

Elizabeth Vreede and the Cloak of Invisibility ('Tarnkappe')

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Dr Rudolf Steiner (1865-1925) attracted a host of talented and educated women to his Anthroposophy movement. Elisabeth Vreede (16 July, 1879 - 31 August, 1943) was prominent among such devotees. At the Christmas Conference of 1923, Elisabeth Vreede was appointed by Rudolf Steiner as the head of Mathematics and Astronomy Section at the School of Spiritual Science of the Goetheanum, Dornach, Switzerland (M. Steiner, 1944).



Image 1. Koberwitz, Agriculture Course venue (photo: J Paull).

Elisabeth Vreede attended Rudolf Steiner's Agriculture Course at Koberwitz (Paull, 2011) (Image.1). She recalled in 1929: "those wonderful days of the agricultural course. We were filled with gratitude" to Count von Keyserlingk for facilitating the course (Vreede, 1929, p. 25). Elisabeth Vreede was a member of the 'Experimental Circle of Anthroposophical Farmers and Gardeners'. She received copy #10 of the Agriculture Course in May 1926 and #403 in June 1931, as well as #12 for the Rudolf Steiner Archive in May 1926 (Course Register). The Experimental Circle was tasked with testing and progressing Rudolf Steiner's "hints" for the development of a differentiated agriculture (R. Steiner, 1924). Elisabeth Vreede was listed for an "Agricultural Session" at Dornach for January 1926: "Lecture by Dr Vreede on 'The Significance of Astronomy for Agriculture'" (NSS, 1925).

George Adams states: “She helped the farmers in developing and understanding the astronomical aspect of their work” (1943, p.132).

Elisabeth Vreede (Image 2) was one of the original members of the Executive Board (Vorstand) of the Goetheanum. Personally selected and appointed by Rudolf Steiner, the five Vorstanders were: Albert Steffen (Literature); Marie Steiner, Rudolf Steiner’s wife, (Eurythmy); Elisabeth Vreede (Mathematics & Astronomy); Guenther Wachsmuth (Natural Science); and Ita Wegman (Medicine). Edith Maryon (1872-1924) was appointed as head of Fine Arts but illness precluded her taking up that position (Paull, 2018b).

“Chilly” was the single word that summed up Elisabeth Vreede for Ernesto Genoni, Australia’s foundational pioneer of biodynamics, when he met her in 1920 (Paull, 2014). Other first hand accounts bear out his impression. Olive Whicher recalled that Elisabeth Vreede “bore the solemn and determined - even stern - expression of the thinker” (Whicher, c.1943, p.1).

‘Vreede’ translates from the Dutch as ‘Peace’. Under the personal meditation given her by Rudolf Steiner, she has handwritten “Shantih”, Sanskrit for ‘peace’ (*shanti*, शान्ति), (reproduced in Selg, 2017, p.241). Elisabeth Vreede experienced close-up the tragedy of war. In World War One (WWI) she moved from Dornach to Berlin (in 1916 -1917) to support British prisoners of war (POWs). In this philanthropic work, she worked with Dr Elisabeth Rotten (1882-1964), Quaker, peace activist, and co-founder of the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) (Paull, 2018c; Selg, 2017; van Deventer, 1979). As a national of the Netherlands, a non-belligerent, Elisabeth Vreede had some freedoms to travel. Her feelings for Berlin were ambivalent: “my peculiar mood concerning Berlin - most wonderful and most terrible of all cities” (in Selg, 2017, p.26). She had previously lived in Berlin in the same apartment block as Rudolf Steiner in Motzstrasse (Paull, 2019; van Deventer, 1979).

Life in Germany during WWI was abstemious. The Allied Blockade of Germany started early in the course of the war and persisted for the duration (Bell, 1937). It was effective in its objective of denying supplies to Germany. What goods were landed in Germany were prioritised for military use. This meant that rations of food, clothing, and other consumables for civilians were progressively reduced as the war dragged on (Heal, 2018).

Olive Whicher, personal assistant to, and colleague of George Kaufmann, recalls: “Dr Vreede used to say half jokingly that she thought she wore ‘Tarnkappe’ - an invisibility cap. I think it is true, and furthermore that the invisible cap extends to quite central themes in Rudolf Steiner’s great impulse. No doubt, as the decades pass and the souls who harbour those vital impulses have turned again towards Earth, the invisible cap will wear thin and become transparent” (Whicher, c.1943, p.3).



Image 2. Jacoba Elisabeth (Lili) Vreede.

Lili Kolisko, biodynamics pioneer, wrote: “Elisabeth Vreede, PhD, was a member of the Executive Council, on whose opinion one laid very little - one could almost say, absolutely no - value. This was in spite of the fact that Dr Steiner introduced her in the Christmas Conference [1923] with the following word: “Likewise, a very long-time member is the person I now mean and who has proven, right down to the last detail, to be the most loyal coworker here and with whom you really can also agree to the very last detail: Fraulein Dr Lili Vreede” (in Selg, 2017, p.xiii). Rudolf Steiner stated: “her advice is always sought when we need to know something in the mathematical-astronomical realm ... I wish to have this work carried on in the future by Fräulein Dr Vreede as Leader” (M. Steiner, 1944, p.68).

