. 206.
3. Schmidt, "Gertrude Sandmann," p. 207.
4. Gertrude Sandmann, "Anfang des lesbischen Zusammenschlusses: die Clubs der zwanziger Jahre," «MDBU»ukz«MDNM» (1976), 2(7/8):4.
5. The USPD was a left-wing splinter party of the SPD. It existed from 1917-1922, after which part returned to the SPD and part went to the German Communist Party (KPD) – TRANS.
6. "Gertrude Sandmann über Käthe Kollwitz," in *Käthe Kollwitz. Briefe der Freundschaft und Begegnungen* (Munich, 1966), pp. 158-161.
7. Sandmann, "Anfang des lesbischen Zusammenschlusses," p. 6.