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Käthe Kruse, the famous dollmaker's connection with the Life Reform movement

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Abstract

Käthe Kruse, perhaps one of the world's most famous dollmakers and the visionary behind reform dolls, spent a brief period of her life in a commune at Monte Verità. The beginnings of her artistic development are also tied to this place. Although she was particularly repelled by the ideologies present there, she was deeply influenced by the residents' connection to nature. Her autobiographical book, *Das grosse Puppenspiel*, not only provides insight into the major milestones of her life and her creative work as a dollmaker but also offers further information about the Life Reform movements, particularly the commune at Monte Verità founded by Henry Ödönkoven. This is significant because, although Käthe Kruse could not fully align herself with the spirit of the commune's residents at Monte Verità and was unable to fully immerse herself in the reform movement, this place and this phase of her life can still be regarded as the cradle of her artistic maturation. For this study, we primarily used German-language literature as sources, in addition to the autobiographical book, which provided important information not only about the famous doll maker's work but also about the commune at Monte Verità. In addition, we mainly relied on the publications of András Németh, who is one of the most significant researchers of the life reform movements in Hungary.

Keywords: Life Reform movements; Monte Verità; Monte Verità commune; Käthe Kruse; Kruse dolls; doll history; toy dolls

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Introduction

Käthe Kruse, born Katharina Simon, was a 19-year-old actress in Germany, full of artistic ambitions. In 1902, at the age of 19, as a promising young talent on the path to international fame, she met Max Kruse, a successful Berlin-based sculptor, with whom she later lived in an extramarital relationship (A. –B. Wagner 2003).

Katharina was born in Breslau, also to parents in an illegitimate relationship. She grew up in modest circumstances, and her childhood cannot be considered idyllic (Kruse 1951). This is why her love for Kruse opened up new dimensions for her, introducing her to a completely new social environment. The artistic world, which

she may have already been somewhat familiar with as an actress, had a significant influence on her.

Kruse also introduced her to the life reform movements that emerged in the last third of the 19th century in Western Europe and North America in response to the social and health problems caused by industrialization and urbanization.

The emergence of Life Reform movements and their characteristics

Life reform is the term used for those modernization-critical movements characterized by a return to nature, naturalness, self-healing, and the search for lost wholeness (Németh 2013, 11–12). “The desire for naturalness, rooted in 18th-century social and cultural criticism and based on Rousseau’s ideas, re-emerged in the aspirations of the so-called life reform movements in the last decades of the 19th century, whose ideological foundations were laid by the work of Edward Carpenter, the English utopian philosopher, in his 1889 book *Civilisation: Its Cause and Cure*” (Kissné Zsámboki and Varga 2023, 280).

At the end of the 19th century, the desire of urban dwellers, uprooted from their natural surroundings, to reconnect with nature and return to natural living conditions became evident (Németh 2002). Those fleeing from the city to nature, through their return to a natural way of life, offered a critical response to the negative effects of an alienated society. Conscientious adults, seeking to provide their children with a better, healthier future, realized this by changing their lifestyles, eating habits, and environments through a return to nature.

The life reform movements encompass a wide range of reform efforts that sought remedies for the destructive and dehumanizing effects of civilization (Németh 2012). “The life reform movement primarily represents the diverse spectrum of reform efforts that raised the civilization-critical slogan ‘escape from the city’—encompassing the relationships between man and nature, man and work, man and God—through a complex set of movements, including garden city building, land reform, anti-alcoholism, vegetarianism, natural healing, and body culture movements” (Krabbe 2001, 25, cited in Németh 2005, 38).

The movements focused on closeness to nature were extremely diverse. Among their forms of expression were associations, press outlets, communes, health institutions, as well as reform shops and restaurants (Nagy and Németh 2017). This study focuses on a commune that was offering an alternative lifestyle as an escape from the impersonal world of modern industrial society.

The history of the formation of the Monte Verità Commune

The idea of communes has been present in the history of various cultures since ancient times. "The different utopian communities organized under this concept sought and presented an idyllic model of harmony in opposition to the majority society of their time" (Nagy and Németh 2017, 11). The commune movement also appeared within the life reform efforts of the 19th and 20th centuries, which are associated with three characteristic locations: naturopathic sanatoriums, artists' colonies, and agricultural communities (Nagy and Németh 2017).

One of the most famous examples of life reform movements tied to sanatoriums is the Monte Verità, or "Mountain of Truth," founded in 1900. Located on a mountaintop near Ascona, Switzerland, it welcomed life reformers from around the world (Németh 2014).

The sanatorium, following various naturopathic principles, broke away from the medical practices of the time (Nagy and Németh 2017, 13). The story of the commune's formation first leads us to the Gräser brothers, around whom a group of young Europeans gathered in Munich in October 1900. Arthur Gustav (Gusto) Gräser, a former art student in Vienna, was born in 1879 in Brassó to a scholarly family. He abandoned his high school studies to pursue painting and sculpture (Müller 1978). Later, after a visionary experience, he tore up his previous artworks, gave away his possessions, and embarked on a life of wandering.

