

An Initiative for the Rehabilitation

of

Ita Wegman and Elisabeth Vreede



Elisabeth Vreede



Ita Wegman

Ita Wegman (1876-1943)

Dr. Ita Wegman was one of Rudolf Steiner's trusted colleagues as well as his personal physician. She witnessed first-hand many of the events and circumstances surrounding the spiritual teacher, especially Rudolf Steiner's own situation between 1923 and 1925. Rudolf Steiner's trust in her ability to be discrete made it possible for him to share a great deal with her in personal conversations. Her sense of discretion meant that she lived for a long time with an intention to write about her memories of Rudolf Steiner during the last part of his life. During the final six months of his life he was confined to a bed in his Dornach atelier where he worked with her much of the time. In the months preceding his illness—indeed, during the whole period after the burning of the first Goetheanum—Ita Wegman stood close by his side and was engaged in much of what he did. Few others were as involved as Ita Wegman in the Christmas Conference of the Anthroposophical Society and the founding of the First Class as an “esoteric school at the Goetheanum,” a “Michael School.” According to Rudolf Steiner, she had asked the “Parzival question about a new esotericism.” And throughout decisive and difficult years she had stood unconditionally with the teacher during the establishment of the School for Spiritual Science, the Medical Section, and the Anthroposophical Society.

Elisabeth Vreede (1879-1943)

“Fräulein Vreede,” said Rudolf Steiner, “is among those individuals who best understand my lectures.” Because of her extraordinary capacities, she was called by him during the Christmas Conference 1923/24 to be a part of the esoteric Vorstand at the Goetheanum; he also entrusted to her the leadership of the Mathematical-Astronomical Section of the School for Spiritual Science. J. Emanuel Zeylmans van Emmichoven referred to Elisabeth Vreede as the “most occultly schooled” personality in Rudolf Steiner's leadership council, and through her many people had groundbreaking experiences of the consciousness soul. However, in 1935, she was dis-

missed from all her official responsibilities; she was never rehabilitated. Lilly Kolisko wrote: “One could say that Fräulein Dr. Elisabeth Vreede was an Executive Council member whose thoughts were afforded very little value.” Sixty-six years after Elisabeth Vreede’s death, the Ita Wegman Institute published a monograph that bore witness to the greatness of her individuality, a greatness that was evident even when she was confronted by a tragic failure to understand her. The monograph contains many previously unpublished documents.¹

Rudolf Steiner once said of Elisabeth Vreede:

*Frl. Dr. Vreede is tirelessly active in bringing anthroposophy into the field of the mathematical sciences....She unites rigorous anthroposophical insight with an outstanding clarity about how anthroposophy should be brought into the various fields of knowledge.*²

Through a decision made during the Annual General Meeting of the General Anthroposophical Society on April 14, 1935, Ita Wegman and Elisabeth Vreede—two members of the Society’s Executive Council appointed by Rudolf Steiner—were removed from their positions as members of that Council.³

Background of the 1935 Decisions⁴

After Rudolf Steiner’s death, Ita Wegman and Elisabeth Vreede as well as their so-called “followers” were accused of serious offenses and disruptive behavior detrimental to the Anthroposophical Society, the spirit of the Christmas Conference, and the impulses of anthroposophy.⁵ At considerable expense, the Executive Council actively helped disseminate these assertions to the membership through the Society’s *Nachrichtenblatt* (and the so-called *Denkschrift*).⁶ These publications formed the basis for the decisions of the 1935 Annual General Meeting. For all intents and purposes Ita Wegman and Elisabeth Vreede had long since been excluded from the leadership activity of the Executive Council; the decision to expel them officially from the Executive Council put a formal seal on this reality.

The justifications for this action that were offered at the time included misunderstandings, misrepresentations, and defamatory accusations—a fact that, even then, some members clearly recognized. Nonetheless, these members were unable to prevail despite letters, motions, and oral contributions.

In the years since, an increasingly widespread agreement has emerged that these expulsions were carried out unjustly. In hindsight, it was not the activity of Ita Wegman and Elisabeth Vreede that was contrary to Rudolf Steiner’s intentions and the impulse of the Christmas Conference; it was the activity of those responsible for their expulsions.

As a result of these misunderstandings and untruths, two members of the Executive Council who had been highly valued by Rudolf Steiner and appointed by him during the Christmas Conference were expelled by central organs of the General Anthroposophical Society: the Annual General Meeting and the remaining Executive

¹ Text from the bookcover for *Elisabeth Vreede. 1879-1943* by Peter Selg, Arlesheim, 2009.

