“From the North comes the light to us!” —
Scandinavian Artists in Friedrichshagen
at the Turn of the Century

Gertrude Cepl-Kaufmann and Anne M. N. Sokoll

Bohemian Culture in Friedrichshagen.
A Place of “spiritual upsurge and uprising”
European art and society at the turn of the previous century were marked by numerous paradigm shifts, as a young modernist vanguard asserted itself politically as well as artistically. Although the protest against the status quo and the desire to stage a fundamental renewal of art and society was widespread, the movement was marked by profound diachronic and synchronic heterogeneity. What culminates in the historical avant-garde in the 1910s and 1920s has its origins in the late nineteenth century. The notion of artistic bohemia provided one of the cradles of the historical avant-garde, inspiring vibrant communities to take root on the fringes of Europe’s metropolises. One such bohemian centre was Friedrichshagen, a lakeside village on the South-East outskirts of Berlin, soon to become one of its suburbs. Erich Mühsam, writer, bohemian and anarchist, described it as a site of “spiritual upsurge and uprising” (“aufgerührte und aufrührerische Geistigkeit”) (1977: 42). Here, as was common with other bohemian communities, political and cultural heterogeneity was the order of the day.

Around 1890 Friedrichshagen was still situated in the countryside of the Mark Brandenburg, but was connected to Berlin through a newly opened railway line. Over subsequent years, a secession occurred within the Berlin literary scene, as several writers decided to leave the city and settle in Friedrichshagen close to the residence of
the naturalist playwright Gerhart Hauptmann in neighbouring Erkner; Hauptmann had recently made his mark with dramas like Vor Sonnenaufgang (Before Sunrise) and Die Weber (The Weavers). This move to a more rural environment on the doorstep of Berlin was typical of the way in which representatives of the Lebensreform (reform) movements of the period tried to escape the experience of alienation in urbanised and industrialised modernity by founding communities outside, yet still in the proximity of, the metropolitan areas they shunned. The foundation of this poets’ colony on the shores of the Müggelsee exemplifies the desire to find “natural solitude near the roaring metropolis” – to use the author Bruno Wille’s characterisation of the situation in Friedrichshagen. Wille, Wilhelm Bölsche and the brothers Heinrich and Julius Hart were the initial core members of the Friedrichshagen colony. Bölsche became known through his engagement with the popular social-democratic theatre movement (Volksbühnenbewegung), and also edited the leading Berlin cultural journal Freien Bühne für den Entwickelungskampf der Zeit (Independent Theatres for the Improvement of the Age) from the rural colony. Wille took part in the Free Church movement, while the Harts played leading roles as critics in the emergent progressive intellectual culture. A commitment to proletarian education and culture acted as a unifying concern for the members of the “Muses’ Court at Müggelsee” (“Musenhof am Müggelsee”) – to use Franz Mehring’s ironic 1894 description. The village of silk spinners and broom-squires that slowly transformed into a lakeside resort for those who were tired of metropolitan life, replete with villas and an open-air bath, provided the poets with an idyllic provincial environment, from which most of them originated, yet allowed a direct intellectual involvement in contemporary politics.

Soon the Friedrichshagen colony expanded – in several directions – and became a prism of intellectual exchange in the fin-de-siècle. In November 1891, a number of Scandinavian poets arrived, led by the Swedish couple Ola Hansson and Laura Marholm. A second wave of Scandinavians came in 1892, led by August Strindberg, who was to play a remarkable role in the colony. In 1893, at a party honouring the presence of the Scandinavians, the popular author Hermann Sudermann aptly articulated the paradigm shift that had occurred, when he declared that, “From the North comes the light to us” (“Vom Norden her kommt uns das Licht”) (Paul 1914: 82). Indeed,