

## The piety of German women in South Africa

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### *Abstract*

The article analyses the piety prevalent in the four volumes of *Unsere Frauen Erzählen* which contain the stories of German women residing at Kroondal, a Hermannsburg mission near present day Rustenburg in the Northwest Province of South Africa. The focus is on the period between 1930 and 1990 when Nazism and apartheid reigned in Germany and South Africa. Firstly, the women's piety showed signs of being prescribed by nationalism. The women, most of whom were first generation German women born on South African soil, supported Hitler and his ideas, aiding his war efforts and siding with racially conservative Afrikaans-speaking people by whom they were surrounded. Secondly, the women's piety was family-based, living the ideals of the perfect religious woman who supported her family, her church and her nation with her domestic skills. Thirdly, the piety of the women was theologically uninformed as women of the time were not exposed to theological training. However, as Lutherans who believed in the free will of believers, they expressed their piety differently from that of the Afrikaans-speaking women who accepted their fate as predestined.

### **Introduction**

Between the years 1930 and 1990, a period in South Africa that was dominated by apartheid, local female identities were prescribed by the "nation". As Anne McClintock reminds us, "All nationalisms are gendered, all are invented, and all are dangerous."<sup>1</sup> In South Africa, *all* female identities – including those of black, Afrikaans and German women – were constructed

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<sup>1</sup> McClintock, Anne: "No Longer in a Future Heaven": Women and Nationalism in South Africa, in: *Transition* 51, 1991, 104.

by the “nation” or, in McClintock’s language, the “invented community”, so named because “nationalism invents nations where they do not exist”.<sup>2</sup>

This article will focus on the religious identities of German women living in South Africa between 1930 and 1990. Secondary attention will be given to how these identities were constructed in accordance and in comparison with those of Afrikaans women, with cursory references to the identities of black women and how they were constructed by local German women.

### Sources

Of all texts, the stylised stories of women are among the most difficult to interpret, especially when they are produced in an enclosed national and religious community. This article aims to give the reader some insight into the piety of German women living in South Africa between 1930 and 1990, focusing specifically on the four volumes of locally published *Unsere Frauen Erzählen* of the Kroondal women associated with the Hermannsburg Mission near Rustenburg in the north-west of South Africa.<sup>3</sup>

Marcus Melck<sup>4</sup> describes Kroondal in all its cultural and religious simplicity. At the end of the nineteenth century, five Hermannsburg missionaries bought the farm Kroondal (now slightly more than 100 kilometres north-west of Pretoria/Tshwane) to start a missionary farming community along the lines of the Hermannsburg Mission. The system was, firstly, family orientated, or as Melck aptly puts it: “It was a system of farming and settlement that had been the hallmark of the European peasantry in which each family’s farmlands extended out from the semi-nucleus of a town.”<sup>5</sup> In the second place, the settlement was based on a national-religious, that is a German-Christian, lifestyle, in accordance with the “original vision of the HMS’s founder and director, Ludwig Harms ... to establish a progressive foothold of self-contained German-Lutheran villages in Africa that could support his missionaries while simultaneously providing a practical example of a Christian (German) lifestyle to its new congregations”.<sup>6</sup> This congregation (then still without a building) subsequently states in its *Stiftungsurkunde* that it was to be Evangelical Lutheran, bound to the Lutheran Confession, and closely associated with the Hermannsburg Mission.

From the outset the community was plagued by local and world wars, that is, the South African War of 1899–1902, and later the First and Second World Wars in the first half of the twentieth century. During the first of these,

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* 104.

<sup>3</sup> *Unsere Frauen Erzählen*, 1980, 1996, 2003, 2011. Obtained from Julia Wenhold, Kroondal.

<sup>4</sup> Melck, Marcus: *The Afrikadeutschen of Kroondal*. Unpublished MA dissertation, University of Pretoria, 2012. 75ff.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* 81.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* 81.

