

Stein der Erinnerung für Marianne Schmidl

In April of this year – exactly 75 years ago – Marianne Schmidl was forced to leave her apartment in the Eichendorffgasse 7. The Nazis deported her from the Aspang-station to Izbica in Poland, which was under German occupation. Marianne Schmidl was then 51 years old. We don't know, how, where and when her life came to a violent end.

To present the academic biography of Marianne Schmidl she should have, in a sense, a chance to be heard in her own words. In 1920 – at the time she was 30 years old – she described her sound education, her work experience, her academic research and publications as follows:

“I was born on 3rd August of 1880 as the daughter of the Viennese lawyer Dr. Josef Schmidl in Berchtesgaden in Bavaria, Protestant confession, German-Austrian citizenship and belonging to Vienna. After completion of four years at the girls' high-school of Eugenie Schwarzwald in Vienna, I passed my Matura [KG: school leaving examination] in 1910 in Graz.

I went on to study mathematics and theoretical physics for three years at University of Vienna and during this period I published an article about cultivation and treatment of flax at Umhausen [“Flachsbau und Flachsbereitung in Umhausen”] (*Zeitschrift für österreich. Volkskunde*, 1913). In autumn 1913 I switched over to study Ethnography and Physical Anthropology with Prof. Pösch and Prof. Haberlandt and at the same time I joined the museum of Austrian Folklore as a volunteer for one year. In February 1916, I graduated with unanimous distinction in Ethnography and Anthropology as a major subject with Prof. Pösch and prehistory as minor subject with Prof. Hoernes. The subject of my doctoral thesis was „Numbers and Counting in Africa“ [“Zahlen und Zählen in Afrika”], which had already been published in 1915 in „Mitteilungen der Anthropologischen Gesellschaft in Wien”. Immediately afterwards I worked as a graduate assistant of Bernhard Ankermann in the African department at the Museum of ethnology in Berlin, where I stayed until 1917. In September of the same year I joined the staff of the Linden-Museum in Stuttgart as a research assistant of Prof. Koch-Grünberg, a position I had to leave due to staff reductions as a result of financial problems at the end of May 1920. Since my time in Berlin I have been engaged in a comprehensive study of African basket weaving [...].”

In addition to this curriculum vitae written by Marianne Schmidl, it should be mentioned that – during her studies – she became a member of the Association of Austrian Folklore

and of the Anthropological Society in Vienna and that she made purchases of everyday objects and utensils on behalf of the Museum of Folklore. Above all, Marianne Schmidl was the first woman to obtain a doctorate in ethnology in Austria. For her doctoral thesis „Numbers and Counting in Africa“ Schmidl connected two of her fields of interest: mathematics and ethnology. To this day Marianne Schmidl’s paper is well known in Ethnomathematics, a relatively young field of Mathematics. Her supervisor Rudolf Pöch wrote in his report: “The circumstances, that her study is not based on hitherto established theories but on facts, as well as the territorial limitation namely Africa, justify the ongoing value of this paper.” Marianne Schmidl’s work received positive reviews beyond Austria’s borders and, for instance, her “moderate and sensible judgement” was applauded (Karl Meinhof, Africanist). At the Museum of Ethnology in Berlin, Bernhard Ankermann deemed her suited, as he wrote later, to write a cultural-historical study on African baskets. When Marianne Schmidl left Berlin to move to Stuttgart, where she took up her position at the Linden-Museum, Ankermann wrote to Theodor Koch-Grünberg: “Miss Schmidl has learned the ropes very quickly and I am sorry to lose her.” When M. Schmidl had to quit her assistantship with Koch-Grünberg he similarly commented: “I saw her leave with the greatest regret and I wish her great success in her future life.” “Miss Schmidl always carried out the work assigned to her with great understanding and attention to detail. Aside from her good social and academic education, she is a brave person and a good and cooperative colleague”. Schmidl was seeking employment. Ankermann and Koch-Grünberg continued to be her advocates, as well as Michael Haberlandt and not least the Viennese ethnologist Father Wilhelm Schmidl.

Rudolf Pöch, who died in March 1921, bequeathed his anthropologic-ethnographic collection to the Austrian Academy of Sciences. In his will Pöch instructed the Academy “to ensure the appropriate allocation to trained professionals”. Pöch explicitly named Marianne Schmidl as one of these professionals.

