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■ Introduction

The Red Countess and Her Revolutionary Vision

Intelligence, liveliness of mind, sensibility, taste, and charm have made her a truly good fairy. A stray dog, abandoned by its master, a poor devil without a penny to his name or a roof over his head, a lost soul—she takes them all equally under her wing. She has nothing in common with communist officials mechanically and bureaucratically working their eight-hour-day shifts. Although she has not yet lost her illusions about the Party leadership, she retains great independence of mind, and her horizons are in no way limited. . . . Everyone who understands that revolutionary art is not just phraseology, everyone who is on the look-out for a creative and joyful talent responds to the great literary gifts and the free spirit of Hermynia Zur Mühlen.

—HENRI GUILBEAUX, *DIE WELTBÜHNE* (JULY 8, 1930)

Hermynia Zur Mühlen disobeyed all the rules of proper behavior that were part of her aristocratic upbringing in Austrian upper-class society. From childhood onward, she questioned these arbitrary social codes and rarely minced her words in an effort to find and speak the truth in the face of oppression and hypocrisy. Consequently, she betrayed her class and became one of the most outspoken and prolific left-wing authors of the early twentieth century, who sought to revolutionize both children and adults through her writings, especially through her provocative fairy tales. Ironically, in pursuit of a better world, the life she led was anything but a fairy tale.

Born on December 12, 1883, in Vienna, Hermine Isabella Maria Folliot de Crenneville was destined to lead a life of luxury, but the circumstances of her early childhood caused her to revolt against destiny. An only child, Zur Mühlen was neglected by her narcissistic mother and disciplined by her strict father, a career diplomat, to learn the rules of etiquette and aristocratic behavior so that she could appropriately represent her family and marry well. She never felt loved or understood by either of her parents. In contrast, her British grandmother, Isabella Gräfin von Wydenbruck, provided her support and encouraged her to cultivate liberal ideas, as did her favorite, eccentric Uncle Anton. By the time Zur Mühlen turned eleven, she formed a political group with several friends called the Anchor Society, and the radical politics of this society signaled the direction her life would take until her death. As she wrote in her best-selling 1929 memoir *Ende und Anfang: Ein Lebensbuch (The End and the Beginning: The Book of My Life)*,

After intense study of the “social question” from my eleventh year to twelfth years, which for me was exclusively a question of politics and had nothing to do with economics, I reached the conclusion that since the year ’48, when the brave and generous bourgeoisie had taken to the barricades, nothing had been done for the improvement of the world. But now I had come along and would take matters in hand. Down with the aristocrats!¹

Of course, she never realized her project, but her revolutionary spirit did not abate over the years. In fact, she remained dedicated to socialist ideas throughout her life. But first, she en-

countered numerous obstacles before she could lead the life she desired.

When she decided in 1900 to become a schoolteacher, she enrolled in a pedagogical program in a convent in Gmünden, a small Austrian city, which had become her hometown, and by the end of 1901 she passed the examinations that would allow her to teach at public schools. However, her father prevented her from accepting a position as a teacher because it would have been beneath her social status to do something like this. For the next few years, she traveled with her father, learned different languages, encountered a young Russian woman who reinforced her socialist ideas, and studied bookbinding. Meanwhile, she had become desperate to separate from her family and to become independent. Consequently, in 1905, she decided to marry a German baron from Estonia, Viktor von Zur Mühlen, against her parents' will because they believed he was below her class. In addition to their misgivings, she herself was aware of the ideological differences with her future husband, as she noted in her memoir:

Had the two of us searched the whole world over it would have been impossible for either of us to have found anyone less suited than we were to each other. There was nothing about which we did not have opposing opinions. My future husband related with pride and enthusiasm that he had spent most of his time in the previous two years shooting revolutionaries. I, on the other hand, dreamed of an estate run as a co-operative, in which all the workers had a share. Neither of us made a secret of our convictions, but the young Balt, accustomed to the submissive German women of his

homeland, assumed that after the first two or three children my “madness” would automatically disappear, while I, for my part, was convinced that it would be an easy matter for me to “convert” him.²

For the next nine years, spent in isolation on a dismal feudal estate in northern Estonia, Zur Mühlen learned a bitter lesson. All her attempts to change conditions on the estate failed; the intellectual climate among the Estonian aristocrats was zero; the impoverished conditions among the peasants were overwhelming. Moreover, her own health suffered so much that she developed tuberculosis, and in 1913 she entered a Davos health clinic in Switzerland, never to return to Estonia again.

