

Book review

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Book review

Nürnberg R., Höxtermann E. & Voigt M. (ed.): Elisabeth Schiemann 1881–1972. Vom Aufbruch der Genetik und der Frauen in den Umbrüchen des 20. Jahrhunderts. Beiträge eines interdisziplinären Symposiums zum 200. Gründungsjubiläums der Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. – Rangsdorf: Basilisken-Presse, 2014. – ISBN 978-3-941365-13-1. – 24 × 17 cm, 574 pp.; softback. – Price: EUR 39.

In academia, anniversaries with numbers ending in a zero are often marked by ceremonial acts, congresses and Festschriften. When the Humboldt Universität zu Berlin (previously Universität zu Berlin, later Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität) celebrated the bicentenary of its foundation in 2010, it followed established custom and organized, among others, a symposium on the plant-geneticist and botanist Elisabeth Schiemann (1881–1972), which took place on 6–7 May 2010. In a sense, it was a double anniversary, since the Institut für Vererbungsforschung der Landwirtschaftliche Hochschule Berlin, in 1934 amalgamated with the Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität, also celebrated an anniversary, the centenary of its foundation. The proceedings of this meeting comprising a total of nineteen contributions have now been published in the reviewed volume, with the back flap containing the logos of several sponsors, among them – rather surprisingly at first glance – the Gedenkstätte deutscher Widerstand and the Evangelische Kirche Berlin-Brandenburg-schlesische Oberlausitz.

In the Preface (pp. 8–10), the editors state that the symposium had united biologists and historians with researchers of resistance and gender studies. As a matter of fact this multidisciplinary approach was very appropriate indeed – Schiemann was among the first female students in Prussia, later combined genetics with morphology and phytogeography becoming one of the founders of paleoethnobotany, and in 1946 became, aged 65, one of the first female professors in Germany. At the same time she was active in the Confessing Church, a movement within German Protestantism during the Nazi period opposing the unification of all Protestant churches into a single pro-Nazi Reich Church. Working in a male-dominated society she stood in opposition to Nazi ideology and lost her permission to teach at the Berlin University in 1940 because she was considered politically unreliable. Remarkably she wrote as early as 1938 about the “solidarity of guiltiness of the Christians in Germany”, a position similar to that of the theologian Dieter Bonhoeffer, who was hanged in April 1945 in the Flossenbürg concentration camp. In

1943 Schiemann together with her sister Gertrud had the courage to hide for a month in their home in Berlin a “non-Aryan Christian” who had been earmarked for deportation, which led to Elisabeth’s name being listed among “The Righteous Among The Nations” in Yad Vashem, Jerusalem. Very rightly the editors therefore call this symposium volume an Honorary Volume for Schiemann with the Vice President of the Humboldt University speaking in his words of greeting (p. 11) of a contribution to the Berlin University’s history including “its inglorious periods”.

All but two contributions are in German, all contributions comprise a bibliography and summaries in English and German and an interview with three of Elisabeth Schiemann’s relatives has also been included (pp. 144–149). A substantial appendix to the main text contains a genealogy of the Schiemann family (pp. 454–459), the texts of two CVs written by Schiemann (pp. 460–461), a timeline of her life (pp. 462–468) and photographs of the different stages of her life (pp. 469–480). These are followed by the text of the review written for awarding Schiemann the honorary doctorate of the Technische Universität Berlin (pp. 481–487), personal recollections from her colleagues H. Kuckuck, M. Hopf and U. Nürnberger (pp. 490–523), Schiemann’s bibliography, including her reviews and literature reports (pp. 524–538), as well as published records and archival sources on Schiemann’s life and work (pp. 539–555). The names and addresses of the contributing authors are given on the following pages (pp. 556–558). While symposium volumes rarely offer more than a table of contents, in this case the editors have taken the pains to compile two indices – one for the illustrations and tables (pp. 559–563) and one for the persons (pp. 564–572). This carefully edited volume is richly and exquisitely illustrated with images taken from a broad spectrum of sources, many of them in private hands, with all the necessary information given in the legends. Here we find numerous portraits, photographs of buildings, title pages, diagrams, letters, notebooks, herbarium specimens, the latter all from the herbarium of the Botanical Museum Berlin.

