

## CATS AND CITIES

### „Hygienic Helpers“: Cats in the Cities of the „Third Reich“

**Dr. Maren Möhring**

University of Cologne, Germany

maren.moehring@uni-koeln.de

Cats occupy a highly ambivalent place in the history of the relations between men and animals. In modern times, they have - besides dogs - become the most popular pets, but at the same time they have never been fully domesticated, last but not least because there has never been a complete mastery over the cats' breeding. „More than any other animal, cats are delicately balanced between wildness and domesticity“<sup>1</sup>, and it is this ambiguity around which the perceptions of cats revolve. In my paper, I want to discuss the role ascribed to cats within National Socialist ideology, which is in itself a highly heterogeneous conglomerate. My paper consists of two parts: First, I will shortly outline the importance of animals and animal protection for National Socialist politics and then discuss the German discourse on cats in the 1930ies and early 1940ies. Besides the cat's hygienic function that was foregrounded in the Nazi literature on cats, the idea of the pet as an „animal comrade“ also played an important role. In the second part of my paper I will demonstrate the significance of pet-keeping, of „animal-comradeship“, in the Third Reich by discussing the National Socialist prohibition of pet-keeping in Jewish households.

On November 24, 1933, the National Socialist government passed a new, far-reaching law on animal protection. It followed a law on the slaughtering of animals, issued in March 1933, prohibiting the killing of unanaesthetised animals, thus attacking kosher slaughter.<sup>2</sup> Both laws and the ones to follow within the next few years fulfilled many of the demands of the societies for the prevention of cruelty to animals. Animal experimentation was restricted, old and sick animals were to be killed „mercifully“ and anyone who tortured or mishandled animals had to fear severe penalties. The Nazis considered their detailed law on animal protection as an „indicator for the level of culture of a people (Volk)“<sup>3</sup>. In a comment on the new law it says: „the German people has from time immemorial had a great love for animals and was always aware of

---

<sup>1</sup> Boria Sax: *Animals in the Third Reich. Pets, Scapegoats, and the Holocaust* (New York/London 2000), p. 160.

<sup>2</sup> For years, animal protectors had fought for the prohibition of kosher slaughter: „Weil alle Parteien mehr oder weniger vom Juden beeinflusst waren, wagte z.B. niemand, der übelsten Tierquälerei, dem Schächten, Einhalt zu gebieten“ (P. M.: *Vom Recht des Tieres*, in *Deutsche Katzenzucht und Katzenhaltung*, Nr. 1 (January 1941), pp. 3-4, here: p. 3).

its great ethical obligation to them“.<sup>4</sup> Within National Socialist ideology, love for animals was a “characteristic of the nordic man” and Germany became the leading nation in respect to animal protection.<sup>5</sup>

Though the National Socialist laws on animal protection were indeed far-reaching and – as Boria Sax notes in his book on *Animals in the Third Reich* – „notable for their detail, as well as for their medical and legal sophistication“<sup>6</sup>, one exception, however, existed, and this was the treatment of cats. In the decree on the protection of nature (Naturschutzverordnung), issued in March 1936, it says that cats, found outside of their habitat, were considered poaching and could be caught (§ 16). They had to be treated ‘humanely’, their owner had to be informed, but – in case their owner did not show up in time or wasn’t found out – they were to be killed.<sup>7</sup> This law was much disputed among animal protectors and the cats’ exception from effective legal protection was often criticised. Friedrich Schweingart, a renowned animal psychologist and researcher on cats, wrote in his book *Vom Recht der Katze* (On the Right(s) of the Cat) in 1937, that cats lived under exceptional circumstances, in a „Ausnahmezustand“ (= a state of emergency), hated by the majority of the population and not sufficiently protected by the law. Schweingart points out that, in sharp contrast to the „otherwise highly developed animal protection“ in Germany, „in no other country of culture“ cats were „so meanly mishandled and persecuted“.<sup>8</sup> Paul Eipper, author of many popular books on pet-keeping, was of the same opinion: „There are, especially in Germany, many cat haters“.<sup>9</sup>