During the six years that she spent in Davos, Zur Mühlen was not able to overcome the tuberculosis, which plagued her for the remainder of her life. However, she flourished because she came into contact with like-minded people who inspired her passion to change the world. The most significant person was Stefan Klein, an Austrian translator, who had been raised in Hungary and Czechoslovakia. He shared her political views and interests in literature, and they inspired one another. From this point onward, they became lifelong partners and often collaborated on different projects. Zur Mühlen was particularly excited by the outbreak of the 1917 October Revolution in Russia, and one of the first works that she translated was Leonid Nikolajev Andrejev’s *Das Joch des Krieges* (The Burden of War, 1918). She followed this with translations of Upton Sinclair’s novels and articles and short stories against wars in various newspapers and journals. At the same time, she began to reflect and write about the trivial and demeaning literature for girls and how children’s literature played an important

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role in the socialization of young people. Numerous authors in Europe began to do this as well.

At the end of World War I, Zur Mühlen divorced her Estonian husband and moved with Klein to Frankfurt am Main, where they were to spend the next fourteen years dedicated to “changing the world” through their writing. By this time, they were both members of the German Communist Party, and they played an active role in fostering the principles of the party through their translations of progressive authors, articles in journals and newspapers, stories, and novels. Up until the early 1930s, Russia was for Zur Mühlen the symbol of socialist hope, and her critique of injustice and exploitation of the working classes in Weimar Germany was based on her vision of revolutionary change in Russia and her ethical and idealist notions for transforming Germany. Given the poor living conditions, her fragile health, and lack of money while she was living in Frankfurt—Viktor Zur Mühlen kept her dowry after their divorce and she refused to ask her family for money—Zur Mühlen’s accomplishments in this period of her life are remarkable.

Her first major pioneering effort was in the realm of fairy tales. In 1921, she published *Was Peterchens Freunde erzählen* (*What Little Peter’s Friends Told Him*), which employed a frame narrative to include six different household objects telling young Peter stories one after the other that pertain to the difficult lives of working-class people. Peter has broken his leg and has to remain at home while his mother works in a factory. The objects come to life to explain their relationship to humans. Similar to the tales of E.T.A. Hoffmann and Hans Christian Andersen, who created talking objects, Zur Mühlen was much more explicit in relating the objects to the exploitation of workers. This book was timely due to the

difficult conditions of single women who had lost their husbands during World War I, the political conflicts in the early 1920s, the growing literacy of the lower classes, and the support of left-wing publishing houses like the Malik Verlag. Consequently, her book became an immediate success and was translated into ten foreign languages. Zur Mühlen continued her experiments with politicizing the fairy tale by publishing several other books that were addressed to adults as well as children: *Märchen* (Fairy Tales, 1922); *Ali, der Teppichweber* (Ali, the Carpet Weaver, 1923); *Das Schloß der Wahrheit* (The Castle of Truth, 1924); *Der Muezzin* (1927); *Die Söhne der Aischa* (The Sons of Aischa, 1927); *Said, der Träumer* (Said, the Dreamer, 1927); *Es war einmal . . . und es wird sein* (Once Upon a Time . . . It Will Be, 1930); and *Schmiede der Zukunft* (Forging the Future, 1933). The themes of all these fairy tales dealt with social injustice, discrimination, tyranny, deception, enlightenment, and the significance of solidarity among members of the working class.

Zur Mühlen was not alone in reinvigorating the fairy tale with a socialist bent in the interwar years of 1919 to 1939. In Germany, she was joined by Erich Kästner, Berta Lask, Lisa Tetzner, Bruno Schönlank, Oskar Maria Graf, Kurt Schwitters, and Edwin Hornle, not to mention the Hungarian Béla Balázs. There were literally hundreds of writers, illustrators, and publishers in Europe (including the United Kingdom) and North America who changed the “field” of children’s literature due to the rippling effect of World War I that opened the way for socialist and communist cultural movements, seeking new ways to change the socialization of children through political literature. Such books as Mathilde Lèveque’s *Le renouveau du roman et du récit pour la jeunesse en France et en Allemagne pendant l’entre-deux guerres* (2007); Julia Mickenberg

and Philip Nel's *Tales for Little Rebels: A Collection of Radical Children's Literature* (2010); Kimberley Reynolds's *Left Out: The Forgotten Tradition of Radical Publishing for Children in Britain 1910–1949* (2016); and my book, *Fairy Tales & Fables from Weimar Days* (2018) reveal how widespread radical children's literature was and how interconnected the publishers were through the publication of translations. In particular, Lèveque has shown how the works of Zur Mühlen and also Lisa Tetzner were widely translated in France, while authors like Paul Valliant-Couturier, whose marvelous work *Jean sans Pain* (Jean without Bread, 1921), was not only translated but also adapted by Tetzner.

