



Wolff, Charlotte (1897-1996)

by Tina Gianoulis

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The life of German-British medical practitioner, psychologist, and writer Charlotte Wolff spanned nearly a century of almost unimaginable changes in the status of both women and queers. Born in Germany during the Victorian era, Wolff saw the Nazis come to power during her young adulthood and survived to see her own groundbreaking writings about lesbianism and bisexuality inspire a new generation of German lesbians during the 1970s.

Charlotte Wolff was born on September 30, 1897 in the small West Prussian town of Riesenburg. Her father was a Jewish merchant, and young Charlotte attended exclusive undergraduate schools before earning a scholarship to study philosophy and medicine at the University of Freiburg in 1918. She completed her medical doctorate at the University of Berlin in 1928, and took a job as a doctor at the Wirchow Hospital in Berlin.

Wolff had been a social rebel from her childhood, openly attracted to other girls and frequently choosing to wear men's clothing, explaining that they were more practical and comfortable for her work. Berlin in the 1920s and early 1930s was a center of gay and lesbian culture, and many nightclubs, salons, and cafes allowed German queers to socialize publicly. However, though she did not hide her relationships with other women, Wolff did not join this social scene and seldom went to lesbian nightclubs. Instead, she devoted herself to her work, becoming especially concerned with helping poor women gain access to family planning.

At the end of January 1933, Adolph Hitler became Chancellor of Germany. Soon afterwards, Charlotte Wolff was arrested for espionage and for wearing men's clothes. She was released when a prison guard, the husband of one of her patients, spoke up for her, but she received continued harassment from Nazi police. As a Jew, a strong woman, and a lesbian, Wolff knew that her future in her homeland was bleak. In May 1933, she fled to Paris.

Barred from practicing medicine in France, Wolff fell back on one of her more unique medical specialties--cheirology, or the study of the hand. She developed her own theories of physical and psychological diagnosis using observation of the features of the hand.

In Paris, and later in London, where she emigrated in 1936 with the encouragement of Maria and Aldous Huxley, Wolff earned her living by reading hands. She read the hands and collected palm prints of such celebrities as Virginia Woolf, Marcel Duchamp, T. S. Eliot, George Bernard Shaw, and the Huxleys. From the mid 1930s to the 1950s, she published several books on the study of the hand, including *The Hand in Psychological Diagnosis* (1952). In 1941, in recognition of her work in cheirology, she was made an honorary member of the British Psychological Association.

Wolff was eventually licensed as a physician in England. Her analysis of hands had awakened her interest in psychology, and she began an in-depth study of homosexuality, especially lesbianism. In 1971, she published the first comprehensive study of lesbianism, *Love between Women*. In this psychological study, Wolff

examined the lives of 100 lesbians as compared to those of a control group. Her observations led her to conclude that lesbians often have problematic relationships with their fathers, which causes them to fixate on their mothers. She also asserted that bonds between lesbians are more emotional than sexual.

The opinions expressed in her 1977 work, *Bisexuality: A Study*, were perhaps more progressive. There she states that "bisexuality is the root of human sexuality."

She also published *An Older Love* (1976), an autobiographical novel about the passionate lives of women in their 60s, and an actual autobiography entitled *Hindsight* (1980). Her final book was *Magnus Hirschfeld: A Pioneer in Sexology* (1986). In 2004, her correspondence with East German essayist and novelist Christa Wolf was published as *Ja, unsere Kreise berühren sich: Briefe* (Yes, Our Circles Touch Each Other: Letters).

Wolff's writings, most of which were first published in English, then translated into German, were eagerly received by the emerging German lesbian movement of the 1970s, to whom she became something of an icon. In 1978, she returned to Germany for the first time since her emigration to give a reading sponsored by the lesbian group L.74, and in 1979, she lectured in Berlin on "Lesbian Love and the Women's Movement."

Wolff died in London on September 2, 1986.

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About the Author

Tina Gianoulis is an essayist and free-lance writer who has contributed to a number of encyclopedias and anthologies, as well as to journals such as *Sinister Wisdom*.