

Portraits

Highlighting the exceptional contribution
of European Jewish Women

Rosa Luxemburg

Marxist theorist, philosopher, economist,
anti-war activist & revolutionary socialist
(1871-1919)

Rosa Luxemburg was born a Jew in 1871 in Zamość, Poland, then under Russian ruling. Though "... the horrible Jewish pogroms in her homeland induced hatred and contempt for anti-Semitism in her..." and she was repeatedly insulted by an SPD member, there was no "special angle in the heart for the ghetto". When her family moved to Warsaw, she enjoyed a comprehensive humanist education. In 1887 she completed high school as top of her class but was denied the traditional gold medal because of her "oppositional attitude towards the authorities". Anti-Semitism probably played a role. Her affiliation to the outlawed socialist party "Proletariat" forced her to flee to Switzerland. There she met the Polish Marxist Leo Jogiches, with whom she had a love affair and a political relationship. He helped her finance her studies at the University of Zurich, where she received her doctorate in public law. At the age of 28, she went to Germany, which was then considered the centre of the international labour movement. In Berlin she became active in the left wing of the SPD and fought vigorously against the beginning of the armament for the world war.

Between 1904 and 1915, she was sentenced to four prison terms.



Meanwhile, Rosa founded the Spartakusbund, but in 1915, because of her actions in this new party, she was sent back to prison, this time for three years. At the end of the First World War, the Spartakusbund, led by Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, became the Communist Party of Germany (KPD). In the riots between November 1918 and January 1919, supporters of the emperor fought against workers and left-wing groups. Rosa and Karl Liebknecht were taken to the Hotel Eden, where their guards eventually shot them.

Rosa defended the idea that the class struggle should be fought with mass strikes, not in bloodshed. Her strike policy became a model in Germany and other countries, her approach helped to narrow the gap between entrepreneurs and employees by promoting the unions. Her dream was a socialist fraternity of European countries and ultimately of the whole world. Her famous motto was: "Freedom is always the freedom of the dissidents".

Willy Brandt praised Rosa Luxemburg's work. The International Rosa-Luxemburg-Gesellschaft has organized a conference every couple of years since 1980.