While Zur Mühlen, herself a superb translator of American left-wing authors, wrote political fairy tales, she also published a series of mystery novels under the pseudonym Lawrence Desberry. These popular books included *Die blaue Strahl* (The Blue Ray, 1922); *An den Ufern des Hudsons* (On the Bank of the Hudson River, 1925); and *Im Schatten des elektrischen Stuhls* (In the Shadow of the Electric Chair, 1929). Under the pseudonym Traugott Lehmann, Zur Mühlen published *Die weiße Pest. Ein Roman aus Deutschlands Gegenwart* (The White Plague: A Novel about the Present Situation in Germany, 1926). In all these novels, she raised questions about criminality, corruption, depravation, justice, law, and order. In other works such as *Lina. Erzählung aus dem Leben eines Dienstmädchens* (Lina: A Story from the Life of a Servant, 1926) and *Nora hat eine famose Idee* (Nora Has a Great Idea, 1933), she explored the “woman” question: how lower-class women were exploited, and how women in general had to struggle for better treatment. Though Zur Mühlen did not consider herself a “feminist,” there was no question in her mind that women should have equal rights with men, and her own life and writings

were, to a certain degree, exemplary in this respect. As Lynda King has noted:

Before joining the K.P.D. (Communist Party) Zur Mühlen did not belong to a women's movement, and there is no evidence that she later was identified with any women's group, nor that she ever used any term equivalent to feminist to describe herself. First and foremost she was dedicated to the goals and principles of the socialist movement as she understood them. But one socialist principle stood high on her list of priorities: Women's position in society had to be changed. Her writing was a tool for increasing public awareness of the issues vital to women.³

And her writing was always intended to motivate readers to take some kind of political action. As early as 1924, with the publication of her story "Schupomann Karl Müller" (Policeman Karl Müller), charges of high treason were brought against her for instigating political action against the police. The charges were dropped, but Zur Mühlen's name was registered by the police, and she and Klein were under police surveillance during their time in Frankfurt. When the Nazi takeover of the government occurred in early 1933, they knew that their time of departure had arrived, and they left for Vienna in April of that year.

Once again, due to financial difficulties, they moved several times and had limited opportunities to publish their writings. Zur Mühlen was well-known and the breadwinner, but even she had difficulties placing her stories or publishing the few novels she wrote during this time. These were mainly autobiographical in nature, yet politics always played a role in them, as can be seen in two

of her most important anti-fascist novels, *Ein Jahr im Schatten* (One Year in Shadows, 1935) and *Unsere Töchter, die Nazinen* (Our Daughters, the Nazis, 1935). During her hectic time in Vienna, where she could not depend on any assistance from her family (her parents were now dead), Zur Mühlen resigned from the Communist Party because of its authoritarian tendencies that had become clear to her, especially in Russia, where Stalin had begun to initiate the terror trials. Zur Mühlen had always promoted liberty, equality, democratic choice, and solidarity as her socialist principles, and she realized that she could not work any longer within the Communist Party to change it. Moreover, her project was always to improve the world.

In the meantime, her world kept changing when the Nazis invaded and occupied Austria in March of 1938. Zur Mühlen and Klein had to flee immediately, and this time they traveled to Bratislava in Czechoslovakia, where they had friends. Moreover, Klein had Czech citizenship, which entitled them to certain benefits. Later that year, they married, so Zur Mühlen now had three passports—Austrian, Russian, and Czech—but barely a chance to earn a living. No sooner did they make contacts and get settled in Bratislava than the Nazis invaded Czechoslovakia, and this time they fled to England, arriving there on June 19, 1939.

Soon after their arrival, they were interned in a location south of London under miserable conditions that badly affected Zur Mühlen's health. Once they were released in September, they eventually found a small place in Hertfordshire just north of London, adequate enough for both to begin writing and translating again. This was to be their home until Zur Mühlen died in 1951.

Despite her weakened condition, Zur Mühlen threw herself into her work and published essays, fairy tales, novels, stories, and

translations. She even did some radio work. However, her writing did not pay well, and she and Klein were dependent on the PEN Club and the Czech Refugee Trust Fund for financial aid. Since Zur Mühlen was fluent in English, not to mention Russian and French, she published stories and articles for English-speaking readers always with a strong anti-fascist tendency. Though she explored the possibility of returning to Austria at the end of the war, she abandoned this idea when she realized that her home country was not receptive to exiled writers who had contested the Nazi regime even if they were no longer communists.