Trying to change the public opinion on cats, Schweingart, Eipper and with them the societies for the prevention of cruelty to cats took much effort to construct an image of the cat as an useful and at the same time kind and charming animal.<sup>10</sup> According to them, the major enemy of the cat were the protectors of (singing) birds who persecuted not only stray cats, but also house cats roaming about the cities. Since the cat activists could not deny that cats killed birds

---

<sup>3</sup> „Gradmesser für die Kulturstufe des Volkes“ (Giese, Dr. med. vet./Kahler, Dr. jur.: Das deutsche Tierschutzrecht. Bestimmungen zum Schutze der Tiere. Erläutert nach amtlichen Unterlagen, 3<sup>rd</sup>, revised edn. (Berlin 1944), p. 9).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>5</sup> „ein Charakterzug des nordischen Menschen“ (Tierhalter, beweist eure Tierliebe! In: *Unsere Katze* 14/2 (February 1940), p. 9).

<sup>6</sup> Sax, *Animals*, p. 110.

<sup>7</sup> In the year 1936/7 ca. 364 000 poaching cats were shot. Cf. Erna Gläser: Die Regelung der Hauskatzenfrage durch züchterische Maßnahmen. In: *Deutsche Katzenzucht und Katzenhaltung*, Nr. 4 (April 1940), p. 8.

<sup>8</sup> Friedrich Schweingart: *Vom Recht der Katze*. Mit Richtlinien für die Katzenhaltung, (Leipzig 1937), p. 15.

<sup>9</sup> Paul Eipper: *Das Haustierbuch*. Vom Wesen, der Schönheit und dem Nutzen unserer Tier-Kameraden (Berlin 1938), p. 70.

<sup>10</sup> The cat protectors demanded, above all, the following: „Anerkennung der Gleichberechtigung der Katze im Tierreich – Anerkennung und Auswertung ihres volkswirtschaftlichen Wertes als Schädlingsvertilger, wie ihres ethischen Wertes als Heimtier, Forderung eines ausreichenden gesetzlichen Schutzes, Hebung ihres Wertes und ihres Ansehens durch geeignete Zuchtwahl“ (Rudolf Keinert: Reichsfachgruppe Katzenzüchter und ihre neue Aufgaben. In: *Deutsche Katzenzucht und Katzenhaltung*, Jg. 1939, Nr. 11 (Nov. 1939), pp. 1-3, here: p. 1).

from time to time<sup>11</sup>, they balanced this disadvantage against the extreme utility of cats as hunters of mice and rats. Killing these parasites, cats became – in the words of Ferdinand Hueppe, a famous hygienist – „hygienic helpers“.<sup>12</sup> According to Hueppe, in crowded cities, but also in the countryside, cats were absolutely necessary in hygienic and economic respects, as they protected mankind from severe diseases and food from destruction by mice and rats. Cats were “hygienic helpers” in a double sense: they were considered as extremely clean animals and praised as “sanitary police(men)”<sup>13</sup>. In a much-quoted statement, Hueppe underlines the importance of cats: „If we had no cats in Germany, we would have to introduce them immediately“.<sup>14</sup> By systematic breeding cats were to be transformed into „Leistungstiere“<sup>15</sup>, i.e. highly efficient animals in regard to their so-called „rat fitness“ („Rattentüchtigkeit“).<sup>16</sup> To achieve this, the cat population had to be controlled. Only one or two kittens of a brood should grow up, the others were to be killed „humanely“.<sup>17</sup> By this means, so-called „poaching vermin cats“ („verwilderte Schädlingkatzen“<sup>18</sup>) were to be eliminated.

