

DIGITAL ART EXHIBITION: Trailblazing Women in Kazakhstan and Germany

Agnes Wabnitz (1841–1894)

Pioneer for Women's Rights

Achievements

She founded several associations in Berlin to improve the working conditions and wages of female workers. In the General Commission, the first alliance of individual trade unions in Germany, she represented female workers as a delegate and advocated for their rights.

Family

Not much is known about Agnes Wabnitz. She was born in Silesia. Both her grandfather and father resisted the societal conditions of their times: her grandfather during the Silesian weavers' uprising, and her father on the barricades of the 1848 bourgeois revolution, fighting for democracy and human rights. She came from a middle-class background, had several brothers, and remained unmarried throughout her life.

Education/Profession

Agnes Wabnitz received a good education, which proved helpful when her father died early and she had to earn her own living. She became a governess—the only profession considered appropriate for middle-class women at the time. However, since she refused to submit to the authority of her employers, she was unable to work in that role for long. She also had to care for her sick mother—a responsibility her brothers did not have to shoulder.

In the early 1870s, she moved with her mother to Berlin, the capital of the newly founded German Empire, in search of work. Employment opportunities for women were limited: domestic service, factory work, or home-based piecework. Taking on factory or domestic work would have meant leaving her mother alone at home, so she became a home-based worker—the least-paid option. She worked as a cloak seamstress and soon began resisting the poor working conditions. In 1885, she co-founded the Association of Cloak Seamstresses. The first demand of the association was that home-based workers should no longer have to pay for sewing machines, workspace, heating, lighting, and materials like thread out of their meager wages. Agnes Wabnitz spoke at gatherings and became a popular speaker. With courage and humor, she fought for the rights of working women.

Shortly after, the association was banned by the police, as women were not allowed to form political groups or join political parties. In 1886, Agnes Wabnitz was imprisoned. She protested against her imprisonment with a hunger strike and was declared “dangerously subversive and insane.” She was forcibly fed in a Berlin asylum. After a suicide attempt and public protests, she was released and soon resumed her political activism. In 1888, she founded the Association for the Support of Women Released from Hospital Care.



In 1894, she was due to be imprisoned again. Fearing she would be declared legally incompetent and committed to a mental institution, she took her own life. She poisoned herself in the cemetery of the March Revolution victims—where those who died in the 1848 revolution were buried. Her death triggered widespread sympathy. “All working people honored the deceased,” wrote *Vorwärts*, the newspaper of the Social Democratic Party. Crowds came to her funeral and laid wreaths—more than were laid on the Kaiser’s grave. Her grave at the cemetery of the Free Religious Community on Pappelallee in Berlin is still preserved today.

Sources:

SpurenSuche. Women in Pankow, Prenzlauer Berg, and Weißensee, Pankow 2006

<https://kulturforum.info/de/kk-magazin/8118-vergessene-rebellin-agnes-wabnitz-eine-wenig-bekannt-vorkaempferin-fuer-frauenrechte>

