



## Rüling, Anna (Theo Anna Sprüngli) (1880-1953)

by Caryn E. Neumann

Encyclopedia Copyright © 2015, glbtq, Inc.

Entry Copyright © 2004, glbtq, inc.

Reprinted from <http://www.glbtq.com>

Anna Rüling, one of the first German women to publicly acknowledge her lesbianism, also became the first known lesbian activist in 1904.

Very little is known about Rüling's life. It has only recently been discovered that she was born Theo Anna Sprüngli into a middle-class Hamburg family on August 15, 1880. Her relatives stressed the need for her to marry to the point of making her miserable. This experience helped form her opinion about the dangers of forcing gay men and lesbians to conform to a straight mold.

However, during the period in her life when she was being urged to marry, she apparently did not regard herself as lesbian, and her family remained clueless. Rüling's father confidently stated that "nothing of the sort can happen in my family."

Rüling's marriage, if it did occur, does not appear to have been a happy one. She would later speak about the disgust and indifference that lesbians felt toward marital relations with men. She declared that a lesbian who married a man out of social pressure would find "no happiness and be incapable of creating happiness." She called upon the nascent women's movement to publicize "how very destructive it is for homosexuals to enter into marriage."

At some point prior to 1904, Rüling entered into a lesbian relationship. She later wrote: "It proves that a reasonable and moderate gratification of the sexual drive keeps a woman happy, fresh, and active, while absolute abstinence easily develops those characteristics which we feel unpleasant in old spinsters, for example, unfriendliness, hysteria, etc."

In 1904, Rüling received an invitation from the Scientific Humanitarian Committee to speak at its conference. Magnus Hirschfeld had established the committee in Berlin in 1897. It was the largest homosexual organization in Germany, and its October 8, 1904 meeting attracted prominent representatives from several women's organizations.

Rüling came to the Berlin meeting as the only speaker willing to address publicly the concerns of lesbians. Perhaps because she could identify, she agreed with the then-common theory of innate homosexuality that saw lesbians as being closer in mindset to men than to women. To Rüling, lesbians were "more objective, more energetic, and goal oriented" than other women.

While many lesbians were active in the women's movement, they did not work for lesbian rights. To the shock and outrage of many of these women, Rüling defined lesbianism as a feminist challenge.

She said, "If we weigh all the contributions which homosexual women have made to the Women's Movement, one would be astounded that its large and influential organizations have not lifted a finger to obtain justice in the state and in society for the not so small number of its [lesbian] members. . . ."

Rüling's speech failed to prompt women's groups to change their agendas. They continued to neglect the concerns of lesbians for most of the twentieth century.

In 1906, Rüling published a collection of short stories with lesbian themes. She then disappeared entirely from the historical record.

A pioneering activist, Rüling connected all the victims of sex-based oppression. She saw that the women's movement could benefit by improving the status of lesbians but proved unable to push feminists to work for lesbian rights.

Christiane Leidinger recently solved the "mystery" of Anna Rüling by identifying her as Theo Anna Sprüngli, who died in Delmenhorst on May 8, 1953.

### **Bibliography**

Faderman, Lillian, and Brigitte Eriksson. *Lesbians in Germany: 1890's-1920's*. Tallahassee, Fla.: Naiad, 1990.

Hacker, Hanna. "Anna Rüling." *Lesbian Histories and Cultures*. Bonnie Zimmerman, ed. New York: Garland, 2000. 654-55.

Kokula, Ilse. *Weibliche Homosexualität um 1900 in zeitgenössischen Dokumenten* [Female Homosexuality around 1900 in Contemporary Documents.] Munich: Women's Offensive, 1981.

Leidinger, Christiane. "Theo A[nna] Sprüngli (1880-1953) alias Anna Rüling / Th. Rüling / Th. A. Rüling - erste biographische Mosaiksteine zu einer zwiespältigen Ahnin lesbischer herstory." *Magnus-Hirschfeld-Gesellschaft* 35-36 (December 2003).

Rüling, Anna. "What Interest Does the Women's Movement Have in Solving the Homosexual Problem." *Jahrbuch für sexuelle Zwischenstufen unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Homosexualität* 7 (1905): 131-51. M. Lombardi-Nash, trans. Jacksonville, Fla.: Urania Manuscripts, 2000.

### **About the Author**

**Caryn E. Neumann** is a doctoral candidate in Women's History at Ohio State University. A past managing editor of the *Journal of Women's History*, her essays have appeared in the *Dictionary of American History* and *Notable American Women*, among other places.