Gräser was a striking figure, an unusual personality. He traveled the roads with a long staff, like a prophet. He rarely wore sandals, often walking barefoot even on rocky paths. Initially, he only rarely appeared at Monte Verità. After returning from his long wanderings, he retreated to a cave at Arcegno, living on wild fruits and hazelnuts, or on whatever he could beg from local farmers or receive in exchange for work (Voswinckel 2009).

His brother, Karl, served as a lieutenant in the Austrian army. While stationed in Transylvania, he founded the community called "Without Compulsion" in 1898. For a long time, he had been searching for a way to leave the military service, which he despised. He gave away most of his inheritance, and once he was living at Monte Verità, he also avoided contact with money. They were later joined by a couple: Henri Oedenkoven, the son of a wealthy industrialist from Antwerp, and Ida Hoffmann, a pianist and music teacher of Transylvanian descent, who had met and fallen in love at an Austrian naturopathic institute (Voswinckel 2009). Among the founders, there was also Lotte Hattemer, the daughter of a Berlin mayor, and Ida Hoffmann's melancholic sister, Jenny. In 1900, they all wandered barefoot across the Alps together and eventually settled near Lake Maggiore (Katz 2010).

„As the founder, Ida Hoffmann, put it: Monte Verità cannot be considered merely a sanatorium based on naturopathic principles; it is much more than that, a school for higher living, a place that provides the residents with a development that leads them to experience previously unknown worlds and expanded states of consciousness. The settlement and its surroundings soon became the home of numerous eccentrics of the time, who later became famous or infamous, and a pilgrimage

site for the era's eccentric artists, life reformers, and apostles of lifestyle change" (Németh 2014, 44–45).

Hattermer soon sought her own path in complete solitude, ultimately poisoning herself. Her suicide shook Ascona (Voswinckel 2009). People came to Monte Verità from all over Europe, drawn to the place like a magnet, to exchange ideas about women's rights, free love, open marriage, and their surprising views on internationalism. Around 1904, Lenin and Bebel, Kropotkin and Ellen Key, Erich Mühsam and Johannes Nohl, as well as Katharina Simon, also known as Käthe Kruse, visited Monte Verità (Katz 2010).

Life in the Monte Verità Commune

This place was a gathering of alternative thinkers, people who radically changed their way of life. For the members of the colony, the day started at eight o'clock in the morning with breakfast. The menu, hanging on the wall, listed the following: fruit, nuts, bran-raisin bread, coconut fat, and milk. Lunch consisted of vegetables cooked in their own steam, and for dinner, there was once again bread, fruit, and plenty of nuts. The days ended with evenings of reading and music. During the rest of the day, between meals, the residents danced, exercised, took air baths, and gardened (Katz 2010).

They did not consume meat, alcohol, nor did they smoke (Voswinckel 2009). Their leisure activities were also greatly transformed, and they dressed in a way that did not restrict their free movement. "This new lifestyle also required new clothing—down with restrictive garments, down with corsets and suits, and down with shoes—they went barefoot or wore handmade sandals, [...]" (Voswinckel 2009, 8–9). The new order of "vegetabilism" extended to clothing as well. At Monte Verità, the clothing of the commune members was free of luxury and characterized by charming simplicity and neatness. The dominant colors were mostly white, ecru, gray, or beige. The women wore reform dresses, while the men mostly wore sportswear, such as shorts and light shirts. They typically walked barefoot or wore open sandals, and only wore closed sandals in bad weather. They went with their heads uncovered, only wearing straw or linen hats in strong sunlight or wind (Katz 2010).

Those arriving at Monte Verità had to take an aptitude test to prove they were capable of working and demonstrate that their enthusiasm for the movement was genuine. The press paid special attention to Monte Verità, regularly reporting on the colony established there. Monte Verità attracted seekers from all over Europe (Katz 2010). It was a place of great debates and exchanges of ideas. One could encounter a colorful panoply of women and men seeking healing, hypocrites, ascetics, political revolutionaries, swindlers, and visionaries. Meanwhile, the small town of Ascona watched this peculiar bustle with curiosity. The locals were mostly interested in the outward appearances. While the residents of Ascona cared little for the inhabitants of Monte Verità, tourists were much more fascinated by those living in the colony. The thrilling stories about naked vegetarians running around were sensational. Groups of curious onlookers flocked to the area. Although the

residents were separated from the outside world by a fence, tourists could peek through a gap for a fee and catch a glimpse of the naked bodies. Surviving post-cards also depict the colony's residents, either nude or dressed in light clothing (Katz 2010).

