



Alois Kernbauer, Karin Schmidlechner-Lienhart, eds. *Frauenstudium und Frauenkarrieren an der Universität Graz*. Graz: Akademische Druck- und Verlagsanstalt, 1996. 342 pp. DM 58,00 (paper), ISBN 978-3-201-01673-5.

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Studying Women Studying

If readers make it past the uninspiring title, inadequate introduction, and weak editorial conception of this volume, they will discover several fine essays on women's education in Austria. Those interested in the role of gender in the disciplines of law and medicine will find worthwhile material, as will those working on comparative university studies. The trick to reading *Frauenstudium und Frauenkarrieren an der Universität Graz* is to navigate through the twenty-eight essays with a selective eye, dodging the pieces that more careful editing might have removed.

The book grows out of a 1993 interdisciplinary research seminar called "Women at the University of Graz." The stated purpose of the volume is to provide the building blocks for future study of the subject. The editors, Alois Kernbauer and Karin Schmidlechner-Lienhart, acknowledging that the volume leaves many questions unanswered, maintain that "a beginning has nevertheless been made" (p. 5). But a beginning to what? The diversity of materials (ranging from scholarly research essays to entries that have the quality of undergraduate term papers) and the lack of thematic focus (beginning with educational reform and ending with Holocaust memoirs) leave us wondering just what the subject of this volume might be. Promoting the open-ended approach, the foreword explains that the guidelines for contributors were "not a corset" (p. v). In the end, readers will wish for a corset after all, or at least the support, structure and restraint of good editorial direction.

Many of the essays rely on sources from the archives of the University of Graz. Others use oral histories

and private letters. Whatever their source base, the essays can be divided into those which interpret the sources and those which merely present factual information. This distinction is important when considering the field of women's history within the larger parameters of Austrian and Habsburg history.[1] Authors Christine Langthaler (writing on women and medical studies) and Anita Ziegerhofer (on admission of women to the law faculty) read their sources for historical significance. In other words, by interpreting the language of their sources they are able to place debates on women in the university in the larger context of gender relations in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

What emerges is a fascinating view of male anxiety about loss of place. Langthaler reviews what she calls the "pseudo-legitimation" of male doctors' resistance to women's medical study. "It can hardly be denied," wrote one doctor in 1895, "that everything women have accomplished in these areas cannot be even remotely compared to that which men have achieved." And when all else failed, they used the default argument: "Women simply have much smaller brains" (p. 65). Ziegerhofer cites the almost comical extremism of arguments against admitting women to the law faculty. She produces a list of ten "disadvantages" of admitting women, drawn up by the Graz Professors' Committee around 1900, which included, beside the competitive employment pressures their presence would cause men, a warning about a takeover by mythical militant amazon women: "As soon as women are admitted to the bar they will wrest access to government and judicial powers. Then men will pos-

sess all the rights they held under the militant amazon women, namely none” (p. 105). These essays demonstrate that a study of women is simultaneously a study of men, and that gender is a critical variable in the evolution of the academic disciplines.

Less useful (and less interesting) is the older methodological strategy chosen by several of the authors, whose notion of women’s studies or women’s history is stalled at the level of counting. Elke Schuster’s essay on women and the philosophical faculty reads like the university record books from which she takes her material: “In 1870/71 the above mentioned Marie Felber and Marie Lienhart took the French exams, as did Henriette Bourquard from Switzerland. Henriette Bourquard later worked as a private French teacher in Graz” (p. 20). With this descriptive method, buttressed by only brief concluding remarks, she establishes the presence of women, but offers the reader few clues on the significance of her findings.

Similarly, Reinhold Aigner’s essay on his mother Oktavia Aigner-Rollett’s medical practice in Graz, in which he looks at patient records from 1907 to 1922, might have given us a glimpse at the career possibilities facing the university’s newly-minted female doctors. Instead, he does little more than tally the number of patients found in the appointment books, ending the essay after three pages. Presenting in this way unprocessed source material in which women appear does nothing to answer the “So what?” question that skeptics of women’s and gender studies have used to discount the importance of the field.

Frauenstudium und Frauenkarrieren an der Universitaet Graz is divided into four sections: women’s education and university studies, female students, the first female academic teachers, and memoirs of Jewish youth who emigrated from Graz in 1938.

Gertrud Simon leads the first section with an essay tracing the history of girls’ education back to the early school reforms of Maria Theresa and Josef II. Graz proves to be an appropriate setting for the topic, as it boasts the first girls’ lyceum in the Habsburg Monarchy, founded in 1873. Simon reviews the fears that such a school would produce girls both “overeducated” and “overburdened” (p. 10), and describes the controversy over girls from private secondary schools taking the school-leaving exam needed for university admission.