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the inhabitants of Kroondal were forcefully removed and those loyal to the Boers were interned. Kroondal was reduced to ruins, but under the guidance of the *Kroondaler Schulverein*, a school was erected in 1905 with which “the loyalties of the community had begun to extend beyond those of the HMS and into a closer association with that of the emerging German nationalism”,<sup>7</sup> as was illustrated, inter alia, by the way German Day was celebrated in Kroondal in 1933. Also during this time, the *Deutsche Jugend Südafrikas* (DJSA) and the *Bund Deutscher Mädel* (BDM) were established as replicas of the Hitler youth organisations in Germany.<sup>8</sup> The women whose work will be discussed in this article often referred to their affiliation to the BDM, that is, the League of German Girls. However, *Deutschtum*, both politically and culturally, was not the only influence on this community. Because of its location in the heartland of Afrikaner nationalism, it escaped anglicisation and internalised (at least) the language and spiritual values of the surrounding Afrikaners.<sup>9</sup>

During the height of apartheid in the 1950s and 1960s, and after German nationalism lost face in Europe, the identity of Kroondal shifted from being *Afrikadeutsche* to *Deutschafrikaner*,<sup>10</sup> thus forming an integrated affiliation to Germanness and local whiteness. This is the backdrop against which the sources for this study should be introduced. The article is based on the stories of 125 women who were interviewed in the more than 30 years between 1980 and 2011, most of them from Altkroondal, the home for senior citizens in Kroondal. The stories were written down in German, with a handful in Afrikaans, typed, bound and made locally available in four volumes. Initially, visiting the women in their homes and in Altkroondal in order to write down their stories was an initiative of Johanna Hesse, but later became a tradition that has continued to this day, with the first volume being published in 1980, the second in 1996, the third in 2003 and the most recent in 2011.

The women interviewed were born in the 60 years between 1886 and 1944. They are therefore generally representative of the period 1930 to 1990 in terms of lived experience. Also, the majority of them were born in South Africa, in other words they are first generation German South Africans. Of the women in the first volume, about a third was born in Germany and came with their missionary parents or grandparents to South Africa. Of the women whose stories are contained in the second volume, a third was also born in Germany or Austria and came to South Africa during or after the Second World War. In the third and fourth volumes we find that the vast majority were born in South Africa.

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* 99.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* 116.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* 108.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* 124.

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Not all were born in Kroondal, however. Indeed, only about a quarter of the women were born in Kroondal and even they did not necessarily stay after finishing school. These women had lived in a variety of places, in Pretoria, Johannesburg, Rustenburg and Hartbeespoort Dam, on farms all over the country, and on other mission stations such as Saron and Manuane. They are therefore fairly representative of German women all over South Africa who, nevertheless, shared similar identities in terms of family life and German-Christian values. Their affiliation with Kroondal is through their children whom they sent to the primary school in Kroondal for a German education and, by living in Altkroondal in their old age, Kroondal had in some way or another become a symbol of Germanness to them all.

It should also be stated that although very few of the women were/are married to missionaries or pastors, affiliation to the Lutheran Church is common to all.

#### Categories for and background to interpretation

The interpretation of these women's stories is difficult, yet thought-provoking. The difficulty in interpretation comes from the stories being stylised. Three contextual issues seem to contribute to the stories – each two to three pages long – which will be presented in more or less the same format. Firstly, the stories are stylised in terms of the exclusivity of the listener/interviewee situation that is determined by the styles of the current female subculture. Secondly, the majority of these stories were written down at the end of the women's lives when they were already living in Altkroondal. The lenses of history through which life is seen in old age, and the threat of publication, might have influenced the stylisation of the stories. Thirdly, the women did not express their piety in these stories in any pronounced way, probably because theology and faith matters were the domain of men. However, a few exceptions to this rule assisted me in my attempt to see the faces of the German women's piety.

