

## **Annette Eick (born 1909)**

Driven into exile by the Nazis

Celebrating her 95th birthday last October, Annette Eick, born in Berlin and now living in a small coastal town in the south of England, can look back over nearly a full century. She became known to a wider audience through the prize-winning documentary "Paragraph 175" in which she is the only woman amidst gay men who narrate about their lives in the Third Reich.

I got to know Annette Eick in 1992 when I conducted interviews with lesbian women about their lives for my book *Days of Masquerade*, particularly during the Nazi period. Her niece Kirsten, who lives in Berlin, had established the contact between us. When I rang Annette Eick and asked her cautiously if she would agree to be interviewed she immediately invited me.

When I arrived in county Devon on an autumnal evening in 1992 after a long journey on plane and bus she immediately involved me into a captivating conversation which did not stop until midnight, speaking both German and English. Without difficulty she cited poems by Rainer Maria Rilke, one of her favourite poets, and remembered long gone times in Berlin as if it had been yesterday.

As a child of an assimilated Jewish family – her parents had a prosperous furniture business – Annette had a sheltered childhood and youth in the west of Berlin. She fell in love with the charming and popular teacher, Erika von Hörsten who not only introduced her to Sappho's poems but also gave her – after graduation – her first "real kiss".

„Once I gave Erika a record with a song which was popular at the time, 'Your mouth says no, but your eyes say yes. Beloved woman, I will kiss you today'. She laughed and asked if I meant her. Once she was sent ski-touring with a class from another school and I could accompany them. I think it was New Year's Eve, people drank and danced and it was all wonderful. I could hardly take it any longer so I said to Erika 'I am going off to bed, I'm tired'. It wasn't true but I went upstairs into the bedroom and lay down. But my intuition

told me that she would follow soon so I left the door open. She did come and we embraced and kissed passionately. The next morning I was shocked about myself because I took the initiative. So I wanted to apologise, went to her room, knocked and entered and she asked me if I wanted to join her in her bed!' Overwhelmed Annette said no and Erika von Hörsten immediately travelled back to Berlin...

At the time Annette Eick visited a „woman's club“ for the first time very nervously whose address she had found in a magazine. „The club was in the north, in a working class area of Berlin to which the more masculine girls came in their best Sunday clothes, that is, a smoking jacket with tie and so on. I already had the desire to be with women. In this club I got to know a woman, Ditt, who looked a bit like Marlene Dietrich whom I liked as a type even if she was a bit vulgar. She had enormous sex appeal and was very charming. She seduced me. She gave me arrack punch to drink, I got drunk and came home very late. My father was still up, and I got clipped round the ears for the first time by him. Of course, my parents were scared where I was so late.“

Slowly she discovered other meeting points of the thriving lesbian subculture, for instance, the Dorian Gray on Bülow Street, one of the oldest women's bars in town. There, readers and staff of *Frauenliebe* (later: *Garconne*) met and to which Annette, interested in art and culture, contributed poems and short stories.

Carefree times came to an end soon after the Nazis came to power. Her parents' economic existence was destroyed bit by bit on the basis of their Jewish roots and Annette Eick had to take up a job as nanny in a family rather than dedicate herself to writing – her real vocation.

A relationship with Francis, a American woman from Chicago, was to become a decisive experience. Born in 1900 the daughter of a composer originally came to Germany to recover from tuberculosis in the Black Forest. After that, she moved to Berlin where she taught English and visited Magnus Hirschfeld's Institute for Sexology. The two women got to know one another in the mid thirties and moved in together. „Later it happened that Francis attacked me with a knife in a fit of schizophrenia – thankfully we lived on the ground floor, I could jump out the window. I was very desperate. On the other hand it was good for me that we separated because I then decided to emigrate.“

But where? One of the few countries that was prepared to intake refugees was Palestine. But in order to obtain one of the rare immigration permits of the English government, under whose mandate Palestine was at the time, Annette Eick had to visit a farm where Jewish youths were prepared for the anticipated rural life. She went to Havelberg, a small town north-west of Berlin. The pogrom night in November 1938, during which Eick's parents' store was destroyed, was almost fatal for Annette: the farm was invaded by Nazis during the night and all youths were violently dragged into a police prison.

„Something terrible happened“, Annette Eick remembered and her former fears reappeared. „The wife of our director remained on the farm and was shortly before giving birth. The baby remained in her belly, she suffered terribly and died from it. After approximately two or three days we discovered that the wife of the policeman had intentionally left the door open. We ran away and escaped. I went back to the farm. Everything was destroyed. But luckily I found my passport in the midst of all the glass debris. I had a bicycle there and thought, ‚What can I do but go back to my parents to Berlin‘. Then I ran into a postman on the other side of the road who came towards me, also on a bicycle. He stopped me and said, ‚Miss, wait, I have a love letter for you‘. Now the miracle comes. I wondered where I got a letter from?“ Impatiently she opened the letter – it contained the saving immigration permit for England which her already in England living friend Ditt, the „Marlene Dietrich-double“, had managed to obtain for her.

Thus, Annette Eick managed to escape Germany in time in 1938. „The bad thing was, of course, that I saw my parents waving on the platform when the train drove off and I knew that I'd never see them again“. In England she got by as a domestic, a nanny and educator. Despite the numerous German bomb attacks – one she escaped only narrowly – her years in London in emigrants' clubs became the „most intense“ of her life, even during the war.

In 1944 she got to know Joy, a secretary from London. „That was really funny. When Joy came into the restaurant my girlfriend Hortense said accidentally loudly, ‚Annette, your type is coming‘. Everybody stared at me and Joy! Even though it was true I must have been as red as anything! Then we laughed and Joy came over. She laughed and came home with me. I had a horrible, very small room at the time. But I couldn't pay more. I

asked her if she wanted to come upstairs for a cup of coffee? We slept together the first night and stayed together for five years.“

In 1949, after Joy split up from her, she got to know Gertrud Klingel, known as Trud, through a mutual friend and they got close. „She was a strong character, had integrity, a hundred percent credible and was reliant.“ Eight years older, Trud had already lived in England in the early 1930s and returned there after the end of the war. After Trud’s retirement in 1964 they left London and moved to Devon. There, Annette ran a day nursery in their own house for eleven years. Little time was left for her favourite hobby, writing. After a nervous breakdown, a reaction to her traumatic escape from Germany and the knowledge of her parents’ murder in Auschwitz, she had begun writing poems in English.

When Trud became ill with Alzheimers one of the hardest times of Annette’s life began. For months she cared for her increasingly confused and at times also violent girlfriend. Trud died in 1989 and left behind her completely exhausted life partner of forty years. Despite various illnesses Annette Eick continues to live on her own in her house and largely cares for herself. It is important to her to maintain her independence as long as possible. She has become more lonely as many friends and acquaintances have died in the meantime. But the „eternal muse“ – heroine of her book of poems published in 1984 „Immortal Muse“ – continues to frequently inspire Annette Eick to write and divulge in philosophical contemplations. Writing as survival.

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### **Proposal for quotation**

Author name, author first name year: text. Ingeborg Boxhammer/Christiane Leidinger: online-project lesbian history. translation by translator first name name (year).  
URL:<<http://www.lesbengeschichte.de>>