There was, indeed, a major change in Zur Mühlen's ideology during the 1930s and 1940s. Where she had formerly placed her faith in the Communist Party to spearhead the way to a socialist future, she now placed her faith in religion. Though Zur Mühlen was not a devout Catholic, her ethical and moral principles were strongly religious, and her later writing reflected a greater focus on spiritual belief than on communism. The ideological difference between *Little Allies: Fairy and Folk Tales of Fourteen Nations* (1945), a book that has been largely neglected and that was written in English, and *What Little Peter's Friends Told Him* could not be greater. Whereas her early narrative framework was conceived to address problems of the working class and faith in the solidarity of the oppressed, Zur Mühlen recast the narrative framework to allow her to stress how faith in God and mutual understanding are necessary for the building of a new society that is not necessarily socialist. *Little Allies* is set near the end of World War II in a castle to which numerous refugee children from different countries are invited to spend a weekend. A twelve-year-old British boy named John and his two friends Czech Ján and Polish Jan are asked by John's mother to look after them and to entertain them, while she

attends a sick friend. At first, the children fight with one another, until the older boys come upon the idea that the children should tell stories about their home countries. They all agree, and Zur Mühlen then adapts fourteen tales from Denmark, Norway, Poland, Austria, France, and so on to create a sense of international understanding and to strengthen the children's Christian faith in God. Not all the folk and fairy tales have a religious bent, but a tale such as "The Crown of the King of Domnonée," for example, reflects the general change in Zur Mühlen's ideological approach to socializing children and raising their social and political conscious. Based on the tale type "The Singing Bones," this story allegedly from Brittany concerns a good king who prays to God for help to save many of his people from rabies. A hermit by the name of Meen arrives, and after the king builds a monastery for him, the hermit magically cures the people of rabies. Later, this same hermit gives the king's youngest son, Judicael, a magic rod to find the crown that the king had lost in battle, because this son reveres God. However, his two older brothers are malicious, and they kill Judicael to gain credit for finding the crown. Five years later, when the king hears flute music in a forest generated by the magic rod, he discovers Judicael's body and brings it to the monastery, where the hermit prays to God so that Judicael is restored to life. His father wants to kill the brothers, but Judicael begs his father to forgive his brothers for their sin. In turn, they go out into the world to fight for God and the truth. Soon thereafter the king dies, and Judicael ascends the throne and maintains peace throughout his reign.

Clearly, Zur Mühlen's views about class struggle, solidarity of the working people, the causes of war, international conflict, and peace changed greatly toward the end of her life. Strangely, despite their good morals, the tales in *Little Allies* contradict deeply held

beliefs about the socialization of children, who were to become enlightened through communism. This does not mean that Zur Mühlen reneged and abandoned her struggle to improve the world. As Lionel Gossman remarks about her last years in England,

Overcoming the pessimism, despair, and sense of isolation that she projected convincingly on to several of her women characters, identifying with the oppressed, and taking an active stand against injustice remained the primary imperative of the lapsed Catholic as well as the former Communist. Not surprisingly, individual Communists remain, along with truly devout Christians, among the most decent and admirable characters in her fiction.⁴

The fairy tales selected for publication in this book stem primarily from Zur Mühlen's radical Weimar years and are intended to provide a comprehensive view of the innovative techniques that she used in her tales to provoke and raise the political consciousness of readers, young and old. In contrast to the classical fairy tales of Perrault, the Brothers Grimm, and Andersen, Zur Mühlen's focus was constantly on the plight of the working class under capitalist conditions that had to be changed to create greater social justice. At the beginning of her career as a writer in Germany during the 1920s, she published her tales first in left-wing newspapers and magazines such as *Die rote Fahne* (The Red Flag) and *Der junge Genosse* (The Young Comrade). Her first book, *What Little Peter's Friends Told Him*, was illustrated by George Grosz, one of the foremost experimental painters of that time. Though the six stories in *What Little Peter's Friends Told Him* are intended to wake the political consciousness of children and are written in a simple, di-

rect style to provide hope, Grosz's pointed and often bleak pen-and-ink drawings serve to remind readers that better times are not around the corner. Indeed, they capture the dark destinies of the protagonists in Zur Mühlen's tales.