Twenty years ago, in 1994, I wrote a book on the *Piety of Afrikaans Women*.<sup>11</sup> The piety of these women had been influenced, in the first place, by the *bevindelijke godsdienst* of the Second Dutch Reformation that resisted the intellectuality of the Reformed Orthodoxy. When the books of this radically pietistic movement, especially *Het Gekrookte Riet* van Bernardus Smijtegelt (1665–1739), were no longer in demand in the Netherlands because of the *Aufklärung*, they were shipped to the colonies of which South Africa was one. The Dutch-Afrikaans women mentioned in their ego-texts how they were influenced by these books, referring to them by name. The books emphasised the fallen nature of man (woman!) and the dangers of

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<sup>11</sup> Landman, Christina: *The Piety of Afrikaans Women*. Pretoria 1994.

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Satan. Secondly, the women were influenced by the piety of Andrew Murray (1828–1917), which was an individualistic piety in which all evil and bad luck that befalls one can be traced back to one's own personal sinful behaviour. Finally, the women were captivated by the romantic sexism of the Dutch theologian and statesman, Abraham Kuyper (1837–1920) from whom many Afrikaans theologians, such as JD du Toit (Totius) received their training and influence. Consequently, the piety of Afrikaans women is, in the personal sphere, one of self-humiliation and self-hate. In the political sphere it is one of selflessness and martyrdom. This is a piety of personal sins to be confessed before a personal God who is male and demanding. It is one of guilt fantasies and fantasies about the love of Jesus.<sup>12</sup>

What influenced the piety of the German women in South Africa? Was it the Hermannsburg family values and insistence on a vigorous German-Christian lifestyle? Melck, without focusing on the women in particular, identifies two characteristics of German-South African women that may be of help in seeing the faces of their piety. The one is a "conscious notion of duty and religious faith" that lured German women into "the fulfilment of her duty in accordance with her faith".<sup>13</sup> Although Melck refers here to the Hermannsburg missionary women, this may well be applied to German women in twentieth century South Africa in general who fulfilled their duties *as wives* in religiously founded communities such as Kroondal. Secondly, Melck refers to the lure of belonging, the "fundamental allure of acceptance"<sup>14</sup> of Germans in South Africa vis-à-vis the German culture. This might have been true in a very special sense of the women who attached themselves in some way to Kroondal, to its German school and to Altkroondal.

In an informal discussion<sup>15</sup> with Julia Wenhold, a lay archivist at Kroondal from whom the volumes with the women's stories were obtained, the question of why the local German women made much less reference to God's participation and intrusion in their lives than the Dutch-Afrikaans women was asked. For Wenhold this distinction lies in the difference between Calvinism and Lutheranism. The German women as Lutherans – although they were not theologically trained – instinctively revert to people's free will as opposed to Calvinist women who were brought up with the idea of predestination and that life was predestined to be suffered according to God's will. The German women, then, led their lives in "free will" and did not pronounce their lifestyle as being according to "God's will", as did the Afrikaans women with the help of the language of the Dutch pietists and Andrew Murray.

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* 117–119.

<sup>13</sup> Melck, 72.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* 75.

<sup>15</sup> 20 December 2013.

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Piety as a religious identity is a social construct. In what follows, I shall try to identify the dominant discourses in the lives of German women in South Africa, and how these social discourses contributed to their piety, or rather to their religious identity.

### **The construction of piety as religious identity**

#### *Coupledness and marriage as the dominant discourses*

As is the case with most middle-class women, the lives of German women in South Africa between 1930 and 1990 were dominated by coupledness and marriage discourses. This is clear from the four volumes of Kroondal *Erzählungen*, which here serve as the source of information. A married, domestic life was a priority. Most of the stories in the volumes mentioned are told only in terms of getting married and having children, thanking God for his grace.

Most of the women, especially those born after 1904 (Volume 2), were educated and finished their schooling – first primary school at Kroondal and then secondary school in Rustenburg. However, there were economic class distinctions and varying gender attitudes among the local Germans that kept some women from finishing their schooling. Without naming them, a handful of women mentioned that they had had to leave school or could not finish their secondary school training because of a lack of funds, or that their fathers did not consider education to be important for a girl who was to get married anyway.<sup>16</sup> Li Dinkelmann<sup>17</sup> records how she enjoyed studying and became a teacher, but was called home to look after her parents when they became in need of care. A variety of women – albeit a small minority – reported that they became teachers or nurses, or worked in the post office or the bank. Those women who sought employment did so mainly before they got married, and then in “female careers” such as teaching music or “huis-houdkunde”, nursing, or secretarial work.

