

# Nicht zuschütten<sup>1</sup>

## A personal remembrance of Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky

---

Irene Nierhaus

From my experience in gender research, I have become cautious about descriptions of identity, which is the subject of any kind of biographical writing. So it is necessary for me to emphasize that I am writing a personal memoir of Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky in which biographical details of the remembered are intermingled with the autobiographical circumstances of the one who is doing the remembering. Here I am constructing a/my narrative about *die Schütte* (as she is known in Vienna) from a specific perspective that occurred at a specific place and point in time. While living in Vienna in the late 1970s, I met Grete, when she was in her late 70s, a woman with a rich life and full of verve as she conveyed her version of history, architecture and politics and recalled her activities in the resistance, the women's movement and with internationalism. In my 20s at the time, I was curious about these topics and constantly in search of alternatives to those available to me in my life and the courses that were offered at the local institutions of high learning. Because the Department of Art History at the University of Vienna was extremely conservative, I studied for a year at the University of Rome. There, I was introduced to a civically and culturally oriented, socio-historical contextualization of art and architectural history by professors such as Carlo Giulio Argan, the art historian and then communist mayor of Rome.

Back in Vienna and in search of a critical and socially relevant method of writing art history, I first met Grete through the women's movement

---

<sup>1</sup> In this context, *nicht zuschütten* means "don't bury [her]" or "don't obscure [her]". The title is a wordplay on the first part of Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky's last name. The German verb *zuschütten* means to cover up, to bury or to obscure.

and left-wing political circles. At the university, I mainly took courses with the architectural historian Renate Wagner-Rieger, who was a very devout Catholic and quite conservative regarding personal issues, yet was liberal, open-minded and supportive when it came to academic pursuits. She was my political counterpart to Grete, yet I deeply appreciated her because of her generosity towards me and my fellow students regarding our desire to experiment and explore new lines of thought. I don't remember the first time I met Grete. She had not become the *die Schütte*, the famous or much talked about person, so I just got to know her little by little. She was living history and, seen from today, also something like a *role model* who impressed me and, I would like to think, had an influence on my life. (Figure 1)

Her influences on me include: her contextualized means of thinking about space; her willingness to take a clear-eyed stand in relation to current political matters (except for her attachment to an ossified communism); her unwavering engagement for the emancipation of women, social classes and all people; her understanding of the world at large and her cosmopolitanism; her concentrated, objective and precise way of working; her conviction that life-long, educational offerings to impart knowledge are necessary; her awareness of social appearances, her humor and her charm; her confident elegance; and, last but not least, her ability to act independently and with a slight detachment in any given situation, as well as the manner in which she carried this out. The latter quality appealed to me because I perceived it as an expression of her autonomy and self-reliance, especially when compared to the prevailing notions of appropriate feminine behavior at the time, like the eternal smile, the constant pressure to establish cordial relations and preserve harmony. Grete always countered such gender stereotypes with humor, recalling the memory of a discussion by the jurors of a student competition during her years at the School of Arts and Crafts in Vienna. The jurors tried to guess which project had been submitted by the lone female participant and assumed it was a romantic "design with flowers." But to everyone's astonishment it was "of all things the most rational project" that came from none other than herself. We liked to laugh about such gender missteps; at the time, such assumptions only fueled my arguments against the much-debated, feminist "female aesthetics," based on differential feminism with ideas of an inherent gender difference and that were commonplace then. (Today, however, I would probably take a second look at this story.)



Figure 1: Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky, 1980s. Source: Ronald Zak.

Grete's reflections on housework and the necessity of changing how it is perceived as women's work responded to the pressing concerns that occupied myself and my fellow feminists in those years, particularly as we discussed alternate ways of living in communal apartments and households, although to some extent these notions were not radical enough for us. Nonetheless, such issues directly affected our daily lives and found an echo in our thoughts about the future. Other models, such as the boarding house and the "single-kitchen" apartment block seemed particularly desirable. While the design of the Frankfurt kitchen appealed to me from the beginning, I had my misgivings about its potential to improve women's lives due to its integration into the single-family household. It was only through conversations about the real political conditions and historical context of Weimar Germany that Grete was able to make the concept of this built-in kitchen comprehensible to me. As a result, I gave my first public lecture as an art historian on the Frankfurt kitchen at the first German-speaking conference of women art historians (Marburg an der Lahn 1982, publication 1984<sup>2</sup>), where we claimed gender as a category of analysis for art history. Today, the kitchen is now a part of international architectural history, demonstrating how spatial thinking about activity and use is translated into built form with integrated furnishings and informs the layout, function and aesthetic appearance. Grete

---

<sup>2</sup> Nierhaus (1984).

even installed a mini-version of this kitchen, which, as she said, „alle Stückl'n spielt“ (plays all the pieces) in her own small apartment in Vienna.