In their attempt to reevaluate the cat, the cat protectors followed the biopolitical argument of population control and selection of ‚superior‘ individuals. They tried to found their arguments on the hegemonic discourses on hygiene and on the health as well as the economic wealth of the German people. Whereas the hygienic argument in favour of cats was brought forth in many countries<sup>19</sup>, in Germany the hygienic discourse took on an extremely aggressive tone, focussing on the elimination of all so-called parasites. Cats were considered an „ever ready weapon“<sup>20</sup>, possessing a „fierce impulse to annihilate“ those parasites.<sup>21</sup> In praising cats as important agents in the omnipresent war against the enemies of the German *Volk*<sup>22</sup>, the cat activists participated in this eliminatory hygienic discourse.

---

<sup>11</sup> „Wir sind sachlich genug eingestellt, um zuzugeben, dass streunende Katzen eine Gefahr für die Vogelwelt sind. Aber man braucht sie deshalb nicht gleich totzuschlagen!“ (Der Tierfreund. Mitteilungen des Württembergischen, Crimmitschauer u. Freiburger Tierschutzvereins 59/1 (January 1933), p. 25).

<sup>12</sup> Ferdinand Hueppe in 1931, cit. in: Schweingart, Vom Recht, p. 8, and Eipper, Haustierbuch, p. 70.

<sup>13</sup> Katzen als Gesundheitspolizisten. In: Unsere Katze 13/4 (April 1939), p. 60. Cf. also Hans Walter Schmidt: Die Katze – ein Plus im Wirtschaftsleben. In: Unsere Katze 14/2 (February 1940), p. 10.

<sup>14</sup> „Hätten wir in Deutschland noch keine Katzen, so müssten wir sie schleunigst einführen“ (Ferdinand Hueppe in 1931, cit. in: Schweingart, Vom Recht, p. 8; Eipper, Haustierbuch, p. 70; Hans Walter Schmid: Katze und Volksgesundheit. In: Deutsche Katzenzucht und Katzenhaltung (July 1941), pp. 3-4, here: p. 3.

<sup>15</sup> Eipper, Haustierbuch, p. 71.

<sup>16</sup> So-called „Rattenkatzenstationen“ were to be installed (cf. Die deutsche Katzenzucht V/2 (February 1938), p. 17).

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Schweingart, Vom Recht, p. 29.

<sup>18</sup> Heinrich: Katzensteuern? In: Unsere Katze 15/11 (November 1941), p. 88.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Commission Générale de Propagande de l’Office Nationale d’Hygiène Sociale (ed.) : Les rats et le chat ratier, Paris 1934.

<sup>20</sup> „stets bereite Waffe“ (Hans Walter Schmid: Katze und Volksgesundheit. In: Deutsche Katzenzucht und Katzenhaltung (July 1941), pp. 3-4, here: p. 4).

<sup>21</sup> „Es ist hochinteressant, welcher grimmige Vernichtungsdrang die Katze beseelt gegenüber den Nagern“ (Von Eigenarten der Katze. In: Das deutsche Katzenwesen (April 1938), pp. 1-2, here: p. 1).

<sup>22</sup> „Das deutsche Volk steht im Kampfe um seine Existenz, um seine Zukunft, um sein Leben. Der Schutz unserer Nahrungs- und Futtermittel (...) ist oberstes Gebot. Hier muß die Katze als biologischer Gegner bewußter als bisher

Besides the cats' revaluation as „hygienic helpers“, cats were also to become true companion animals. Stressing their „enormous significance as ethical-cultural means for the formation of *Gemüt* and mind“, Schweingart opposes all the traditional prejudices against cats (being false, faithless or ill-bred).<sup>23</sup> Instead, he underlines their loyalty to their owner and the female cat's distinct mother-love that makes her an efficient wet-nurse even for other species.<sup>24</sup> Schweingart tries to convince his readers that cats are as lovable as dogs which had a much better standing in German society.

