

# ROSA LUXEMBURG: A THOUSAND MORE THINGS

EXHIBITION

*Rosa carota*  
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# ROSA LUXEMBURG: A THOUSAND MORE THINGS

"I feel at home in the entire world, wherever there are clouds and birds and human tears."

—Rosa Luxemburg, February 16, 1917<sup>1</sup>

Rosa Luxemburg (1871-1919) is best known for her political fervor. Her abilities as a theorist and thinker, her rhetorical skills, and her strong convictions have continued to inspire socialists, as well as people of other political convictions, since her death one hundred years ago. She fought against revisionism, militarism, and imperialism—and for a socialist democracy.

## BOTANY AND WRITING

Lesser known is that, long before she became actively involved in politics, Rosa Luxemburg had a strong interest in the natural sciences. At 19, she moved from Poland to Switzerland to study botany, zoology, and geology at the University of Zurich. Several years later, already deeply involved in socialist politics, she became an avid collector of plants, an activity she continued even while incarcerated. During her lifetime, Rosa Luxemburg spent more than three years impris-



Rosa Luxemburg, 1907 © Karl Dietz Verlag Berlin

oned for various "political offenses." Between 1913 and 1918, which includes her years in prisons in Berlin (1915-16), Wronke (near Poznań) (1916-17), and Breslau (1917-18),<sup>2</sup> she produced a *herbarium*, a collection

<sup>1</sup> "Letter to Mathilde Wurm, Wronke i. P., February 16, 1917," in Georg Adler, Peter Hudis, and Annelies Laschitzka (eds.) (2011), *The Letters of Rosa Luxemburg*, p. 376. New York: Verso.

<sup>2</sup> See Rory Castle (2016) "Rosa Luxemburg: A revolutionary life," in Stefanie Ehmsen and Albert Scharenberg (eds.), *Rosa Remix*, pp. 13-19. New York: Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung..

of dried and pressed plants accompanied by handwritten notes.

During those years, she also sent many well written and highly engaging letters to friends, lovers, and comrades in the socialist movement. In addition to their documentary and autobiographical value, these letters are deeply personal. Even where they speak to Rosa Luxemburg's political ideas, such as the need for an alternative to capitalism or the importance of the women's movement, they extend well beyond the political and touch upon the most intimate aspects of human relationships.

### THE PERSONAL IN THE POLITICAL

Rosa Luxemburg's interest in botany might, at first sight, appear disconnected from her politics. A closer look reveals, however, that precisely here, in her solitary occupation with plants, an entire world beyond the private unfolds. While collecting is usually considered a practice of categorizing and ordering the world, for Rosa Luxemburg it was a way to engage with it, requiring attention to detail and care for its small, seemingly insignificant aspects. During her repeated imprisonment, this involvement with the natural world also allowed her to break through her confinement and reach the outside. The pages, pastings, and notes of Rosa Luxemburg's *herbarium* materialize a new way of living—full of sensitivity and in search of a world free of exploitation. In this sense, Rosa Luxemburg's deep humanity cannot be considered without recognizing her strong bond to nature.

Her orientation to detail, which is often perceived as a typically "female" quality, also reveals the particular complexity of Rosa Luxemburg's political analysis. In her attempt to understand the form and meaning of revolution, she was able to think beyond such categories as the mass strike, de commodification, and economic transformation, and to recognize that only radical social change can make socialism possible. For Rosa Luxemburg, revolution entailed the transformation of society on the most elementary level—that is, not only how we relate to ourselves and each other, but also our relationship to the other living things with which we share the planet.

### THE EXHIBITION

Treatments of well-known historical figures often foreground the "public" or "political" aspects of their lives. In



The last entry in the *herbarium* ©Karl Dietz Verlag Berlin

other cases, like Rosa Luxemburg's, we find that historians and writers draw a line between the "private" and the "political," forcing apart her "soft," "female," or "artistic" side from her revolutionary spirit and political ambitions. This exhibition follows an alternative approach by introducing a multifaceted Rosa Luxemburg. Rather than envisioning her anew, we allow aspects of her persona, which have otherwise been omitted or sidelined, to stand in the center of the exhibition and explore how they relate to each other.

By foregrounding Rosa Luxemburg's practice of collecting, we do not eclipse her political work but seek what Judith Butler has called "a dialectical expansion"<sup>3</sup> of the personal and the political. By allowing her many sides to co-exist, we resist the temptation to narrowly define Rosa Luxemburg as either heroine or gentle soul, as either "Bloody Rosa" or "lyrical dreamer."<sup>4</sup> Not wanting to enclose her in too small a space for all that she brings, we introduce her various storylines, some of which align and some of which cut across each other.

