



Meier, Karl (1897-1974)

by Hubert Kennedy

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Swiss actor, cabaret performer, and stage director Karl Meier was, under the pseudonym "Rolf," editor-in-chief of the gay cultural periodical *Der Kreis* from 1943 until its demise in 1967. In this capacity Meier made an important contribution to gay liberation and culture, both in Europe and elsewhere.

Meier was born Rudolf Carl Rheiner on March 16, 1897 in St. Gallen, Switzerland. He was an illegitimate son of Elisabeth Rheiner, who later married an Italian and disappeared from view. He was raised by a childless couple, Thomas and Wilhelmine Meier, who formally adopted him on April 10, 1912.

Meier's adoptive parents wanted him to go into business, but from an early age he yearned to pursue a career as an actor. By 1917 he had found a position in Zurich that allowed him to train as an actor on the side.

From 1920 until 1924, Meier appeared on several Swiss stages, in both plays and operettas. In the period 1924 to 1932, he engaged in several tours of Germany, but never appeared on stage in the capital city. He was later grateful for the provincial work, since on these tours he learned all the various jobs that needed to be done in a theater. In 1932, he returned to Switzerland, and steadily took on more important roles than he had previously. He also began to direct and to design sets.

The cabaret "Cornichon" opened in Zurich in May 1934, and resoundingly flopped. But in September, when Meier was added to the ensemble, the cabaret was an overnight hit. Meier remained with Cornichon for thirteen years, taking part in probably 4,000 performances. One of his younger colleagues there was the pianist and composer Nico Kaufmann (1916-1996), who had been a student and lover of acclaimed American pianist Vladimir Horowitz.

The end of World War II brought a turning point in Meier's life. He resigned from Cornichon to continue his career as an actor on various stages. He was especially popular on radio and in the children's theater in Zurich. He also appeared in minor roles in movies and television. For example, he played the railroad watchman in the classic Swiss film *Hinter den sieben Gleisen* (Beyond the seven tracks, 1959), a comedy directed by Kurt Früh (now available on DVD, in Swiss German with German subtitles), and he was in a television production of the stage play *Bomber für Japan* (Bombers for Japan, 1938) by Werner Johannes Guggenheim. He was especially successful as a director of amateur productions. In 1960 he directed a play based on a poem by the Swiss writer Conrad Ferdinand Meyer, which required 220 amateur actors. He afterwards received a 35-minute standing ovation.

Although Meier never appeared professionally in Berlin, he did visit the city and came into contact, not only with the homosexual subculture there, but also with Adolf Brand (1874-1945), editor of *Der Eigene*. Begun in 1896 under the influence of the egoist philosopher Max Stirner (as reflected in the title, "Der Eigene," or "The self-owner"), it was openly homosexual from 1898 and may be considered the first gay journal in the world. Meier contributed an article, a poem, and two reviews to *Der Eigene*. The 1929 article "Rummel oder Kampf" (Row or fight) shows that he was already a determined and self-confident homosexual, with a strong

sense of justice.

In May 1934 Meier began contributing articles to the *Schweizerisches Freundschafts-Banner* (Swiss Banner of Friendship) in Zurich, a homosexual liberation journal that had begun in 1932. The Swiss Federal Assembly had already recommended reforming the penal code to allow same-sex relations between men 20 years of age and older, but this reform was not adopted until a plebiscite was held in 1939. In the years when the revision of the penal code was under discussion, Meier's articles for this journal fit in well with the militant tone taken by Anna Vock, a longtime activist for the homosexual cause, who was its editor from 1934.

In 1943, Meier, as "Rolf," became editor of the journal, which was now directed only toward men, and changed its name to *Der Kreis* (The Circle). The revision of the Swiss penal code, which had been adopted by plebiscite in 1939, came into effect in 1942. With the decriminalization of homosexual acts in Switzerland, *Der Kreis* became less militant and concentrated more on culture than on politics. Under Meier's guidance it also became trilingual. It had become bilingual in 1941, when French articles appeared; in 1952, contributions in English began to be published. From that point onward, its title was *Der Kreis--Le Cercle--The Circle*.

Although Meier's association with *Der Kreis* was well known, the name Karl Meier never appeared in the pages of *Der Kreis*. As editor, he always used the name Rolf. For literary and other contributions to the journal, he sometimes used the pseudonyms Rudolf Rheiner, Gaston Dubois, and Karl Pfenninger.

From 1942 until *Der Kreis*'s demise in 1967, Meier's influence on the periodical was supreme, if only by virtue of the sheer volume of his writings. In the years from 1946 to 1967 he contributed over 500 articles, short stories, poems, and commentary. His contributions amounted to about 20% of all contributions in German. (About half the written contributions were in German, with the remainder divided between French and English.)

Although the French and English sections of the journal had their own editors--"Charles Welti," pseudonym of Eugen Laubacher (1903-1998), for the French, and "Rudolf Burkhardt," pseudonym of Rudolf Jung (1907-1972), for the English--Meier set the tone for the journal, determining the ideas and ideals that he wanted the journal to promote. Nevertheless, he allowed a certain latitude in the expression of other views.

As was typical of other homophile journals of the period, *Der Kreis*, as directed by Meier, was intent on promoting the acceptance of homosexuality by society at large, but rather than address outsiders, the journal addressed homosexuals themselves with the aim of making them more acceptable to society and helping them to adjust to societal expectations. Thus, Meier promoted a view of "the ideal gay man," one that very much mimicked the ideal of heterosexual society. A permanent, coupled relationship was the desirable form, for example. One-night-stands--not to mention prostitutes--were to be avoided, as well as flagrant behavior in public. The many short stories and poems in *Der Kreis* were often rather sentimental, especially the stories in the larger Christmas issues. Meier attempted to appeal to the educated reader as well as the common man, not surprisingly getting complaints from both.

The illustrations were a popular part of every issue of the journal, though Meier scrupulously avoided including any that might cause legal problems. Hence, there was no frontal nudity. Although *Der Kreis* did not pay contributors, the photographs were often of a very high quality.

Meier was especially proud of the photographs of George Platt Lynes (1907-1955), which frequently graced *Der Kreis*. Lynes contributed over 50 photographs. At first, Lynes used his real name, but later chose the pseudonym Roberto Rolf.

When the more liberal sexual views of the 1960s began appearing in the new gay periodicals of Germany and Scandinavia, which also often included frontal nude photographs, the readership of *Der Kreis* declined.

The journal finally ceased publication in 1967.

Meier was deeply disappointed by the demise of *Der Kreis*, and this disappointment may have contributed to his declining health. In December 1970, he suffered a stroke during a rehearsal at a children's theater in Zurich, shortly before the premiere of a piece written specifically for him: suddenly he could no longer remember the text. A short time later symptoms of paralysis began to appear, and a long decline followed. Alfred Brauchli, his companion for over thirty years and a professional nurse, cared for him.

Meier died in Zurich on March 29, 1974.

The group that organized to produce *Der Kreis* also served as the nucleus of a cultural organization for homosexual men. It had a clubhouse with a lending library and offered occasional lectures as well as weekly dances. Meier directed the plays that were sometimes produced and often the special entertainments for various occasions, those for Christmas being especially popular. Meier gave much time to these activities.

As the editor of *Der Kreis*, as writer of short stories, poems, and commentary, and as adviser to his "homophile comrades" in difficulties of all kinds, Meier helped set the stage for the European movement for glbtq equality.

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About the Author

Hubert Kennedy has published in several fields and several languages. Among his books is a biography of the German pioneer of gay liberation, Karl Heinrich Ulrichs. He has also translated the gay novels of John Henry Mackay.