‘At Home with Communists’: Emmy and Werner in Private

‘Just imagine, Werner has now been expelled from his party, I have no idea what will become of the boy!’ So begin Betty Scholem’s comments on her son’s political fate in 1926, summarising in a few short sentences what Werner was unable to admit to others, let alone himself: ‘He really has landed at the wrong feeding trough, without any kind of proper qualifications or useful skills! For the past two years, ever since he found himself in opposition to the dominant tendencies of his party, his wife has wanted him to take up studies, but she couldn’t convince him. It worries me quite a bit, but what can I do?’

After leaving the Lenin League with a bang in 1928, Werner Scholem looked back on an almost decade-long career as a professional politician, a time during which he had never bothered to acquire ‘useful skills’. On the contrary: his father’s drive to instil a sense for profitable entrepreneurship in his sons had been the original reason for Werner’s rebellion. As a revolutionary, both his life and his thoughts reflected the priorities of a future society, not the practical necessities of his everyday life. The council republic, the proletarian justice of Soviet Russia, the Chinese Revolution – Scholem’s attention was fixed on distant revolutionary vanishing points, not the world around him. Although he followed wage struggles and trade union politics with a degree of journalistic detachment, he essentially considered them as much a nuisance as, say, haemorrhoids, as he told his brother in 1914. Although Scholem enjoyed more influence among Berlin workers than most of his left-wing peers in the KPD, he shared their political blind spots. As a rule, he viewed the quotidian logic of wage labour and the constraints and compromises it entailed as breeding grounds for ‘right dangers’, and regarded social reform in general to be the terrain of his irreconcilable opponents, the opportunists and liquidators. He could never quite identify with these practical, reformist concerns, except for that brief phase during which he developed an interest in school reform. After this

1 Betty to Gershom Scholem, 8 November 1926, Scholem and Scholem 1989, p. 150 f.
attempt failed, Werner became a committed political voluntarist, driven solely by will and intellectual conviction, in contrast to the material need that propelled most to join the ranks of the labour movement.

Instead, it would be the women in his life who would remind him time and again of the unpleasant compromises of the capitalist lifeworld: Emmy urged him to return to university, Betty wanted him to find steady employment. She pressed the questions that Werner tried to avoid: ‘The moment the Reichstag is dissolved or new elections are called, he will be left high and dry. [...] But what else can he do? If his own party’s paper refuses to hire him as a journalist, the newspapers of other political pursuits certainly won’t print his articles’.3

Indeed, the Scholems had been financially dependent on the party for years. Werner as a member of parliament and as editor of various publications, Emmy as a stenotypist at KPD headquarters, where she worked from 1921 onward. They shared a common workplace in Rosenthalerstraße, although their relationship at work was far from equal. Werner found himself in the spotlight while Emmy remained largely invisible. She had foregone her own political career to transcribe her husband’s speeches – several minutes from that time carry her initials. On the other hand, Emmy’s position provided her with a degree of personal freedom. In early 1925 she travelled to Moscow without Werner to work as a congress stenotypist for several weeks.4 She managed to travel and earn some money while active in the party, but her political work remained largely confined to appearances at educational workshops.5 Correspondingly, she played no role in the KPD’s permanent factional struggles, and even distanced herself from Werner’s opposition in 1926. In a letter to the Berlin district leadership, she stated ‘that I do not agree with the opposition and have no ties to any factions’.6 Had the party conflict led to divisions in the family as well? This seems unlikely, as Emmy’s statement was not a personal attack, but rather one of many acts of self-assertion she was compelled to perform in her relationship with Werner.

It was her husband’s factionalising that forced her to give up her position at party headquarters after four years. She wrote that she had resigned ‘because

3 Betty to Gershom Scholem, 7 December 1926, Scholem 2002, p. 156 f.
4 Lichnoe delo Sholem, Emma [personnel file Emma Scholem], RGASPI Moscow, Komintern, f. 495, op. 205, d. 9797; as well as letter from Betty to Gershom Scholem, 20 April 1925, Scholem and Scholem 1989, p. 128.
5 Emmy remained active in KPD educational work until 1926. She wrote that after Werner’s expulsion she no longer served as a ‘course leader or speaker’; Emmy Scholem, ‘Schilderung des Verfolgungsvorganges (7. April 1934)’, Entschädigungssakte Emmy Scholem, HStA Niedersachsen, NdS. 110 w Acc. 14/99 Nr. 107351. On KPD educational work see Krinn 2007.