² van Deventer/Knottenbelt (ed.): *Elisabeth Vreede. Ein Lebensbild*, 1976.

³ Other prominent Dutch and English national Society members were also excluded from the General Anthroposophical Society. The Annual General Meeting of the General Anthroposophical Society reversed these exclusions in a 1948 decision. However, the exclusions of Ita Wegman and Elisabeth Vreede remain in effect.

⁴ Sources and notes on the history of the General Anthroposophical Society can be found at the end of this document.

⁵ The relation between the General Anthroposophical Society today and the Anthroposophical Society founded by Rudolf Steiner at Christmas 1923/24 is understood in various ways. It is not possible to go into this here, although the differences present significant questions for further research.

⁶ The “*Denkschrift über Angelegenheiten der Anthroposophischen Gesellschaft in den Jahren 1925-1935*” is actually a polemic of about 154 pages. It argues for the exclusion of Ita Wegman and Elisabeth Vreede from the Executive Council as well as the exclusion of prominent members of the Dutch and English national Societies. This “*Denkschrift*” [memorandum] was officially distributed by the General Anthroposophical Society until 1949. It has never been retracted.

Council. This action effectively excluded them from any further opportunity to work within the General Anthroposophical Society.

The rehabilitation of Ita Wegman and Elisabeth Vreede would require that their individualities and their work in service to anthroposophy and as colleagues of Rudolf Steiner be recognized and their value acknowledged. It would further require that the circumstances and events that led to the expulsions be raised to consciousness and worked through in the broader context of self-knowledge within the Anthroposophical Society. Finally, it would require that what was done to them be recognized as an injustice; and that the decision of 1935 be rescinded. This is the only way that we can stand on a foundation within the Anthroposophical Society that is both attentive and truthful to the form and mood of the consciousness soul. Ultimately these steps alone make it possible for those who actively carry responsibility in anthroposophy to work fruitfully into the future.

“But here I would like to point out that our gathering today can only be fruitful if it is based on creating a positive element that recognizes our shortcomings—which we certainly admit to—and thereby builds upon a more concrete recognition of what is lacking.”⁷

Rudolf Steiner spoke these words in 1923, the year of destiny and crisis following the fire that destroyed the Goetheanum. During that year he worked tirelessly and with deep commitment to awaken within the membership a consciousness of the urgent necessity for self-knowledge and strengthening within the Society.

What do the 1935 exclusions mean for the supersensible anthroposophical movement and for the Anthroposophical Society on the earth?

In his 1924 lectures on karmic relationships, Rudolf Steiner describes how souls from all the Old Mystery streams who sought the Christ-Impulse had gathered around Michael in the spiritual world. For the salvation of all earthly civilization these souls wanted to unite the most diverse karmic and spiritual streams at the end of the 20th century and together guide the cultural activity of anthroposophy to a culmination.

From this, we can conclude that Rudolf Steiner had assembled significant representatives of these streams in the original Executive Council of the Christmas Conference 1923/24. The expulsions in 1935 “eliminated” important spiritual pupils of Rudolf Steiner from the Executive Council. But distinguished colleagues in the fields of science, medicine, and medical therapies were also cut off from their Sections and their professional tasks within the General Anthroposophical Society. In addition to the approximately 2,000 members who were also excluded from the Society in 1935, it should be recalled that these actions on the earth led to entire portions of the supersensible anthroposophical movement being cut off as well. It is almost impossible to assess the true extent and enormity of this act—and to determine which developments have been hindered or prevented since then.

In the years following 1935 Marie Steiner (who had taken an active role in the expulsion of her Executive Council colleagues), was herself excluded from participating in the Executive Council and from shaping the Society. The feminine element was thus entirely eliminated from the first Executive Council despite the fact that in his earlier esoteric lessons Rudolf Steiner had placed particular emphasis on the significance of a balance between feminine and masculine aspects within a renewed esotericism.

The expulsion of Ita Wegman from the Executive Council appears especially tragic and consequential against the background of Rudolf Steiner’s evening lectures during the December 1923 refounding of the Anthroposophical Society. These lectures reveal the collegial work he had shared with her over thousands of years on behalf of Michael.⁸

⁷ GA 259, p. 377.

⁸ See GA 233, and Zeylmans: *Wer war Ita Wegman*, vol. I, 1992.