Elke Schuster and Anne Paulitsch both touch on an incident that highlighted the international context of

women’s educational reforms. In the 1870s a sizable colony of female Russian students had made their way to the universities of western Europe and were applying to the University of Graz. Schuster maintains that concern about these foreign applicants helped spawn initial discussion on Austrian reform. Of their continuing presence, Paulitsch writes that at the turn of the century “the female Russian student had roughly the meaning of *Buergerschreck* and was a symbol for anarchy and revolution” (p. 57). The scare caused by the Russian women fed into the larger debate about women’s education in Austria; one contemporary concluded that educated Austrian women posed “an incalculable risk to the public good” (p. 53).

The second section, on female students, is heavy on statistics, most of which would only be of interest to scholars working narrowly on Graz or a comparative project on universities.[2] One piece counts the number of Slovenian women at the University of Graz, another breaks down the number of female students by language during the years 1918-1924, and a third breaks down the student body in the different faculties by gender from 1910-1963. A further essay contains interviews of five women who studied at Graz in the inter-war period, recording their thoughts on school, social life, living situation, finances and the rise of national socialism, while another focuses on women who returned to the University of Graz after a break in their studies.

In the third section, the biographical sketches of the first female instructors at Graz give an idea of the political infighting in academic departments, as men faced not just the presence of women in the classroom, but also the prospect of women colleagues on their faculties. The essays are somewhat formulaic (strong woman with a passion for her subject defies the odds) and with each woman considered individually, we are left to synthesize the material ourselves. One shared feature in these stories of academic pioneers is the higher standards for *Habilitation* imposed on women. Angelika Szekely, the first female instructor for physics in Graz, faced a faculty committee in 1930 that ruled: “higher scientific accomplishments are demanded of female habilitation candidates than of males” (p. 249). In the same year, Mathilde Uhlirz’s *Habilitation* was rebuffed by a history professor who argued that “the writing and researching of history remain, as ever, matters for men” (p. 199).

In other ways, however, the life stories of the first instructors differ significantly from each other. Because the authors are not in dialogue with each other, they do

not raise the question of why, in the political climate of the 1930s, some of these academic women became supporters of the Nazis (Uhlirz was a member of the NS-DAP and Stella Seeberg, the first female instructor in the law faculty, joined the National Socialist Peoples Welfare group and the Women's Works), while others (Szekely, for example) did not. In not considering larger questions of how the contours of the women's academic careers may have shaped (or been shaped by) their political choices, the authors have missed an opportunity to incorporate women into existing literature on the politicization of university life in the 1930s.

In the final section, this collection takes an inexplicable turn. As if the volume were now to encompass any topic relating to Graz, the editors include several memoirs from Jews, women and men, who grew up in Graz but fled before the war. Kernbauer and Schmidlechner-Lienhart have failed as editors in two ways: they have not been adequately selective in assembling the collection (these memoirs seem strangely out of place), nor have they explained the logic of their choices. Dieter A. Binder explains that the authors in this final section form a network: Trude Philippsohn was the last Jewish woman to graduate from the history seminar in Graz in 1938, Hans Lang is her brother and Lisa Gerber is her cousin, and Otto Pollak is their friend from childhood. All of them recount tales of flight. Philippsohn survives a lonely refugee existence in England, Gerber leaves Graz as a young girl, spending the war years in Shanghai, Lang flees to Italy. The volume concludes with an essay by Pollak, who left the University of Graz in 1938 and returned after the war to finish his medical studies. He faces the residual anti-Semitism of co-workers at a Graz hospital,

and ends his story with his sharp reply to a man who apologized for making anti-Semitic remarks in his presence. "I answered: When 5-6 million dead cannot convince you, then I will hardly be able to ..." (p. 325). This is a fine ending to a memoir, but not even with a stretch of the imagination is it a fitting conclusion to a book on women's studies and women's careers at the University of Graz.

Notes:

[1]. For a relatively recent assessment of the state of women and gender studies in Austria, see Edith Saurer, "Frauengeschichte in Oesterreich. Eine fast kritische Bestandsaufnahme," *L'Homme* 4. Jg./H. 2, 1993. The collection *Frauen in Oesterreich. Beitrage zu ihrer Situation im 20. Jahrhundert* edited by David F. Good, Margarete Grandner and Mary Jo Maynes (Vienna: Boehlau, 1994) is now available in English, with some modification, under the title *Austrian Women in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Providence, Rhode Island and Oxford: Berghahn, 1996). A review is forthcoming on HABSBERG.

[2]. For a comparison to Vienna, see Waltraud Heindl and Marina Tichy, "Durch Erkenntnis zu Freiheit und Glueck...": *Frauen an der Universitaet Wien (ab 1897)*, Schriftenreihe des Universitaetsarchivs Vol. 5 (Wien: WUV-Universitaetsverlag, 1990).

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