## Herbarium

This exhibition features excerpts from Rosa Luxemburg's *herbarium*, a series of 17 journals filled with dried and pressed plants. Her activity of

collecting spans from the spring of 1913 to the fall of 1918. The last entry, dated October 15, 1918, features a white mullein (*verbascum lychnitis*), which Rosa Luxemburg had found in the farmyard of the prison complex in Breslau, Poland.<sup>5</sup> Freed from prison at the beginning of the November Revolution, she was murdered three months later in Berlin by members of a counterrevolutionary military group.<sup>6</sup> Selected pages from the *herbarium*, which run the length of the exhibition space, indicate how Rosa Luxemburg's lifelong interest in botany and her concern for the natural world were folded into her political practice.

## Letters

This concern also finds expression in her writing—not just in her political essays and exposés, but especially in her letters and personal correspondence. The excerpts from Rosa Luxemburg's letters that are displayed in this exhibition are as much testimony to her love for plants and animals as they are to her friendships, inner struggles, and political convictions. They show that she took to both the political and the personal with great "care and deliberation."<sup>7</sup> And yet, while Rosa Luxemburg approached the natural world with the same passion that drove her politics, nature

3 Judith Butler (1988) *Performative acts and gender constitution: An essay in phenomenology and feminist theory*. *Theatre Journal* 40(4): 523.

4 Georg Adler, Peter Hudis, and Annelies Laschitzka (eds.) (2011), *The Letters of Rosa Luxemburg*, p. XXIII. New York: Verso.

5 Evelin Wittich (ed.) (2016) *Rosa Luxemburg: Herbarium*, p. 369. Berlin: Karl Dietz Verlag.

6 See Klaus Gietinger (2019) *The Murder of Rosa Luxemburg*. New York: Verso.

7 "Rosa Luxemburg to Karl Moor, Südende, October 12, 1914," in *The Letters of Rosa Luxemburg*, p. 333.

did not constitute an easy "refuge" for her but a place of "so much cruelty that I suffer greatly."<sup>8</sup> She did not treat nature as a backdrop to human life, detached and distant from our daily struggles. Rather, she experienced all aspects of the world as interwoven and forming each other.

## Confinement

Given that Rosa Luxemburg collected many of these botanical specimens while imprisoned, this exhibition confronts the conditions of her confinement. It provides historical context in the form of archival images of Rosa Luxemburg, of the prisons in Berlin and Wronke, and of the cover of her last botanical journal, which remains unfinished after her violent death on January 15, 1919. A letter sent from Wronke prison to her friend Hans Diefenbach ends, "I have a thousand more things I would like to say to you,"<sup>9</sup> leaving us with the painful realization that her early death denied Rosa Luxemburg the opportunity to live her life to its natural end and stripped her of the possibility of realizing her political vision of a socialist future.

## Sounds of Nature

For Rosa Luxemburg, prison was undeniably a place of "painful irri-



Women's Prison Barnimstreet, 1931 © Bundesarchiv, Bild 102-12436

ation."<sup>10</sup> The privations of imprisonment caused her to lose her "inner equanimity"<sup>11</sup> and to experience a deep longing for the world, as her letters powerfully testify. Most vivid are her descriptions of the sounds of nature outside her prison cell—trees rustling in the wind and birds singing in their multifarious voices. A sound installation allows visitors to listen to recordings of bird songs Rosa Luxemburg would have heard in her cell. We should not forget, however, that in prison, Rosa Luxemburg was also frequently confronted with silence and a lack of human contact. The "sound artifacts"<sup>12</sup> of the installation make clear that the acoustics of detention, whether in the form of sound deprivation or over-stimulation, play an essential role in punishment, and that prisons—then as now—exist to break the political will of the incarcerated. ■

8 "Letter to Sophie Liebknecht, Wronke, May 2, 1917," in Peter Hudis and Kevin B. Anderson (eds.) (2004) *The Rosa Luxemburg Reader*, p. 391. New York: Verso.

9 "Letter to Hans Diefenbach, Wronke in Posen, March 5, 1917," in *The Letters of Rosa Luxemburg*, p. 380.

10 "Letter to Hans Diefenbach, Wronke in Posen, March 5, 1917," *ibid.*, p. 378.

11 "Letter to Sophie Liebknecht, Wronke, May 23, 1917," *ibid.*, p. 413.

12 Forensic Architecture. N.d. *Saydnaya: Inside a Syrian Torture Prison*, <https://www.forensic-architecture.org/case/saydnaya/>





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