Whereas since the 1970ies animals kept primarily for social or emotional reasons are called „companion animals“ in English<sup>25</sup>, in Nazi Germany another term was used for animals living in the household or the farmyard, i.e. „animal comrade“. Comrade, much more than friend or companion, integrated the animal into the *Volksgemeinschaft* – last but not least through the military connotations of „comrade“ (in arms). By stressing the common origin of man and animal, thus following Darwin, and by conceptualising human society as biologically and racially constructed, the traditional (Christian) boundaries between man and animal were blurred. In consequence, the old „master-and-slave point of view“ on animals was to be left behind.<sup>26</sup> The Nazi literature on animals and animal protection generally claims that the National Socialist attitude towards animals – „comradeship“ - was a new form of human-animal relationship, germane to the ‘Germanic race’.

Instead of the boundary between animals and human beings, the most significant differentiation, concerning both animals and men, was the dichotomy between the wild and the domestic. In Nazi ideology the tame animal was considered to be unnatural, and domestication was seen as a process of decline. Analogous to the domesticated animal, the city dweller in general was regarded as unnatural and effeminate, his natural instincts ruined. Urbanisation and domestication had affected both animal and man. Thus, the line was not drawn between the species, but between the domesticated, especially those living in the cities, and the wild predator – of whom the wolf was the best-loved in Nazi ideology. The National Socialist attitude towards companion animals was thus an ambiguous one, the revolt against bourgeois culture was also

---

und vor allen Dingen planmäßig eingesetzt werden“ (Rudolf Keinert: Reichsfachgruppe Katzensüchter und ihre neuen Aufgaben. In: Deutsche Katzensüchter und Katzenhaltung (November 1939), pp. 1-3, here: p. 2). Cf. also Erna Gläser: Die Katze als Verhüterin von Krankheiten. In: Die deutsche Katzensüchter (April 1938), pp. 43-44.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Schweingart, Vom Recht, p. 14. See also Fritz Herrigel: Klugheit einer Katze. In: Der Tierfreund 59/4 (July 1933), pp. 51-52, here: p. 51.

<sup>24</sup> Schweingart, Vom Recht, p. 14. See also Eipper, Haustierrbuch, p. 72.

<sup>25</sup> This term was first used in veterinary science and animal psychology (cf. Donna Haraway: The Companion Species Manifesto. Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness (Chicago 2003), p. 12).

<sup>26</sup> In his book *Die wundersame Freundschaft. Das Buch von Tier und Mensch* (Leipzig 1941, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn.) Ehm Welk points out that the animal will feel this new comradeship and will now happily serve mankind (p. 23). Already in 1929 Heinz Anders had pleaded for treating animals like „comrades“ (Heinz Anders: Mensch und Tier (Berlin 1929), p.4-5).

directed against pets.<sup>27</sup> The activists engaged in the protection of cats therefore not only tried to present the cat as a faithful and trainable comrade, but also stressed the cat's resistance to domestication. The cat was assigned a „wonderfully strong and wild personality“ and a solitary life led by its own rules.<sup>28</sup> Some authors describe cats as „Herrentiere“ (master animals), not willing to show obedience to anyone.<sup>29</sup> Whereas the aspect of pride and solitude is a traditional characteristic ascribed to cats, the cat activists in Nazi Germany tried something else: they attempted to masculinise the cat. Schweingart points out that it was a „misfortune“ that the cat „who strikes us as masculine in so many respects“ had been attached the female article in German („die“ Katze).<sup>30</sup> Rehabilitation of the cat meant masculinisation. Even more problematic than the ‚wrong‘ gender attributed to the cat was its (supposed) origin in the orient. For the Nazi poet Will Vesper, for example, cats were not only easterners, but also semitic; they did not belong to the „Germanic races“ like dogs did.<sup>31</sup> The cat activists played down this aspect or tried to prolong the exotic attraction of the cat.

The tradition of highly ambiguous attitudes towards the cat was carried on in the Third Reich, but it was distinctively reformulated in racial categories and in terms of original wildness. Accordingly changes occurred in the way cat activists tried to reevaluate the cat. They participated not only in the hygienic discourses but also in the new cult of the wild. At the same time they propagated the idea of a novel comradeship between animal and man. Excluded from this community of German nationals („Volksgenossen“), consisting of „racially superior“ human beings and animals, were the Jews – and their pets.