The nineteen contributions (pp. 12–452) are grouped under five headings: 1. History of disciplines: Experimental genetics and job opportunities for women (pp. 12–85); 2. Biography: Socialization and positions in academia (pp. 86–261); 3. History of biology: Scientific work and questions (pp. 262–313); 4. Contemporary history: Personal integrity and resistance during the Nazi period (pp. 314–389); and 5. Gender perspective: Biographical discontinuities and female culture (pp. 390–452). Quite natu-

rally the individual contributions differ widely in approach and scope, but they all are written by highly competent authors, in good style and relying on a broad spectrum of sources. The two contributions on Theodor Schiemann, Elisabeth's father, and Paul Schiemann, Elisabeth's cousin, may act as examples – apart from literature in English, German and Latvian, ample archival material kept in Berlin, Lüneburg, Marburg, München and Riga is cited.

Unsurprisingly a huge amount of biographical information on Elisabeth Schiemann is made available in this volume, but it is at the same time also a mine of information on university and institutional politics, on the interplay between the Kaiser-Wilhelm-Gesellschaft, now Max-Planck-Gesellschaft, the universities in general and the Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität in Berlin in particular and the various fund-giving organizations. Needless to say, Schiemann very closely experienced the political changes in Germany and their immense consequences on science and research, among them the “cleansing” of the universities – she had moved from Fellin (Russian Empire, now Viimsi, Estonia) in 1877 to Berlin and died in this very city, aged 90. Although an honorary volume, this is clearly not a hagiography: Schiemann had her sharp edges, the discontinuities in her career and the disagreements with her mentor Erwin Baur are not passed over in silence. As late as 1955 she wrote about her father's wish to maintain “Germanness [in the Baltic] against ... rape by Latvians and Estonians”, which clearly indicates a nationalistic undertone. This was one of the reasons why her long-lasting friendship with Lise Meitner, the theoretic physicist behind the nuclear fission experiments in Berlin and who had to flee Germany in 1938, cooled down. When Schiemann resigned in 1931 from her permanent position at the Landwirtschaftliche Hochschule, Ludwig Diels, then director general of the Botanischer Garten und Botanisches Museum Berlin-Dahlem, offered her research facilities. Though unpaid, she continued to work there as long as 1943 when new opportunities developed at the Kaiser-Wilhelm-Gesellschaft for her. Unfortunately Schiemann's experimental plot in the Botanic Garden Berlin-Dahlem, where she demonstrated in c. 1940 major findings in plant genetics and the evolution of economic plants to the general public, is not dealt with (a list of her 37 topics with ample commentary appeared in *Notizblatt des Botanischen Gartens und Museums zu Berlin-Dahlem* 15: 145–163. 1940).

The contributions under the heading 3 (see above) are of more direct relevance to readers of *Willdenowia*. K. Olbricht deals with the studies on phylogeny and biogeography of *Fragaria* species undertaken by Schiemann and her pupil G. Staudt (pp. 262–279); U. Willerding reports on Schiemann's role in the establishment of paleoethnobotany (pp. 280–293); F. Pohlheim gives an account on her work on *Antirrhinum* chimeras (294–301); and V. Lipphardt deals with Schiemann's use of the technical terms “Rasse” and “Bastard” (pp. 302–313). However, very important botanical information is also to be found under heading 2 (see above). B. Kilian and K. Hammer concentrate on the phylogeny of wheat (*Triticum aestivum*) and elucidate Schiemann's role in its analysis (pp. 236–261). While at the Botanical Museum Berlin-Dahlem, she postulated as early as 1939 *Aegilops cylindrica* to be the donor of the D genome in wheat. In this she was almost right – today we know that *A. tauschii* was the donor, but she was totally right in her thesis that the hybridization and polyploidization events must have taken place in the region where *Triticum dicoccoides* and the donor would occur together. Considering the economic value of the wheat plant, this alone would have been reason enough to make Schiemann – as was done in 1946 – “professor of genetics and the history of cultivated plants” at Berlin University. Two years later she summarized in *Weizen, Roggen, Gerste. Systematik, Geschichte und Verwendung*, Jena, 1948 her findings on these grasses of key importance for mankind.

In short this is most remarkable volume about a most remarkable woman.

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