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Basic biographical data

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| Name: | Walter Nelz |
| Other names (byname, pseud. etc.): | Florine ; W.O. ; Walter Ost ; Walter Tell |
| Date and place of birth: | 1909, Zürich (Switzerland) |
| Date and place of death: | August 1990, Zürich (Switzerland) |
| Nationality: | Swiss |
| Occupations, careers, etc.: | Geographer, archivist, freelance writer |
| Time of activity in Trotskyist movement: | 1929 - 1943 |

Biographical sketch

Note: This biographical sketch is chiefly based on the following Swiss dissertation: *Vogelsanger, David: Trotzismus in der Schweiz. - Zürich : Univ., 1986. - 270 pp.*

Walter Nelz who was better known within the Trotskyist community by his pseudonym *Walter Ost*, was born in Zürich (German-language part of Switzerland) in 1909 * into a working class family who prior to World War I had come from Germany, settled in Zürich and had become naturalized.

As a young student of geography at Zürich University, Nelz at the end of the 1920s became a member of the *Marxistische Studentengruppe (Marxist Students' Group)*, which was led by Swiss communists, and got acquainted with Fritz Brupbacher, an outstanding head of the Swiss left. Soon Nelz became a member of the *CP*, but was expelled as a left deviationist in 1931. Under the strong influence of Solomon Ehrlich, a Zürich student from Polish-Jewish origin, Nelz was won over to Trotskyism and after having graduated with a diploma in geography in 1932 he primarily dedicated to political activism, at the same time continuing his studies which he only concluded in 1937 with a dissertation on *Anthropogeographische Untersu-*

* Unfortunately the exact date as well as other biographical details such as family and relatives are unknown to us.

chungen im Mendrisiotto.

In 1933 Nelz became a co-founder of the first Swiss Trotskyist organization, the *Marxistische Aktion der Schweiz (MAS, Marxist Action of Switzerland)* which consisted primarily of militants expelled from the CP. MAS remained a tiny group, most of its activists were concentrated in Zürich, Basel and Schaffhausen, i.e. in the German-speaking part of Switzerland. The Zürich branch was led by Nelz who became known as a remarkable activist whose activities could partly compensate the smallness of the group. Furthermore, Nelz functioned as an indefatigable contributor to various papers issued by MAS during the following years, some of which being co-operatively issued with other German-language Trotskyist sections*. At the end of 1933 Nelz visited Trotsky who at that time was living at St. Palais (France). In 1934 Nelz and the majority of the MAS militants were convinced by Jan Frankel, a representative of the *International Secretariat of the International Communist League (ICL)*, to adopt Trotsky's new tactic of entrism and thus to join the ranks of the *SPS (Sozialdemokratische Partei der Schweiz, Social-Democratic Party of Switzerland)* and of its youth section, respectively. While in the latter the Trotskyist influence in view of the small number of Trotskyist militants was quite considerable, the work inside the SPS remained unsuccessful. Nelz was soon excluded as a Trotskyist from SPS as were most of the other Zürich branch Trotskyists, too.

The Swiss MAS was not represented when in September 1938 delegates from various countries met in a suburb of Paris in order to launch the *Fourth International* but the Swiss group was considered as a fraternal organization. However, relations of the MAS with *Fourth International's* leading bodies were considerably disturbed by the fact that a prominent leader of Austrian dissident Trotskyists, Josef Frey, began to play an important role within Swiss Trotskyism after he had to flee Austria when it became part of the German *Reich* in March 1938. Relations were almost totally cut shortly after the outbreak of the Second World War and could only be re-established in 1945/46.

During the war years the Swiss Trotskyists who already in the 1930s were more or less under police surveillance, had to work clandestinely and their publications became underground papers. In 1939/40 Nelz was involved in the editing and disseminating of such an illegal paper, *Informationsbriefe für revolutionäre Politik*, which had a print run of some 600 copies and which propagated strictly revolutionary antimilitarist positions, refusing support to national defence and emphasizing that there was no reason to be confident in either the Swiss bourgeoisie's ability or its will to defend neutral Switzerland against an eventual menace from the fascist Germany.