Only one woman revealed that she was divorced and two that they never got married. One of them became a doctor, whose story will be told later.

How did this domestic lifestyle reflect on the German women’s piety? All of us who grew up in middle-class families during the previous century know that the women of faith who placed their domestic skills at the disposal of the church made an indispensable contribution to the financial and social growth of that church. The Women’s Ministry at Kroondal (*Kroondaler*

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<sup>16</sup> Volume 2, pp 9, 19, 33.

<sup>17</sup> Volume 2, 22.

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*Frauenhilfe*) was/is no exception. In the *Rundbrief* of February 1967 they described their activities as follows:

Wir hatten im letzten Jahr ein reiches Mass an Arbeit. Es fing mit dem Empfang unserer Pastorenfamilie an, dank amen 2 Hochzeiten, am 30. April den Rummelverkauf, unsern Basar im Juni, am 16. bis 18. August die Missionskonferenz, am 11. September unser Missionsfest, zwischendrin Hochzeiten, Kuchen backen für die Kreupelsorgverkauf, am 11. Dezember die Konfirmation und mit 2 Hochzeiten wurde der Abschluss gemacht.

In 1996, almost 30 years later, the women were still engaged in more or less the same activities, which were fundraising, tea after church, and prayer meetings, with the exception of catering for weddings which had been taken over by private enterprise.

In summary then, the local German women enjoyed a middle-class existence in which priority was given to marriage and domestic duties which were extended to serving the church. In the years under discussion, theirs was a practical piety expressed in fundraising and catering for missionary conferences and the like – and not expressed in theological terms.

#### *Germanness as religious discourse*

Dora Schoenfelder<sup>18</sup> was born in 1905 in Kroondal. Her primary school education was interrupted frequently because of external factors such as the death of the teacher, Herr Penzhorn. She did not finish her secondary school training because she did not have a career in mind that required further training, choosing rather to help her mother in the house. In 1933 she founded the Bund Deutscher Mädchen Kroondal, a youth group for girls who were in sympathy with German nationalist ideals. In 1947 she married a farm manager – who had been interned during the Second World War – and lived “in einem volleingerichteten Haus mit schönem Garten und Schwimmbad. Wir hatten viel Besuch und ich kochte gern”. In her life story she describes the political and domestic bliss of a local woman of her age. A few other women mention their affiliation to the BDM, but give little if any information on the implications of being a member. It would seem to have been an almost innocent girly pastime, reflecting the political innocence of the majority of the women. Surely they would have been affected by the world wars? Even so, they did not mention this as part of their life stories. The women who fled the wars to come and live in South Africa told stories of suffering in Europe

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<sup>18</sup> Volume 2, 110-11.

and of happiness and survival in South Africa. The German women born here showed much less of a political conscience.

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By contrast, the story of Maria Teichler, born in 1908 in Bethel, Germany, of missionary parents is not quite so innocent. In Bethel she had undergone theological training with, among others, Karl Barth who was one of her lecturers and who she acknowledged as Hitler's enemy: "Der Schweizer Karl Barth war ein starker Gegner von Hitler und wurde als Staatsfeind No. 1 aus Deutschland ausgewiesen."<sup>19</sup> In 1933 she married Dr Günther Teichler and spent her life at different mission stations in Africa. She and her husband were rejected by fellow Germans because they were not Nazis and were considered to be "Kommunisten". Although not ignorant about Nazi Germanism, she and her husband sent their children to Kroondal for a good German education, and they were confirmed in the Lutheran church in Kroondal. The couple also spent their senior years in Altkroondal. She concludes her life story with praise to God for his goodness and grace in typical pietistic fashion. Being German eventually overshadowed everything and brought the local Germans together.

