

Note to our guests and readers:

Our common language is English. It is the language that most of us understand (more or less) and that gives us the opportunity to exchange our ideas. However, since very few of us are native speakers, we often fight for words. The summaries of our guest evenings are prepared by the sisters who moderated these evenings. We make these summaries available uncensored to give our readers an impression of the issues that concern us. Since we unfortunately lack the resources to have all of our sisters' texts edited professionally, we apologize to the readers for any language deficits. We hope that the summary of our guest evening themes, regardless of their linguistic presentation, will spark your interest in visiting us on one of our guest evenings.

The theme of the guest evening:

Women in Freemasonry

Freemasonry is a man's world. This is what we have been hearing for 300 years and what still seems to be general opinion.

But as so often in the world, appearances can be very deceptive. We are here, and we are real - and not just since yesterday.

From the beginning, women had their place in Freemasonry. The exclusion of women in modern Freemasonry, written down in 1723, still applies to many brothers. This is often justified by the explanation that women did not play an important role in the history of stonemasons and their guilds.

The fact is, we've always been few - of course. But we have always been part of Freemasonry. In old documents and closed roles of each guild you can find women from the early Middle Ages to the 18th century. Most often you will find widows who had to run the business when their husband or other male family head passed away. After they remarried, the usual procedure was to have their name removed from the documents and guild lists. Thereafter, the name of the new head of the family - male, of course - was listed.

But there were also some few women that have been taken as apprentices in the stonemason's world. Starting with Gunnilda the mason of Norwich in England (her name was found in the so-called "close rolls" in 1256) up to Mary Banister in 1713, who was listed in the yearbook of the London Company of Masons as apprentice for 7 years.

Let us point out that there were only a few women! But even for men it has been difficult in recent centuries to be accepted as an apprentice in a craft if they had no trusted connections. So, it was much more difficult for women. Society's expectations were clear: she had to be married, serve her husband and give birth to children.

Therefore, only a few women were able to take advantage of their opportunities. But never underestimate the impact of the opportunities used (on contemporaries and offspring: us).

"If there is a will, there is a way". This is a well-known saying in Germany and "ways can be prepared by walking". Over the centuries, women have searched and found a way to Freemasonry.

300 years ago, when modern freemasonry was established in London in 1717 the brethren made a constitution which clarified indisputably that only men of good honour can become Freemasons: no slaves, no criminals and no women. This constitution is called the basic principles and was written by James Anderson and published in 1723.

Despite this exclusion (or maybe because of it) stories and theatres in the 18th century have been full of women who tried to smuggle themselves in Lodges because of their female curiosity.

But there are also stories of ladies who have been initiated in lodges. These are surely, individual cases and these are mostly placed in the time when modern freemasonry already arose but the excluding constitution (the basic principles) was still not published. Most of these stories are controversial. Early in the 19th century brethren discussed and struggled very passionately if a special individual case has taken place or not. This case is Elisabeth Leger Aldworth and the indices cannot be ignored. "Elisabeth Leger Aldworth 1693-1773, initiated in Freemasonry in 1712 in Lodge no 44 Donerale Court": this is written on her gravestone!

In several old documents (long before the basic principles excluded women from freemasonry) are hints that it was not completely unlikely to initiate women into freemasonry.

One of the oldest documents is the Regius-Manuscript. It is the oldest known arrangement from a mason guild dated on 1390 (as per new research 1425). It was written in a poem form, so it is also called regius-poem:

"In that honest craft to be perfect; And shall each one teach the other, And love together as sister and brother". ... Why such texts if women didn't play any role?

Or look at York Manuscript No. 4 of 1693, what is in the archive of the Grand Lodge of York: „The one of the elders taking the Booke and that hee or shee that is to be made mason shall lay their hands thereon and the charge shall bee given“

Brothers fervently discussed whether this "she" really means "she" or whether it was a typo ...

After freemasonry came from England and was fanned out all over the continent, in France so called "Adoption Lodges" - special Lodges for women - were established. These were similar to freemason lodges, but differed in rituals, and they were still not self-determined... But they have been very popular - especially in Paris where many well-educated ladies (scientists, artists, etc.) were streaming from the Paris salons into these lodges. Josephine, the wife of Napoleon, was member in one of these lodges and after the French Revolution she revived them again. Among the early female Freemasons such lodges inspired the desire to participate more and more.

In the end of the 19th century Marie Deraismes was officially initiated into a traditional men's lodge named Libres Pensier. It came to discrepancies among the Brethren and the lodge that initiated her was excluded from the Brethren's connections.

So, Marie Deraismes founded with Georg Martin the first mixed order "Droit Humain". This was the first freemasonry lodge for men and women that used the traditional male rituals. Everywhere in Europe mixed lodges were established and branched out in the 20th century.

After the 2nd world war, female lodges spread across Europe.

The French Brethren released their sister-lodges, gave them their rituals and let them work as per their own knowledge and conscience.

In Germany in 1949 some Brethren founded a new freemasonry working circle for women in Berlin. It was 30 years under the protection of the Brethren and different from the procedure in France the German Brethren tried to keep their secrets and keep the women away from the “true freemasonry”. They gave them a special ritual what was different from their own, and they determined their sister’s Freemason life.

After 30 years 2 more circles were founded and the sisters established in the early 1980ies their first umbrella organization. This became some years later the Grand Female Lodge of Germany. From this point on the female freemasonry in Germany is growing and developing – and here we are. Today we have nearly 30 female Lodges in Germany with approximately 650 sisters. 😊