It was in the context of Nelz's involvement in the *Informationsbriefe* that in June 1940 he became a victim of harsh governmental repression when together with some fifteen other Swiss Trotskyists he was arrested and held without trial until March 1941. One year later, from March 23-30, 1942, Nelz and twelve of his comrades were brought before a military court; the trial was held at Luzern**. Nelz as the main defendant was sentenced to 2 years in prison, two other defendants to one year each while the rest of the group were given shorter sentences. All defendants were convicted of 'exhortation and instigation of violation of military discipline'. Due to that extraordinary act of repression (occurring in a democratic country!) the tiny MAS nearly disappeared from the scene; only a few militants remained and quite isolated continued their illegal underground work.

During his years in prison (1942/43) Nelz successively abandoned Marxism and Trotskyism and began to

* The best-known example for such a co-operative effort was the theoretical monthly *Der einzige Weg*, a paper issued at the end of the 1930s by the MAS together with *Revolutionäre Kommunisten Österreichs (RKÖe, Revolutionary Communists of Austria)* and *Internationale Kommunisten der CSR (IKCSR, International Communists of the CSR)*. For more details about this journal see our *Trotskyist Serials Bibliography*, München, 1993, under TSB item no. 0467.

** The trial of the Swiss Trotskyists held before the military court in 1942 has been treated *in extenso* in *Vogelsanger, David: Trotzkismus in der Schweiz, Zürich, Univ., Diss., 1986*. See also *Alexander, Robert J.: International Trotskyism, Durham and London, 1991, p. 728*.

dedicate himself to extensive studies of Hegelian philosophy.

At the end of the Second World War he took a job as an archivist at the *SSA (Schweizerisches Sozialarchiv, Swiss Social Archives)*, Zürich, where for some 30 years he was in charge of the newspaper clippings collection which in 1999 consisted of more than one million documents arranged by subject and country dossiers. In 1945 Nelz launched the *Sozialistischer Kulturbund Humanitas (Socialist Cultural League Humanitas)* and in the following years he was engaged on the side as a freelance writer, publishing some of his writings privately, and as an active member of the *International Hegel Society*. In 1962 he again became a member of the *SPS* at Zürich (from which he had been expelled in the mid-1930s as an entrust Trotskyist, see above), and he occasionally contributed – also after his retirement in 1974 – to its daily paper *Volksrecht*.

Nelz, whom Swiss historian David Vogelsanger considered the actually leading head of Swiss Trotskyism before WW II, died in Zürich at the end of August 1990*.

We should like to conclude our biographical sketch with a short quotation from an obituary which appeared in the just-mentioned social-democratic daily *Volksrecht* (Zürich):

"Walter Nelz war ein meist unbequemer, in seinen Äusserungen mitunter auch problematischer, aber eigenständiger und origineller Kopf in der Zürcher Arbeiterbewegung".**

*Selective bibliography****

- ***Selective bibliography: Books/pamphlets (co-)authored by Nelz***

Anthropogeographische Untersuchungen im Mendrisiotto. - Zürich : Univ., 1937. - 56 p. [His dissertation]

Der Brief aus Zürich an die Landesvertretung Salzburg des Freidenkerbundes Österreichs. - Salzburg : Othmar Hösel, 1969. - 6 pp. - (Specht-Heft ; 8)

Deutschland und die Krise des Marxismus. - Zürich : Selbstverl., 1945. - 26 l.

Einige Feststellungen zur Frage: Schweizerische Landesverteidigung / Walter Ost [i.e. Walter Nelz]. - Zürich : Selbstverl., ca. 1940. - 9 l.

Geist und Macht : das Wesen des wissenschaftlichen Sozialismus ; ein Beitr. zur Lösung der Krise des Marxismus. - Zürich-Fraumünster : Dynamo-Verl., 1950. - 72 p.

Das Mendrisiotto : anthropologisch-statistisch. - Zürich : Dynamo-Verl., 1937. - IV, 107 pp. [Based on his dissertation]

* Exact date not known.