Crispian Villeneuve observed of Elisabeth Vreede: “The sheer passage of time has subsequently effaced her memory to such an extent that many anthroposophists in the English-speaking world know little about Vreede beyond her name” (Villeneuve, 1994, p.1).

The death of her ‘protector’, Rudolf Steiner, in 1925, was a great blow to Elisabeth Vreede. For the decade following his death, Elisabeth Vreede was increasingly sidelined and ignored in the Vorstand. “In her own individual way, and in some respects utterly alone, Dr Vreede went through the immense difficulties of the fateful years after Dr Steiner’s death. Incorruptible as she was, no inducement of ease or expediency would divert her from doing or saying what she felt to be necessary at a given moment, in the position of responsibility entrusted to her” (Adams, 1943, p.134).

In a letter dated 31 January, 1934, Elisabeth Vreede wrote “I find it so painful when attacks are continually made against part of the active members such as to exclude them from this work, from creating together the Being of Anthroposophy” (in van Deventer, 1979, p.7). The axe fell when she went from being ignored, to being expelled from the Anthroposophy Society, along with her positions as head of Mathematics and Astronomy and as a member of the Vorstand. The ‘great purge’ of 1935 was engineered by the ‘gang of three’, Albert Steffen, Guenther Wachsmuth, and Marie Steiner.

The Triad Vorstand of the Nazi-era, expelled not only Elisabeth Vreede, but also the other Dutch woman member of the Vorstand, Dr Ita Wegman, along with six prominent Anthroposophists (DN Dunlop, George Kaufmann, Dr FW Zeylmans, PJ de Haan, Jürgen

von Grone, and Dr Eugen Kolisko), and the whole British and Dutch sections of the Anthroposophy Society, all unsympathetic to Nazism. The expulsion of Elisabeth Vreede and Ita Wegman was an act of treachery that extinguished the feminist impulse that Rudolf Steiner had crafted into the Vorstand. Count Polzer-Hoditz spoke of “The Vorstand, which is now falling apart” (April 14 1935) (in Meyer, 2014, p.224), others of a Steffen “dictatorship” (Meyer, 2014, p.169).

Months after the Great Purge (14 April, 1935), the Anthroposophy Society in Germany was dissolved by the Nazis (1 November, 1935). The Triad Vorstand promptly wrote to Adolf Hitler (17 November 1935) assuring “Your Excellency”, the “Führer”, that the Anthroposophy Society did not harbour any pacifists (or Jews or Freemasons). They wrote that “the description of the Society as ‘internationally attuned’ ... is completely unfounded”. They declared that “the Aryan heredity of Rudolf Steiner has been decisively confirmed by the Race-Political Authority in Berlin” (reproduced in Meyer, 2014, pp.228-233). To the extent that the Great Purge was a sop to the Nazis, perhaps rationalised to head off a dissolution of the Anthroposophy Society, it failed. Nevertheless, the Anthropolop-purgees were generally not restored to membership in their lifetimes.

Monica von Miltitz wrote: “Frau Dr Wegman and Frau Dr Vreede, whom Dr Steiner had appointed to be members of the Society’s esoteric executive board, were expelled by the Annual Meeting, along with forty of Dr Steiner’s closest friends, the truest of the true” (in Meyer, 2014, p.7).

Elisabeth Vreede had moved to Dornach in 1913, initially living with the English sculptor, Edith Maryon. She built a house in Arlesheim in 1919 (Image 3). “The model for this ... house had been made by Edith Maryon with Dr Steiner’s help” (Adams, 1943, p.130). The house offers easy pedestrian access to the Goetheanum.

George Kaufmann Adams wrote that: “‘House Vreede’ on the hill at Arlesheim, looking straight across to the Goetheanum, became known through its hospitality to countless friends” (p130). When visiting Dornach (from England), he stayed with Elisabeth Vreede. “An attic room was his in Haus Vreede, looking towards the Goetheanum ... We found hospitality with Dr Vreede and her friend and helper Luise Schünemann whenever the work took us to Arlesheim” (Whicher, c.1943, p.2). They shared interests in Anthroposophy, agriculture (both were members of the Agricultural Circle), mathematics, Quakerism and pacifism (George Kaufmann was a draft resister in WW1).