Lionel Gossman perceptively notes that Zur Mühlen

adapted a direct, unadorned prose style, reminiscent of the traditional tale, and relied on simple, antithetical moral and psychological categories to define her characters—greed and generosity, cruelty and kindness, haughtiness and modesty, hypocrisy and honesty, trickery and transparency. Inevitably this resulted in a considerable simplification of complex social and economic processes and situations. Nevertheless, Zur Mühlen's fairy tales prescribe models of behavior radically opposed to those of traditional fairy tales, the basic lesson of which had been that all one's wishes will come true if one overcomes temptation and faithfully observes established norms of good conduct.⁵

Zur Mühlen's most significant collection of tales, in my opinion, is *The Castle of Truth*, which has a strong autobiographical element. In the title tale, a beautiful young woman from the working class is exposed to the rays of truth from an indestructible castle, and consequently, she realizes how brutal the elite class is, and that she has made a mistake by marrying a wealthy baron. When she relates her experiences to his upper-class friends, who are like sinister beasts, she is sent to an insane asylum. However, the castle becomes a beacon of true light that exposes the criminality of the ruling class. Typical of all the tales in this collection is their open ending. Zur Mühlen did not believe in the happy ending of classical fairy

tales. The endings of her tales were intended to provoke and incite readers to political action. For instance, in “The Glasses,” readers are encouraged to rip off the glasses that blind them from the truth. By doing this, they will follow in the footsteps of the people of the East (that is, Russia) to attain fair living conditions. In “The Servant,” readers learn that they must share the means of production—that is, the machines—to serve the people and not just the ruling classes. In “The Carriage Horse,” the workhorses organize a union to resist exploitation and bad living conditions. In “The Broom,” a young worker by the name of Karl learns how to sweep away injustice with a magic broom, for injustice will keep happening unless one is actively involved in the struggle against tyranny. Zur Mühlen does not mince her words, just as the illustrator Karl Holtz does not hold back from depicting the devastating conditions under which the majority of people lived and suffered in the Weimar Republic.

Perhaps Zur Mühlen’s most moving tale was published in her 1930 collection, *Once Upon a Time . . . It Will Be*. It is called “The Red Flag” not because of its association with the Russian Revolution but because it is the flag soaked in the blood of murdered refugees on an island ruled by a tyrant. It is this flag that unites different groups of exploited refugees to realize how much they have in common and to rebel against the tyrant and his lackeys. As Zur Mühlen writes:

Later, the former slaves, who became the masters of the factories and the island, succeeded in building a large ship and returned to their home countries. They carried the red flag and boldly planted it in all their homelands. Afterward a miracle occurred throughout all the countries—the people

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who rallied around the red flag were able to understand one another even when they spoke different languages, and they gradually merged and formed a powerful army with courage and determination that took up the battle against the exploitative and oppressive monsters of the world.⁶

This was a tale written when Zur Mühlen was losing faith in the Communist Party and when the rise of Nazism in Germany had become more than dangerous. Zur Mühlen did not rewrite or modernize traditional fairy tales such as “Red Riding Hood” or “Sleeping Beauty” to explain to her readers how to combat fascism. There are no princesses and princes in her tales or happy weddings. The sources for her stories were the injustices that she viewed throughout Europe and the courage of people deprived of humane living conditions. It is striking to see in her unusual fairy tales how much she valued international cooperation of working people as the basis for doing away with aristocracies and improving the world. Even in her very last fairy-tale book of 1944, *Little Allies*, her call for international understanding and unification still resonated, and the children from different countries are depicted as coming together to tell their stories—which were *her* hopeful stories.

Notes

1. Hermynia Zur Mühlen, *The End and the Beginning: The Book of My Life*, ed. and trans. Lionel Gossman (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2010): 20. For the original German, see *Ende und Anfang: Ein Lebensbuch* (Berlin: Fischer, 1929).
2. *Ibid.*, 98.
3. Lynda King, “From the Crown to the Hammer and Sickle: The Life

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and Works of the Austrian Interwar Writer Hermynia Zur Mühlen,” in *Women in Germany Yearbook* 4 (1988): 127. See also Alisa Wallace’s chapter 4, “Socialist Literature for Girls,” in *Hermynia Zur Mühlen: The Guises of Socialist Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009): 101–30.

4. Lionel Gossman, “Remembering Hermynia Zur Mühlen,” in Hermynia Zur Mühlen, *The End and the Beginning*, 286.
5. *Ibid.*, 298.
6. Zur Mühlen, *Es war einmal . . . und Es Wird Sein* (Berlin: Verlag der Jugend Internationale, 1930): 63.