According to antisemitic propaganda, Jews were considered animal torturers, only interested in exploiting animals and killing them brutally, without anaesthetisation.<sup>32</sup> In a great deal of literature on animal protection since the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century this antisemitic stereotype can be found. In the beginning, I mentioned the (indirect) prohibition of kosher slaughter, pronounced as early as March 1933, only a few weeks after Hitler had come to power. In the following, I want to concentrate on another Nazi measure against the Jews: the prohibition of pet-keeping in Jewish households. This decree, pronounced in May 1942 and prohibiting the

---

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Boria Sax: What is a „Jewish Dog“? Konrad Lorenz and the Cult of Wildness. In: *Society and Animals* 5/1 (1997), pp. 3-21.

<sup>28</sup> Paul Eipper writes about his tomcat Blauli: „Er wuchs zu einer herrlich starken u. wilden Persönlichkeit heran. Furcht kennt er nicht, aber er weiß auch nichts von Rücksichtnahme dem Menschen gegenüber. Er formt sein Leben nach eigenen Gesetzen“ (Eipper, *Haustierbuch*, p. 80).

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Hans Walter Schmidt: Das Herrentier der Katze. In: *Unsere Katze* 14/7 (July 1940), pp. 52-53.

<sup>30</sup> Schweingart, *Vom Recht*, p. 32.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Gerd Koenen: *Vesper, Ensslin, Baader. Urszenen des deutschen Terrorismus* (Köln 2003), p. 64.

<sup>32</sup> Jews were considered the „most wicked animal torturers“ (P.M., *Vom Recht*, p. 4).

ownership of dogs, cats, and birds<sup>33</sup>, had precedents: Gypsies were forbidden to own dogs in order to keep them from hunting (in Bavaria a corresponding law had been issued in 1926). These regulations can be interpreted as an attempt to restrict the „contact of despised groups of people with animals“.<sup>34</sup>

Victor Klemperer comments this prohibition as follows: “This is the sentence of death for Muschel [the Klemperers’ cat], who has lived with us for more than eleven years and to whom Eva [Victor Klemperer’s wife] is much attached. What a mean and crafty cruelty against these few [remaining] Jews.”<sup>35</sup> The Klemperers knew that they would not be allowed to dispose of their cat after receiving the order to deliver it. Though it was dangerous for them, they decided to go to a veterinary in time and have their cat euthanised to save it from being confiscated and killed anonymously – it was not allowed to give the pets to somebody else.<sup>36</sup> Victor Klemperer notes that it might seem ridiculous or even immoral to worry so much about their cat, considering all those suffering on behalf of their relatives’ deportation or death. Their cat, however, had become a very important ‘family member’ in times of Nazi persecution. Becoming more and more isolated from society and let down by many of his former friends, Victor Klemperer concentrates on his nuclear family, i.e. his wife Eva – and Muschel, their cat. In August 1937 he notes in his diary: “There is, as I have often stated, not much feeling for human beings left inside of me. Eva – and then (already) comes tomcat Mujel [sic].”<sup>37</sup>

Many documents of the Nazi period demonstrate how precious contact with animals became for many of those persecuted by the Nazis. Friendship with an animal could reaffirm the humanity of the otherwise socially isolated.<sup>38</sup> (Anne Frank, e.g., writes about the pleasure she took in playing with a cat.<sup>39</sup>). The Klemperers did not leave Muschel behind when they had to leave their house and move into a so-called “Judenhaus” (“Jews’ House”) in May 1940 where they had only very little space for themselves. Pet-keeping was one of the last aspects of

---

<sup>33</sup> Anordnung über das Halten von Haustieren (Jüdisches Nachrichtenblatt vom 15.5.1942): Juden wird das Halten von Haustieren (Hunden, Katzen, Vögeln usw.) verboten (cf. Bruno Blau: Das Ausnahmerecht für die Juden in Deutschland 1933-1945 (Düsseldorf 1954), 2<sup>nd</sup> edn., Nr. 380, p. 108).

