

## A phoenix rises from the Nazi book burning

Toni Brennan looks at the life of Charlotte Wolff (1897–1986)

In April 2007 a 21-minute installation 'Everything I Need' (Buckingham, 2007) premiered in Hampstead, London, a very short walk from the house where Sigmund Freud, fleeing the Nazi regime that had annexed Austria in 1938, spent the last year of his life. The installation was about another, less renowned, Jewish doctor – Charlotte Wolff. Like Freud, Wolff had fled the Nazi regime, had practised psychotherapy and investigated sexuality, and made a new home in England. Unlike Freud, Wolff lived to see the end of the Nazi regime and in 1978 she at last travelled back to Berlin, the city where she had been happy during the Weimar Republic, working for the Health Service. Here she immersed herself both in the metropolis' cultural milieu (she was a friend of Walter Benjamin and had studied philosophy with Husserl and a young Heidegger) and lesbian subculture.

In the Hampstead installation, one screen shows details of the interior of an aeroplane as would have been used in the 1970s for international travel when Wolff returned to Berlin. A second screen juxtaposes the thoughts/interior monologue of Charlotte Wolff, as might have gone through her mind during the journey after 45 years of exile.

The Nazi regime came to power 75 years ago, at the beginning of 1933, in an increasingly anti-Semitic climate; Wolff was notified that, like all Jewish employees in the public service, she had to leave her post in the Health Service at

the beginning of April. When she was travelling on the underground system to say goodbye to her colleagues, she was arrested by a Gestapo officer and charged with being a spy and 'dressing like a man'. She was released owing to a miraculous coincidence: a station guard recognised her as the doctor who treated his wife – and this prompted the Gestapo officer to release her. During the same period, Nazi stormtroopers plundered Magnus Hirschfeld's Institute for Sexual Science and publicly burned books by Jewish or dissident authors and destroyed works of 'degenerate art' (*entartete Kunst*) in Berlin's Opera Square near the University. The Nazi regime perpetrated many atrocities, but this *auto da fé* and its symbolic as well as material consequences still loom large, after 75 years, in the imagination of anyone who works with ideas, including psychologists.

When Wolff's flat was searched – with the fabricated charge that she was

harbouring bombs – she saw that the only option was exile. On 23 May 1933 she took a train to Paris – and spent many agonising hours until she was on French soil, fearing that the Gestapo would arrest her.

The leitmotiv of Wolff's life, as she would later remember (1969, 1980) was the interaction between large-scale external events and personal creativity. In Paris, barred from practising medicine, Wolff revived an early interest in chiroplogy, and made a living by reading hands. She became a close friend of Aldous and Maria Huxley, who helped her to find clients and to navigate the intellectual milieu of the French capital. Paris had become the home of many refugees from the Nazi regime, but it was not long before Wolff did not feel secure there. With the Huxleys' help, Wolff

emigrated to Great Britain 'on a sunny October day', as she later wrote in her autobiography (Wolff, 1969) in 1936. The Huxleys were instrumental in helping her to establish herself in Britain. Julian Huxley (brother of Aldous), as director of the London Zoo, arranged access

for Wolff so that she could research primates' handprints.

Wolff felt for a long time that the complicated regulations of registration as a medical practitioner penalised her, in that her German degree was not recognised in the United Kingdom. Furthermore, she was aware that, both in the scientific world and the public imagination, the work she was most associated with – chiroplogy – was considered only one short step removed from, when not conflated with, palmistry, although she published several scholarly books on chiroplogy (e.g. Wolff, 1951). She also practised as a psychotherapist and in 1942 she was made an honorary member of the British Psychological Society, and eventually, in the Fifties, she was licensed as a physician by the General Medical Council.

The author of two autobiographies, a novel and various academic books, Wolff is best remembered for her



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pioneering research on sexuality. Her book *Love Between Women* (1971) was the culmination of extensive research with 100 lesbian participants who were interviewed and completed questionnaires devised by Wolff. This research paved the way for a further study, *Bisexuality* (1977 – expanded and revised in 1979), of great theoretical and empirical scope. Wolff stated that ‘bisexuality is the root of human sexuality’ at a time when bisexuality was invisible.

With the rise of the second wave of feminism at the end of the 1960s and beginning of the 70s, Wolff was hailed as a feminist and lesbian pioneer. At the invitation of Ilse Kokula, a key figure in the German women’s movement, she travelled to Berlin in April 1978 for the first time since her precipitous emigration, to give a reading, and one year later to speak on ‘lesbian love and the women’s movement’ at a university summer course. This was a homecoming for Wolff, not so much in the sense of being on German soil – in interviews (e.g. Steakley & Wolff, 1981) and in her autobiography published after her return to Berlin (Wolff, 1980) she always made a point of identifying as ‘an international

Jew with a British passport’ – but in the sense of being ‘home’ to people who appreciated her ideas and would continue her work. This – Wolff’s voice (in a literal and figurative sense) being heard in Berlin – could be considered a way of counteracting, after many years, the effects of the Nazi book burning.

With characteristic resilience and well into her eighties, Wolff set about researching a biography of Magnus Hirschfeld. She had never met him when they were both active as doctors in Berlin, but she recognised Hirschfeld as a pioneer in sexology and in particular in the scientific study of bi- and homosexuality. She entertained a fruitful correspondence with some eyewitnesses who had worked with Hirschfeld and remembered his Institute for Sexual Science before it was destroyed. Wolff saw the publication of *Magnus Hirschfeld* in spring 1986 and followed with interest the response in the media. She died in London on 12 September 1986, less than three weeks before her 89th birthday.

“The legacy of ideas was very important to Wolff”

Again, the very existence of Wolff’s biography of Hirschfeld can be considered an act of resistance and redress, a ‘rebuilding’ of the Institute for Sexual Science in book form. Where there is a legacy of ideas, books and buildings may burn, but other people will continue the work. The legacy of ideas was very important to Wolff and she bequeathed all her papers and the copyright to all her work to the British Psychological Society, of which she was proud to be an honorary fellow. Yet, her life story and her work are not widely known. In terms of the emigration of psychologists due to the Nazi regime, one tends to think of the Gestalt theorists (e.g. Lewin, Kohler, Koffka, Wertheimer) who continued their careers in academic institutions in the United States; as to psychologists who came to Britain, Freud arguably looms too large for anyone else to share memory space! It is time for another refugee Jewish doctor who practised psychotherapy to be on the map.

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