When Wilhelm Rath sought out Elisabeth Vreede after the 1935 Annual General Meeting and asked her about the expulsions, she said that what had occurred in Dornach would have an impact on world events as a whole: “The dam that held back Nationalist Socialism is now broken.”⁹

Of the original Executive Council and the somewhat diverse spiritual streams it represented, only Albert Steffen and Günther Wachsmuth remained. This resulted in an inevitable one-sidedness that remained a determining factor in the development of the General Anthroposophical Society for decades. During this time, the Society sank slowly into the state of paralysis and ineffectiveness that Rudolf Steiner had warned would be a pressing danger if the Christmas Conference impulse were not taken up. “Anthroposophy,” he said, “will certainly not be driven out of the world. I would say, however, that for decades and longer it could sink back into a latent condition. The loss for the development of humanity would be enormous.”¹⁰

It should be noted that the intention here is not in any way to condemn Albert Steffen and Günther Wachsmuth—nor should such a condemnation follow from this rehabilitation effort. Their engagement on behalf of anthroposophy should be highly valued. For example, we have Günther Wachsmuth to thank for the building of the second Goetheanum; without him, it would not have been possible. And we have Albert Steffen to thank for his splendid writings, his dramas, and his healing paintings. At the same time, we ought not overlook how the development of the Society was shaped by these two Executive Council members. It would represent progress towards a consciousness-soul attitude if we could come to perceive the work of the counterforces in a person’s actions while at the same time not losing sight of our love for that person as a human being or misjudging his true striving.¹¹ We are confronted by “strong oppositional forces, demonic forces” that “attack the anthroposophical movement” and “make use of human beings on the earth,”¹² and without such a consciousness-soul attitude we might otherwise come to view the entire history of the General Anthroposophical Society as a permanent failure resulting from the dereliction of the members—ourselves included. As Rudolf Steiner so frequently said, all “inner opposition”¹³ “including within those closest to me”¹⁴ arises out of the influence of the counterforces.

During a Branch leaders meeting in 1988 Manfred Schmidt-Brabant, chairman of the Executive Council at the time, posed the urgent question as to how and why it is the case that the worldwide membership of the Society hovers around 60,000 while hundreds of thousands are connected to the anthroposophical movement worldwide. He recalled that Rudolf Steiner had spoken about the millions of souls who had made a pre-birth decision to seek out anthroposophy on the earth! Why are they not finding their way to us, to our Society?

Might one answer to this question be found in the tragic development described earlier? Both personalities—in reality, there were three—who were expelled from the founding Executive Council possessed an enormous capacity to work right into the public arena out of the sources of anthroposophy. The absence of Ita Wegman and Elisabeth Vreede as individuals connected to the Anthroposophical Society and as cofounders of it—in combination with the leadership’s gesture of ostracism towards them—made it impossible over the years and decades for innumerable souls to find their way to anthroposophy and the General Anthroposophical Society.¹⁵ Rudolf Steiner’s words are relevant here: “... if it were possible for us to succeed in allowing what has

⁹ Heinz Eckhoff, *Schicksal der Menschheit an der Schwelle*, Stuttgart 1998, p. 96.

¹⁰ GA 258, p. 171. For instance, there were no Executive Council meetings during four years of the Second World War, and no Class lessons were offered at the Goetheanum from 1943 to 1949 although the work of the School continued in other parts of the world.

¹¹ “The human being can live in the belief that he is acting for a certain reason, but in reality this reason is only a mask for a reason that remains unconscious.” (Rudolf Steiner, GA 35, p. 349f.)

¹² GA 260a, 1987, p. 235.

¹³ Noted several times in GA 258, and especially in GA 259.

¹⁴ Zeylmans, *Wer war Ita Wegman*, vol. III, p. 435.

¹⁵ This is not to say that impulses from the Christmas Conference cannot live and be cultivated in individuals and in groups. What is meant here is the General Anthroposophical Society’s development as a whole in view of its diminishing membership. Even though the present-day General Anthroposophical Society is not identical to the one founded by Rudolf Steiner at Christmas 1923/24, we can still work to realize the impulses of the 1923/24 Society!

been active since Christmas to have its full effect, the membership could triple or quadruple in a relatively short time.”¹⁶

The Background of this Initiative

At the 2017 Annual General Meeting of the General Anthroposophical Society a motion based on a member initiative was introduced that sought to rescind the 1935 decision to dismiss Ita Wegman and Elisabeth Vreede from the Executive Council. During or immediately preceding consideration of the motion, legal and other concerns arose from official circles that could not be clarified in the meeting. As a result, those who had put forward the motion decided not to proceed to a vote and they withdrew it from consideration. The concerns raised during the Annual General Meeting have since proven to be irrelevant.¹⁷ **Thus the 1935 expulsion decision remains in effect.**