I also experienced the kitchen's structuring of the analytical, combinable and specific in other areas of Grete's life. She always took great care to prepare herself for events and speeches, being well aware of the impact that her presentation had when she engaged in the public sphere. She skillfully and sympathetically combined eloquence, hard work and charm. Careful planning in advance rather than leaving anything to chance was a motto that could be applied to different parts of her life, and she regularly had a Bulgarian doctor give her life-strengthening injections. And—thanks to her long life—she was able to take the writing of her biography into her own hands too. I find this determination to stand up for herself as well as her championing of the feminist cause all the more relevant today, because within the feminist movements the relationship to empowerment (and power) was often judged negatively and has often been discussed in opposition to powerlessness as an intentional “otherness.”

For me, Grete, or rather *die Schütte*, was someone who “is” history. Even until today, when I stroll through the park of the Schönbrunn Palace, among other venues, I am reminded of her recollections of taking long walks through such places to evade her persecutors and make contact with the political underground—her stories sneak into one's experience of the city, like the way the memory of the expelled and murdered Jewish citizens abruptly edges into consciousness when coming upon the so-called *Stolpersteine* while wandering the streets.

While collaborating on the publication of the second edition of the *Erinnerungen aus dem Widerstand 1938-1945*,<sup>3</sup> I learned about the many facets of her life under National Socialism. Turning to the book's extensive appendix, I was overcome with existential dread when I read her dispassionate account, like a hero's memorial, that enumerated and recorded the biographical data, political functions and judgments that were handed down against her fellow resistance fighters and prisoners. In her characteristic severity, she only spoke about herself with reserve, recalling the danger that she had faced

---

<sup>3</sup> Nierhaus (ed.) (1994). The title is translated as “Memories from the Resistance”. This memoir first appeared in 1985 at the East German publisher *Volk und Welt* and the West German publisher *Konkret Literatur Verlag*.

and the necessity of developing a requisite self-discipline, like an acquired “armor”, for example, to be able to survive prison.

Taking notes, recording and communicating—she undertook such acts of documentation with conviction and as the explicit obligation of a survivor. And she did this in Austria, during a period when few people were willing to confront the era of Nazism, while the mainstream—as evidenced by the “Waldheim Affair”<sup>4</sup>—denied and disavowed it. (Ruth Beckermann recently explored the prevailing attitudes at this time in her film *Waldheim's Waltz*.<sup>5</sup>)

In addition to the matter-of-fact Grete, there was the charming, jocular and elegant Grete, who always attached great importance to wearing well-tailored blouses in fine materials with appealing colors and to displaying a carefully arranged coiffure. She loved good food and dancing, and praised Kemal Atatürk, whom she had met at a reception during her years in exile in Turkey. I remember her telling me: “He was an excellent dancer!” When she was almost 100 years old, *die Schütte* was still dancing with her friend and fellow architect, Hubert Hofmann. One of the most beautiful moments that remains fixed in my memory is of a joint celebration with her, the painter Georg Eisler (son of the composer Hanns Eisler) and the historian Eric Hobsbawm, and with whom I felt, at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, to have finally arrived at a moment in this century that was finally felt “right” to me. Don’t bury history. This goes for all those who, as they sift through the layers of her life, want to redesign the archaeology of *die Schütte* to uncover someone else.

*Translated by Mary Pepchinski*

---

4 The “Waldheim Affair” refers to the scandal surrounding former UN General Secretary Kurt Waldheim (1918-2007). Specifically, this refers to his lack of remorse and unwillingness to accept his complicity, as a *Wehrmacht* officer and a member of the National Socialist Student League, regarding crimes committed by these organizations during the Second World War, including the Holocaust. He also omitted his activities during the Third Reich from his official biography. A controversy arose in 1986 when this information was made public as he was preparing his candidacy for the office of the president of Austria, a largely ceremonial position. Although he did go on to this role, he remained isolated on the international stage.

5 *Waldheim's Waltz* (2018) by Ruth Beckermann (Director) is a documentary film that probes the social and political conditions in Austria that enabled details of Kurt Waldheim's career during the Second World War to be obscured in the post-war years and into the present.

## Literature

Nierhaus, Irene (1984), „Die Fabrik des Hauses: Die Küche für den Arbeiterhaushalt,“ in: Bischoff, Cordula/Dinger, Brigitte/Ewinkel, Irene/Merle, Ulla (eds.), *FrauenKunstGeschichte: Zur Korrektur des herrschenden Blicks*, Gießen: Anabas, 1984, 158–166.

Nierhaus, Irene (ed.) (1994): *Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky: Erinnerungen aus dem Widerstand. Das kämpferische Leben einer Architektin von 1938–1945*. Wien, Promedia, 1994.

## Film and Internet Sources

Beckermann, Ruth (2018), *Waldheim's Waltz* (German: Waldheims Walzer), Österreicher Rundfunk (ORF), 2018, 93 mins.

Waldheim Affair <http://www.demokratiezentrum.org/en/knowledge/statistics-a-z/the-waldheim-affair.html>, accessed on February 11, 2021.

Waldheim Affair <https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Waldheim-Affäre>, accessed on February 11, 2021.