An example of piety, suffering and belonging, and finding one another is the story of Helene van der Spuy who was born in 1916 in Simenau, Poland. In strongly pietistic terms of "Wo die Not am größten, ist Gott am nächsten,"<sup>20</sup> she describes her flight from the German troops during the invasion of Poland. Eventually, with the help of the Evangelisch-Lutherische Kirche, she came to South Africa, eventually coming to rest in Altkroondal. Interestingly, and typical of her piety, she does not describe her flight and suffering in terms of right and wrong, blaming God and asking rebellious questions. At the end of her life she expresses only thanks and joy. This again points to the piety of older women who, at the end of their lives, look back while preparing to meet the Creator with equanimity.

This "looking through the lens of old age" can best be depicted in the words of Ilse Stallmann, who came to South Africa as a missionary after the Second World War. In Germany she supported the Hitler Jugend, and was even a *Scharführerin* and a *Wimpelträgerin* for this movement. In her life story she remarks in this regard, "Warum, weiß ich heute nicht mehr".<sup>21</sup>

Descriptive of church life at Kroondal, and a more innocent, or rather "natural" integration of piety, duty and "politics", is the life story of Alma Muhl.<sup>22</sup> Born in 1920 in Kroondal, she describes the rituals and services of

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<sup>19</sup> Volume 2, 13.

<sup>20</sup> Volume 2, 37.

<sup>21</sup> Volume 4, 7.

<sup>22</sup> Volume 2, 55.

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the Lutheran Church in Kroondal as an expression of her piety. She herself took a secretarial course, but eventually studied music at the Conservatorium of the University of Stellenbosch. Most significant is her participation in the DAHA, the *Deutsch-Afrikanischer Hilfsausschuß*, raising funds for clothes and food to be sent to Germany after the war, the perfect integration of local Germanness and local piety.

In later years, the German women in South Africa started to acquire significant career status. Gisela Meyer, for instance, born in 1940 at Oorsaak, eventually became a lecturer at Vista University in Pretoria.<sup>23</sup> The final story in this article, however, belongs to Marie Meyer.

Marie Meyer<sup>24</sup> represents a new type of piety among South African German women that emerged during the latter part of the twentieth century. This piety is inclusive of race and focuses on rendering professional services to society, all within an informed piety. The story of Marie Meyer was told by her sister; Marie died in 2010 at the age of 75.

Marie Meyer was born in 1939 in Bethel (near to Coligny, South Africa) of missionary parents. She too was sent to Kroondal for her school education and was confirmed by Pastor Hagedorn.<sup>25</sup> Already as a child she was exceptionally pious and displayed a great need for knowledge of the Bible and the contents of the faith handed down to her. She trained as a nurse, and worked in Cape Town at the Peninsula Maternity Hospital, serving the coloured people of District 6 in particular. After that she worked in a variety of mission hospitals, including in Ramotswa in Botswana (1963–1970). She was later encouraged to study medicine and started her studies at the age of 30 at the University of Pretoria in 1970 and finished her practical work in 1981 at Tjijerberg (Cape Town). After that she worked for years in the Mahikeng/Zeerust area and was accepted by the Bafuruthe as a member. She played the organ in the hospital chapel, and could cook well, being famous for her cheese cake.

Three aspects characterise her piety. Firstly, she was extremely dependent on her personal relationship with God. When in situations of want or when she had to take important decisions she became sensitive for signs from

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<sup>23</sup> Volume 4, 39.

<sup>24</sup> Volume 4, 34–38.