Today, as members of the General Anthroposophical Society we find ourselves legally and spiritually in the same Society in which these judgments were made and the expulsions adopted by its administrative organs in 1935. However, we are able now to acknowledge without reservation that an injustice occurred at that time and that things were done then that run counter to the intentions of the anthroposophical movement. We are thus presented with the following possibilities:

- We can distance ourselves from the events that took place then and make it clear that we want nothing to do with those events and circumstances—that we feel in no way responsible for them. Those of us who are members today were not among those who acted then. However, what occurred then remains an inextricable part of the Anthroposophical Society today. Thus if we wish to distance ourselves from those events, we would also have to withdraw from the Society. Distancing oneself from circumstances that are inseparable from the Society while continuing as a member or even belonging to the leadership represents an inherent contradiction.
- We can unreservedly acknowledge the injustice.¹⁸ Within a Society that wants to “serve the spirit of truth” and in the context of the self-knowledge noted earlier we can penetrate what occurred with consciousness and with our feeling of responsibility. We can then rescind the decision¹⁹ and confront any consequences that may result.²⁰

It is the view of those who have signed below that if we want to remain true to Rudolf Steiner’s intentions—or become true to them once again—only the second option offers a just and fruitful way forward. Reuniting the karmic streams that had been separated would make possible an enormous step towards healing karmic fissures and towards self-healing. A powerful, cooperative work would become possible now and well into the future.²¹ After decades of living with the taboo surrounding a rethinking of this past, it should at least be possible today—especially in view of the approaching centenary of the Christmas Conference 1923/24—to illuminate and reintegrate this aspect of the Anthroposophical Society’s tragic history. Such a step could serve as the beginning of a process of healing for the whole Anthroposophical Society and might also lead to liberating the personalities responsible for the expulsions at that time. As we approach the centenary this step can be seen as a contribution towards creating what is needed if we are to take up Rudolf Steiner’s impulses with a renewed sense of purpose in the Anthroposophical Society.

¹⁶ GA 260a, p. 445.

¹⁷ *Ein Nachrichtenblatt*, No. 22 (October 30, 2017), articles by Marijcke van Hasselt and Thomas Heck.

¹⁸ We are aware of the fact that other injustices in the history of the General Anthroposophical Society remain unaddressed.

¹⁹ It is self-evident that Ita Wegman and Elisabeth Vreede cannot be restored retroactively to their positions. But it is quite possible to rescind the decision, a decision that represents a mistake in judgment.

²⁰ A reference to the concerns expressed at the 2017 Annual General Meeting, concerns that have since turned out to be irrelevant. See also the articles by Marijcke van Hasselt and Thomas Heck in *Ein Nachrichtenblatt*, No. 22.

²¹ Of course there are individuals in the excluded streams who nonetheless found their way to the General Anthroposophical Society, especially after life within the Society began to blossom again in the 1970’s. However, incorporation of these excluded streams as a whole still needs to be addressed in a conscious act by the Society.

Conferences, events, and publications about Ita Wegman and Elisabeth Vreede are already being planned for 2018 with the intention of reappraising and honoring these personalities and their achievements. It is the wish of the undersigned that—in collaboration wherever possible with the Sections that had been led by Ita Wegman (the Medical Section) and Elisabeth Vreede (the Mathematical-Astronomical Section)—the 2018 Annual General Meeting also provide an essential contribution to their rehabilitation by recognizing the injustice endured by these individualities in 1935 and by rescinding the decision that brought it about.

The Concept of the Initiative

The Initiative to Rehabilitate Ita Wegman and Elisabeth Vreede is intended to be a free association of members of the General Anthroposophical Society as well as individuals who are not members. It is our view that rescinding the 1935 decision during the 2018 Annual General Meeting is a necessary component for the rehabilitation of these two individualities. Those who see this initiative as justified can become a part of it by signing their names to it—even if they are not entirely in agreement with every detail of this document. There are no rights or duties associated with doing so. Any additional activity is the responsibility of the individual who undertakes it. In order to facilitate communication, an address for the core initiative is noted in the Impressum of the signup form.

Unterzeichner der Initiative

Péter Barna
Liesbeth Bisterbosch
Pieter van Blom
Marc Desaulles
Tatiana Garcia Cuerva
Marion Fischbach
Johannes Greiner

Lucius Hanhart
Marijcke van Hasselt
Thomas Heck
Eva Lohmann-Heck
Kirsten Juel
Aart Klein
Gerd-Mari Savin

Angelika Schuster
Leonhard Schuster
Ingrid Schleyer
Peter Selg
Clara Steinemann
Roland Tüscher

As of November 21, 2017 there are more than 300 additional signers of the Initiative listed at www.wegman-vreede.com.