As head of Mathematics and Astronomy Section at the Goetheanum, Elisabeth Vreede offered Anthroposophists a correspondence course in Astronomy. She told her readers that: “The man of today longs to experience his life as bound up with that of the Cosmos. Rudolf Steiner, in his incomparable way, has given us the guiding lines towards such a feeling as ‘self-unitedness’” (non-duality, *advaita* in Sanskrit). She wrote that:

“Astronomical Science is devoid of spirituality, but must once again be filled with it” (Vreede, 1927-1929, First Letter, p.12) The course was delivered in monthly instalments at a cost of 10/- per annum or 1/- for individual letters (p.12). For the first two years, the course in English was delivered as typeset printed instalments, for the third year it was delivered as typescript instalments (perhaps an economy indicating the waning popularity). The course was translated by Mabel Cotterell (Adams, 1943).



Image 3. Haus Vreede, Elisabeth Vreede's home in Arlesheim, Switzerland (photo: J Paull).

The Rudolf Steiner Archive was the creation of Elisabeth Vreede. “She ... devoted a great part of her life and her resources to building up the Rudolf Steiner Archives. This involved a vast amount of collecting and co-ordinating ... Year after year, she placed her knowledge and experience at the disposal of the hundreds of anthroposophists who came to study there” (Adams, 1943, p.130). The Archive was originally developed in a wing of the Schreinerei (the carpentry worksop), adjacent to the Goetheanum (Paull, 2018a). The Archive is now housed in Haus Duldeck and is a treasure trove of Rudolf Steiner documents and ephemera (Image 4).

Expelled at age fifty five, Elisabeth Vreede continued to travel, “often in Holland and England”, also to Italy, Greece, Palestine, Egypt, Ireland and Turkey (Selg, 2017, p.176). Her last trip to Germany was in 1938 “to help Jewish members of the Anthroposophical

Society to emigrate” (Selg, 2017, p.186). “A frequent visitor to this country, an ever valued adviser and active helper at our Summer Schools, and in all aspects of our work, Dr Vreede was known to many English members” (Adams, 1943, p.129). Months before her death, she delivered the eulogy at the funeral of fellow purgee, Ita Wegman (1876-1943).



Image 4. Rudolf Steiner Archive (Haus Duldeck) (photo: J Paull).

The treachery of the expulsions of Easter 1935 was driven by power, money and Nazi appeasement, not necessarily in that order. Marie Steiner immediately claimed ownership of the Archive, appropriated the contents, and changed the locks (Selg, 2017). This was despite Rudolf Steiner’s admonition: “The Archive is Fräulein Vreede’s work. You may not take it from her” (1925, in Selg, 2017, p.168).

As a young woman, Elisabeth Vreede studied at Leiden University in the Netherlands. She enrolled on 4 October 1898 (full name: Jacoba Elisabeth Vreede, aged 19 years) (Universiteit Leiden, 1925). She studied mathematics, astronomy, philosophy, and Sanskrit (van Deventer, 1979). Eight years later, she left Leiden University (in 1906) having enrolled in a PhD but without completing it; there was no dissertation (Universiteit Leiden, 1925; van Oosten, 2020). This fresh revelation raises the question, did Elisabeth Vreede complete a PhD elsewhere, or perhaps not at all? A quirk of Dutch education was that graduates could use the title ‘drs’ (short for ‘doctorandus’, meaning entitled to proceed to a doctorate, written in lower case before a name), as, for example, ‘drs. E Vreede’ (Nuffic, 2020), but there is no suggestion that she ever styled herself thus. Elisabeth Vreede’s first

Astronomical letter was signed as “E. Vreede (Phil.Doc.)” and each subsequent monthly letter as “E. Vreede, Ph.D.” (Vreede, 1927-1929).

After the Great Purge of 1935, “She was cut off from the field of work with which she had so grown up - the observatory and her Archives ... The last years of her life became ever more lonely. She was cut off from her friends abroad by the War. The death of Ita Wegman was a great shock for her” (van Deventer, 1979, p.8). In 1943, Elisabeth Vreede died at Ascona, situated on the shores of Lake Maggiore, in southern Switzerland. She had travelled from Arlesheim to Ascona to convalesce, but just weeks later she passed away. She was 64 years old. Rudolf Steiner had declared: “Fräulein Vreede is one of those who best understands my lectures” (in Selg, 2017, p.vii).

Seventy five years after her death, an initiative for the rehabilitation of Elisabeth Vreede (and Ita Wegman) (Lohmann-Heck & Heck, 2017) succeeded, at the 2018 Annual General meeting of the General Anthroposophical Society, in annulling the 1935 expulsion (GAS, 2018).

The unhappy episode of the 1935 expulsion now fades into the mists of time and the cloak of invisibility, an artefact of the gang of three, is now cast aside for Elisabeth Vreede as she is restored to her rightful place in the pantheon of significant and interesting foundational Anthroposophists and loyal associates of Rudolf Steiner.

The enduring legacy of Elisabeth Vreede is the Rudolf Steiner Archive presently located in Haus Duldeck, close by the Goetheanum. The Archive preserves the documentary legacy of Rudolf Steiner, hosts the library of Rudolf Steiner, is a sanctuary for scholars, and serves well the ‘duty to remember’.

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