<sup>25</sup> Confirmation is mentioned by almost all the women participating in the four volumes of Kroondal *Erzählungen* as an important event in their spiritual lives. Most of them were confirmed by Pastor Zwietring who served the congregation at Kroondal for 35 years. Marie Meyer was confirmed by Pastor Hagedorn who was there for 16 years. From the founding of the Kroondal congregation in 1896 until today (2014) only eight pastors have served the congregation. They were (1) Christian and Luise Müller (1896–1916) (2) Johannes and Anna von Zwietring (1916–1950) (3) Paul and Ragni Hagedorn (1950–1966) (4) Heinrich and Margret Pape (1966–1984) with Dieter and Gudrun Schütte (1970–1971) and Dieter and Senta Lilie (1977) as assistant pastors (5) George and Inge Scribe (1984–1992) (6) Dierk and Andri Köstlin (1992–1998) (7) Hand Furia (1998–2004) and (8) Victor Rörs (2004–2014).

God. Once, when she was not sure about her future, a man from the village brought her water which to her was a direct indication from “above” that God would take care of her. Secondly, hers was a theologically informed piety, although we are talking “lay theology” here. She took a distance learning course at the TEE (Theological Education by Extension College in Johannesburg) and often preached in Setswana in Lehurutshe. And thirdly, her piety was one of surrender and obedience, as was that of Hermannsburg. “[I]n ihrem Wohnzimmer hing eine Batik mit dem Versa us Jes.6: ‘Hier bin ich Herr, sende mich’.” In summary, it was a female piety of selflessness, albeit informed by lay theology.

### Research findings

After having studied the stories of the 125 German women published in four volumes of *Unsere Frauen Erzählen* of whom most were living at Altkroondal, originally a Hermannsburg mission station a few kilometres south of Rustenburg in South Africa, the following conclusions are made about the piety of these women who were born between 1886 and 1944, most of them being first generation German women born on South African soil:

- During a time when the “nation” prescribed female identity, South African German women conformed to a piety that was (mostly) theologically uninformed, politically innocent as far as Nazism was concerned, and racially unproblematised. At first the women would provide food and catering for missionary conferences only. However, later this expanded to professional services for black communities, as was the case with Marie Meyer. Where duty or business called, races made contact without the white women questioning inequality.
- The space within which the South African German women practised their piety was that of the family, as was transmitted to them by the Hermannsburg model. The *Frauenverein* was an important space in which German women were able to extend their domestic skills to the benefit of fundraising for the church, caring for those seeking help and catering for church meetings.
- In lifestyle, too, the women followed the Hermannsburg model. Apart from a few unmarried women, and one divorcée, the women testified to their commitment to married life, presupposing a strict morality. They sent their children to Kroondal mainly for a moral education. Some of the women did not finish their schooling but, for most, education meant to be educated in morality and as part of a Christian-German lifestyle.
- The German women tell their stories piously, but not with pietistic references to God’s guidance and protection, as did Dutch-Afrikaans

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women of the same period. In their stories they give thanks to God and refer to his grace. This may be because of the Lutheran emphasis on free will that in a sense counteracts the Calvinist notion of predestination and God's control over every aspect of life.

- The piety of South African German women is a practical piety, born out of duty. Their involvement in the community and especially in the black community was "not born out of fear, but out of duty".<sup>26</sup>
- Many of the women studied belonged to the BDM or participated in the DAHA, which sent aid to the Germans in Europe after the Second World War. This might have been an innocent participation in Germanness that was part of their piety and not questioned. They do not express strong political views in their stories. Maybe, at the end of their lives, Nazism was simply passé and not worth mentioning. However, women who had come to South Africa after fleeing the war in Europe did mention that during those times they were kept at a distance by local Germans because of their anti-Nazi stand. Eventually, they all returned to (Alt)Kroondal to spend their last days amidst the longing for and the enjoyment of Germanness.
- Finally, then, it needs to be noted that the piety of South African German women during the period 1930 to 1960 shows strong trends but different faces, and was manifest in a variety of forms. Over time it shows some development. Although Germanness was a strong binding force, German female piety developed from being politically innocent to more informed, from theologically naive to slightly more sophisticated, from domestic and practical to taking on a more professional look. The story of this development from 1990 onwards still needs to be told.

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<sup>26</sup> As was said by an interviewee who does not want her name to be mentioned in this regard.