** Knoepfli, Adrian: Zum Tode von Walter Nelz, in: *Volksrecht* (Zürich), 1990 (Sept.13), p. 5.

*** TSB item numbers (e.g. <TSB 0716>) refer to Lubitz' *Trotskyist Serials Bibliography*, München [etc.] : Saur, 1993, which is out of print but available as PDF file within the framework of *TrotskyanaNet*. In TSB you can find detailed descriptions concerning the respective Trotskyist journals, newsletters, bulletins and the like.

- ***Selective bibliography: Books/pamphlets edited by Nelz***

Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich: Hegel-Brevier / ausgew. und hrsg. von Walter Nelz. - Zürich-Fraumünster : Dynamo-Verl., 1951. - 96 pp.

- ***Selective bibliography: Journals and bulletins to which Nelz contributed***

Bulletin international de l'Opposition Communiste de Gauche = Internationales Bulletin der Kommunistischen Links-Opposition (Paris) <TSB 0234>

Der einzige Weg (Antwerpen; later: Zürich) <TSB 0467>

Informationsbrief der Marxistischen Aktion der Schweiz (Basel) <TSB 0636>

Informationsbriefe für revolutionäre Politik (Basel) <TSB 0638>

Internationale Briefe / Marxistische Aktion der Schweiz (Zürich) <TSB 0740>

Internationales Bulletin der Kommunistischen Links-Opposition (Paris; later: Berlin) <TSB 0758>

Marxistische Aktion (Zürich) <TSB 1005>

Mitteilungen / Marxistische Aktion der Schweiz (Zürich) <TSB 1006>

Trotz alledem! : Zeitung für internationalen und revolutionären Marxismus (Zürich) <TSB 1741>

Unser Wort (Prag, later: Paris; later: Antwerpen; later: New York, NY) <TSB 1761>

Volksrecht : sozialdemokratisches Tageblatt (Zürich)

- ***Selective bibliography: Books and articles about Nelz***

Huber, Peter: Nelz, Walter (1909-1991), in: *Huber, Peter: Stalins Schatten in die Schweiz : Schweizer Kommunisten in Moskau*, Zürich, p. 439. [Biographical sketch. Nelz's year of death is incorrectly given there]

Knoepfli, Adrian: Zum Tode von Walter Nelz, in: *Volksrecht*, 1990 (Sept. 13), p. 5. [Obituary]

Vogelsanger, David: Nelz, Walter / "Walter Ost", geboren 1909), in: *Vogelsanger, David: Trotzkismus in der Schweiz*, Diss., Zürich, 1986, pp. 224-225. [Biographical sketch]

Note: More information about Nelz is likely to be found in some of the books, pamphlets, university works and articles listed in the relevant chapters of our *Trotsky Bibliography*, 3. ed., München [etc.], 1999, e.g. in chapter 7.5.17.

Sidelines, notes on archives

— A small *Walter Nelz archive* (ca. 1 linear m.) is preserved at the *SSA (Schweizerisches Sozialarchiv)*, Zürich; the call number is Ar 120. It contains personal papers, correspondence and various typescripts, primarily dating from 1933-47 including some material about the *MAS (Marxistische Aktion der Schweiz)*. Perhaps the most interesting pieces within the Nelz archive are a mimeographed history of Swiss Trotskyism with title *Zur Geschichte der Troztkisten in der Schweiz* (written by Nelz in 1945 with some later added amendmends from his pen), as well as a typewritten manuscript about the above-mentioned trial of 1942 with title *Der Militärprozess der schweizerischen Troztkisten vom 23.-30. März 1942 im Rathaus Luzern* (written by Nelz in 1946). A finding aid is available online, URL: <http://www.sozialarchiv.ch/Bestaende/Archive/archWeb/Ar120.htm> .

— Nelz' correspondence with Leon Trotsky and Lev Sedov (dating from 1936-37) is contained in the *Trotskii-Sedov Papers* (series 231 of the Boris I. Nicolaevsky Collection) held at the *Hoover Institution Archives* (Stanford, Cal.)

— Some two dozen letters by Nelz to Trotsky are contained in the *Exile papers of Leon Trotsky* (bmS Russ 13.1) at Houghton Library (Cambridge, Mass.).

W. Lubitz, rev. July 2008

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