Selected Bibliography

There is no systematic description of the historical events behind this initiative or the history of the General Anthroposophical as a whole. Thus we must rely on various sources; not all such sources can be listed here. The third volume in J. Emanuel Zeylmans van Emmichoven's documentation is recommended as an introduction; it also includes important historical documents like the 1935 "Denkschrift." Lorenzo Ravagli has begun to put together a very extensive overview of the General Anthroposophical Society's history on the internet, but it is currently unavailable in printed form. Nonetheless it can be recommended as study material:

www.anthroblog.anthroweb.info

DEVENTER, MADELEINE P. VAN und KNOTTENBELT, ELISABETH (ed.): *Elisabeth Vreede. Ein Lebensbild*, Dornach, 1976. (out of print).

KIRCHNER-BOCKHOLT, MARGARETE und KIRCHNER, ERICH: *Rudolf Steiner's Mission and Ita Wegman*, Rudolf Steiner Press, 2016.

KOLISKO, LILLY: *EUGEN KOLISKO Ein Lebensbild*. Private printing, 1961, out of print, available as a PDF at www.koliskoarchive.com.

MITTEILUNGEN AUS DEM ANTHROPOSOPHISCHEN LEBEN IN DER SCHWEIZ, Special issues in German on the members of the original Executive are available. Contact: Sekretariat der Anthroposophischen Gesellschaft in der Schweiz, Oberer Zielweg 60, CH-4143 Dornach, E-Mail: info@anthroposophie.ch.

PROKOFIEFF, SERGEI, *May Human Beings Hear It!* Temple Lodge, 2014

SELG, PETER, *The Last Three Years. Ita Wegman in Ascona. 1940-1943*, SteinerBooks, 2014.

SELG, PETER, *Die Rehabilitierung Ita Wegmans*, 3 volumes, Arlesheim (may be available by Christmas, 2017).

SELG, PETER, *Elisabeth Vreede. Adversity, Resilience, and Spiritual Science* SteinerBooks, 2017.

SELG, PETER, *Spiritual Resistance. 1933-1935*, SteinerBooks, 2014.

SELG, PETER, *"I am for Going Forward": Ita Wegman's Work for the Social Ideals of Anthroposophy*, SteinerBooks, 2012.

SELG, PETER, *"Ich bleibe bei Ihnen". Rudolf Steiner und Ita Wegman*, Stuttgart, 2007.

SELG, PETER / DESAULES, MARC (ed.) *Die Anthroposophische Gesellschaft, "Beiträge zum Verständnis und zum Weiterwirken der Weihnachtstagung"* volume 3, Arlesheim, 2016.

WEGMAN, ITA / SELG, PETER (ed.), *Erinnerung an Rudolf Steiner*, Arlesheim, 2011.

WEIHRAUCH, WOLFGANG (ed.): *"Ita Wegman und die Anthroposophie: Ein Gespräch mit Emanuel Zeylmans," Flensburger Hefte*, Special Issue Nr. 17, 1996.

ZEYLMANS VAN EMMICHOVEN, J. EMANUEL: *Who Was Ita Wegman? A Documentation*, 4 Volumes, Mercury Press, Spring Valley, NY. • The third volume contains the full "Denkschrift" along with documents from L. Polzer-Hoditz, H. Poppelbaum, O. Schmiedel, M. Röschl, E. Vreede and F. W. Zeylmans van Emmichoven.

ZEYLMANS VAN EMMICHOVEN, J. EMANUEL: *Who was Ita Wegman: A Documentation, Vol. 4—Strengthening the Heart*, Mercury Press 2009

Impressum

Responsible for the content: Eva Lohmann-Heck and Thomas Heck

Translation into English: Marguerite Miller and Prof. Douglas Miller

Status as of November 22, 2017

Contact: Thomas Heck, Dorneckstr. 60, CH 4143 Dornach

Internet: www.wegman-vreede.com, E-Mail: info@wegman-vreede.com

How to join the initiative

Your signature indicates that you support the rehabilitation of Ita Wegman and Elisabeth Vreede during the 2018 Annual General Meeting of the General Anthroposophical Society.

Name: _____

Anschrift: _____

Postal code/City/Country: _____

E-Mail: _____

Date/Signature: _____

To join the initiative, please cut out or copy this form and mail it to the contact address indicated above or send an e-mail to: info@wegman-vreede.com. You can also register on-line at www.wegman-vreede.com.