<sup>34</sup> Sax, *Animals*, p. 119.

<sup>35</sup> „Das ist das Todesurteil für Muschel, den wir über elf Jahre gehabt und an dem Eva sehr hängt. (...) Welch eine niedrige und abgefeimte Grausamkeit gegen die paar Juden” (Victor Klemperer: *Tagebücher 1942*, ed. Walter Nowojski, Berlin 1999, 15.5.42). Eight years before, Klemperer – as a “non-Aryan” – had been expelled from the society for the protection of cats: “Ich erhielt eine Zeitschrift mit Hakenkreuz: ‘Das deutsche Katzenwesen.’ Über seine Nützlichkeit ein Aufsatz des Reichsleiters im großen politischen Stil. Die Katzenvereine sind jetzt Reichsverband; Mitglied darf man als Arier sein. Ich zahle also nicht mehr meine monatliche Mark für den Pflegeverein hier.” (Klemperer, *Tagebücher 1933-34*, 30.10.34).

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.5.42.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.8.37: “Es ist überhaupt, wie ich ja schon oft konstatiert habe, nicht mehr viel Gefühl für die Menschen in mir übriggeblieben. Eva - und dann kommt schon der Kater Mujel”.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Sax, *Animals*, p. 119.

<sup>39</sup> Anne Frank: *Das Tagebuch der Anne Frank*, 12. Juni bis 1. August 1944. Mit e. Einf. V. Marie Baum, Gütersloh o.J., pp. 125 and 82.

'normal' life that was left. For them, having their cat meant not giving in: "We have often told ourselves: the raised tom cat's tail is our flag, we won't lower it, we keep our tails up, we pull the animal through, and on the day of victory Muschel gets 'cutlet from Kamm' (the best veal butcher here)". Klemperer notes that it makes him almost superstitious that the flag is now struck.<sup>40</sup>

Although again and again in the animal protectors' journals it is stressed that pets have a right to live („Lebensrecht“) even in times of war when the feeding is difficult, this right did not include the pets of Jews. Being a "hygienic helper" or a good "animal comrade" did not help the Klemperer's cat; it was a Jewish cat. Whereas Nazi ideology advocated an intimate bond between man and animal – especially in the cities where pet-keeping represented one of the few opportunities to keep in touch with nature –, Jews (and their pets) were excluded from interspecies (and human) comradeship. Confiscating the pets living in Jewish households was a means of further isolating the remaining Jews in Germany; it was a means of completing their exclusion from the *Volksgemeinschaft*. And getting rid of the pets was also a presupposition for the mass deportation of the Jews.

In Nazi ideology as well as in the political practice of the "Third Reich" the boundaries between man and animal were blurred. The right to live depended on a supposed 'racial superiority', no matter what species. On the one hand, the animal was anthropologised and assigned the status of a true "comrade"; on the other hand groups of human beings were bestialised and denied the right to live. Both processes, the revaluation of (certain) animals and the devaluation of (certain) human beings followed the same racist logic. That traditional conceptions of animal and man had changed, that values had turned upside down is stated by Klemperer when he notes in July 1940: "Nobody knows exactly what is permitted [for Jews], everywhere one feels threatened. Every animal has more freedom and is legally more protected."<sup>41</sup>

---

<sup>40</sup> "Wir haben uns so oft gesagt: Der erhobene Katerschwanz ist unsere Flagge, wir streichen sie nicht, wir behalten die Nasen hoch, wir bringen das Tier durch, und zum Siegesfest bekommt der Muschel 'Schnitzel von Kamm' (dem feinsten Kalbschlächter hier). Es macht mich beinahe abergläubisch, daß die Flagge nun niedergeht." (Klemperer, Tagebücher 1942, 15.5.1942).

<sup>41</sup> "Niemand weiß genau, was erlaubt ist, überall fühlt man sich bedroht. Jedes Tier ist freier und rechtlich gesicherter." (Klemperer, Tagebücher 1940-41, 6.7.40).