Nevertheless, Marianne Schmidl was not engaged to work on Pöch’s estate nor did she obtain employment in an ethnological institution. After the end of World War I male applicants were again given preference over female applicants. Fritz Röck, head of the Viennese museum of ethnology, certainly argued along these lines as well as downplaying the qualifications of Marianne Schmidl. In addition, her Jewish family background was brought into the discussion and this could have been a further reason for her unsuccessful search for work, considering the fact that the anti-Semitic atmosphere had worsened in the post-war period.

Eventually, in 1921 Marianne Schmidl was hired by the Austrian National Library and in 1924 she was awarded the status of civil servant. Beside her employment as a librarian and a consultant for different subjects, for instance Natural Science, Mathematics, Medicine, Prehistory, Anthropology and Ethnology, she continued her ethnological studies. She carried out fieldwork with the Shopi in Bulgaria, attended ethnological conferences, gave lectures and published various articles, some of them widely received. Her particular interest in African baskets, however, persisted. In 1926 the ethnologist Fritz Krause, temporary head of the Saxon Research Institute of Ethnology in Leipzig, promised her financial support for these studies. In the period that followed Marianne Schmidl visited museums relevant to this study in Switzerland, France, England, Belgium and Germany to make sketches and notes and to study African basket weaving. She also received occasional support from the director of the National Library and the Austrian governmental department of education and made contact with renowned colleagues on site.

In Vienna, too, Marianne Schmidl was engaged in an exchange with colleagues. From the beginning, she belonged to the Viennese Working Group of African Cultural History. As an alternative to the Doctrine of Cultural Circles the members of this working group understood culture as something dynamic. They wanted to develop new methods to further advance into the cultural history of Africa. Presumably Marianne Schmidl had hoped to get an opportunity to discuss with like-minded-people. In her studies, she herself endeavoured to consider all influences. For instance, concerning the Upper Nile region she wrote: "Just as a [cultural] phenomenon cannot be explained from one side only, so the present culture cannot be understood *only* within the common cultural ground." More than several of her colleagues Marianne Schmidl began to detach herself from the widespread ideas and theories of the time, such as from the dichotomous concept of active peoples who create culture on the one hand and passive peoples who only receive culture on the other. She almost never used arguments based on the concept of race.

Meanwhile Otto Reche, new head of the Saxon Research Institute of Ethnology in Leipzig, repeatedly pressed Marianne Schmidl to complete her study on African baskets. In the context of her research she endeavoured "to investigate the history of each tribe" in Africa to get "exact knowledge of the historical circumstances" of the African continent. Schmidl's way of working had become very detailed. For this reason, she would never be able to accomplish the project she had taken on by herself in the foreseeable future. Moreover, since her early forties, her health condition had become unstable, compelling her to bed rest or to

stays in hospital and health resorts. In 1938, she was removed from the National Library as a consequence of the Nuremberg Laws.

Now Otto Reche demanded the money back which Marianne Schmidl had received from the Saxon Research Institute. As she was unable to repay, she was forced to send her unfinished manuscript to Leipzig. Marianne Schmidl wrote to Reche: "This work has accompanied me in my life from my first days of study in a museum to the present day."

Bernhard Ankermann tried to intervene and wrote to Reche: "What would you like to do with the manuscript? [...] it cannot be printed in Germany at all under today's circumstances. The writer herself will probably move abroad and hopes to find employment somewhere. [...] Presumably you do not have any interest in the author as I still do from an earlier period [...]."

Fritz Krause, who assured her the grant in 1926, also spoke up for Marianne Schmidl and wrote to his colleague Reche:

"Miss Schmidl is absolutely competent to deal with the matter academically and she is probably the only one who can do it based on the material she has collected".

Reche did not change his mind. In 1939 two of his colleagues edited a commemorative publication for him. Ironically in this volume one of the contributors mentioned Schmidl's Article *Die Grundlagen der Nilotenkultur* ("The Fundamentals of the Nilotics Culture") (1935) and referred to it as an "All in all [...] careful and critical paper". Also Hermann Baumann, since 1940 head of the Viennese Department of ethnology, repeatedly referred to Marianne Schmidl in his work *Völker und Kulturen Afrikas* ("Peoples and Cultures of Africa"), which was published in 1940.

By now her true champions were a minority in professional ethnology and their voices were not important enough to have a positive influence on her academic or private life. Marianne's widowed brother-in-law urged her to emigrate, but she refused.

Marianne Schmidl did not survive the Holocaust. Five years after the deportation she was officially declared dead upon request.

In posthumous appreciation of Marianne Schmidl's work and in memory of her life, the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology of the University, the Anthropological Society in Vienna and the Department of Social Anthropology of the Austrian Academy of Sciences have covered the costs of the memorial stone