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“All she wants is fairness”

In 1959, lawyer Iris von Roten lent a new and ultimately successful direction to female equality in Switzerland with her book “Frauen im Laufgitter” (Women in the playpen).

CHARLES LINSMAYER

“I wanted it all. Wild adventures to appealing, faraway places. Daring encounters. Independence. Freedom. Life in all its glory,” said the Basel-based lawyer Iris von Roten in a 1979 interview, when asked what she dreamed about as a young girl. Born in Basel on 2 April 1917, von Roten began rebelling against female stereotypes when she was at grammar school in Zurich. She studied jurisprudence to secure an independent life, but then threw herself into journalism with great conviction. “Writing a good article is more important to me than sleeping or eating.” But this elegant young woman was no bluestocking, and an encounter with Valais lawyer and aspiring politician Peter von Roten, who was one year older, marked the beginning of a love story which, through its highs and lows, provides one of the 20th century’s most fascinating examples of the stormy push-and-pull between man and woman. Although each afforded the other complete freedom, Iris von Roten converted her husband to her radical, forthright brand of feminism. And more than anyone else, it was her husband who encouraged and supported her in 1948 when she began to write a book in the USA. This work, a tour de force demanding complete legal, political and sexual equality for women, was published in 1958 under the provocatively humorous title “Frauen im Laufgitter”. “The book is a masterpiece,” said Peter von Roten. “Her thirst for equality is simply irrepressible. All she wants is fairness.” However, for Switzerland and not least for the meek women’s movement of the time, the book came 50 years too early. Despite pleasing a small minority of fans such as Laure Wyss, “Frauen im Laufgitter” mostly attracted public scorn and hatred.

This was a traumatic experience, but Iris von Roten was not deterred: she published her “Frauenrechtsbrevier” (Guide to women’s rights) in 1959 before stepping away from the issue for good. Von Roten subsequently drove to Turkey, North Africa, and the south of France in her own car, and in 1965 published a travelogue about her adventures called “Vom Bosphorus zum Euphrat. Türken und Türkei” (From the Bosphorus to the Euphrates. Turkey and the Turks). She later flew to Brazil, Sri Lanka and other countries – until the tour-

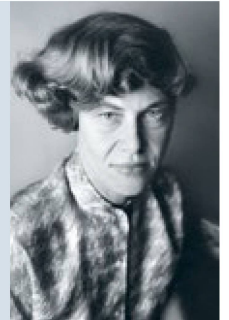
ist crowds got too much for her. In the end, she turned to painting and decided to create 100 flower still lifes, of which she ultimately completed 56. Von Roten was an uncompromising aesthete like no Swiss feminist before or after. “I have an unquenchable yearning for beauty every day,” she confessed.

Worn down by illness and insomnia, Iris von Roten committed suicide on 11 September 1990, half a year before “Frauen im Laufgitter” was rereleased and became a bestseller. This was her final radical expression of the very independence that she had championed all her life. “Just as a guest has to know when it is time to depart, a person should rise from the table of life while there is still time,” she wrote in a farewell letter.

Von Roten, whose feminism was neither bigoted nor dogmatic, has long since become a Swiss icon of women’s rights. In 2007, she and her husband were rehabilitated in Wilfried Meichtry’s wonderful biography “Verliebte Feinde” (Enemies in love). The book’s adaptation into a film in 2012 attracted fresh interest in the couple. Camille Logoz also published “Femmes sous surveillance”, a French translation of “Frauen im Laufgitter”, in 2021.

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“If we understand ‘interests’ to mean self-assertion and personal fulfilment at the expense of others, then political equality for women is directed against the privileges and, yes, the interests of men. Nevertheless, full democracy is also in the interests of men when viewed from a wider perspective. Having to stop and listen now and again runs counter to male self-assertion. But that is good medicine, because the obligation to listen brings him down a notch, making him more engaging and sympathetic.”