Käthe Kruse's connection to the Life Reform movement

For a brief period in her life, Käthe Kruse lived in a commune, leaving behind the unhealthy environment of Berlin. By examining this phase of her life, we can gain further insights into the Monte Verità commune, founded by Henri Oedenkoven (Pásztor 2015).

Käthe and Max Kruse's connection to Monte Verità

The relationship between Käthe Kruse (Katharina Simon) and Max Kruse was quite complicated. Max taught sculpture in the studio founded by Arthur Lewin Funke in 1901 in Berlin. However, he didn't spend all his time there, as he often stayed with his previous wife and their children. Kruse found this completely natural and felt no guilt towards Katharina. From the autobiographical writings of Käthe, who later became a world-famous dollmaker, one would not infer a story of a happy love. The Berlin sculptor had no intention of keeping them by his side, which likely had several reasons, primarily because he was married to another woman.

Following Kruse's advice, Katharina set off with her children for Ascona, where she essentially lived her days in complete emotional oppression. They arrived at Monte Verità on November 2nd, moving into a poor, unheated dwelling. Less than six months later, Käthe wrote in a letter about how much she missed Max, feeling a strong longing for him. Katharina Simon's situation at Monte Verità seems to reflect Ida Hoffmann's article "How Can We Women Achieve Harmonious and Healthy Living Conditions?" In the article, Ida Hoffmann raised her voice against the subjugation of women, demanding equality for them. She found it intolerable that women were treated as the playthings of men and family, were treated like minors, and had no right to self-determination, with their rights to divorce being limited (Voswinckel 2009). Käthe Simon experienced all of this through her own life. The children struggled with this situation. Their child, Mimerle, became withdrawn and very shy, suffering terribly from the absence of her father.

Kruse visited his family at Monte Verità in February 1905. In the photos taken at that time, the Berlin sculptor is seen in unusually casual clothing. He felt that he was surrounded by like-minded people there. He felt a sense of relief, as Henri Oedenkoven and Ida Hoffmann were also living together without being married. This form of cohabitation, known at the time as a "conscience marriage," was popular with many. At Max's request, Käthe wore reform dresses and loved nature, which stimulated and refreshed her. Both of them embraced the goals of the life reform movement (Katz 2010).

Kruse mostly visited them only at Christmas. When they settled at Monte Verità, their younger child was just two months old. In the Kruse couple's relationship, there was a clear dynamic of male dominance and the woman's tendency toward submission. There is no doubt that Kruse was the dominant figure between the two. His will always prevailed, and he made all the decisions. "For Kruse, only his own principles and his educational goals mattered, nothing else. How his partner felt was never of any concern to him" (Katz 2010, 176). Käthe was fully aware of all this, "and she increasingly felt the pressure weighing down on her. Max did not live with her because she still wasn't the woman he desired for himself" (Katz 2010, 176).

Like a true subordinate, Käthe constantly sought to please him and idolized Kruse. Despite her dependence, Katharina was greatly influenced by the father of her children as an artist, as her work as a dollmaker began with his encouragement.

Katharina had high hopes for Monte Verità, but she was disappointed. The new life did not bring a favorable turn to their situation. The puritan lifestyle and oppressive poverty were not the result of a voluntary or conviction-based decision but rather of financial necessity. For her, the greatest frustration was Kruse remaining in Berlin and the vast geographical distance between them. This was certainly not part of their original agreement. His absence was an almost unbearable burden for her. However, her loyalty remained unwavering, and she was deeply in love with the father of her children. In this new situation, what Ida Hoffmann envisioned about the new relationship between the sexes did not come to pass. Hoffmann saw love as the union between two beings, deeming both a religious blessing and a state-sanctioned act unnecessary for it. She called on men and women to move beyond these and enter into a "conscience marriage" in both physical and moral terms. Such a marriage has no chains, is not dependent on external considerations, is born of free desires, and just as freely, it ends when those desires cease (Katz 2010).

Despite their difficult circumstances, the photos taken by Käthe give the impression that their days were filled with the utmost happiness. There was no reason for concern. Everything seemed idyllic. The images of sun-tanned, naked children revealed nothing of the bitter reality. These photos could always reassure Kruse, who remained in Berlin. Everything appeared to be going well: the children were outdoors all day in the fresh air, growing up healthy. Käthe always took great care to ensure that the father could follow the children's development through the photos. But these pictures were well-staged and carefully constructed. Katharina had a good eye for this and always captured the perfect moment (Katz 2010). Through these photos, she wanted to document that the financial support from Kruse was being put to good use. She was going above and beyond her strength. In fact, she was completely dependent on her partner. This strong need to meet his expectations had both financial and emotional reasons. An ambivalent situation arose. Her life became increasingly difficult due to hopelessness and loneliness. As Katharina noticed the disintegration of her personality, she began writing, which became an excellent outlet for her in this situation. It eased her anxieties and relieved her

tensions. It was a form of emotional therapy for her. During this time, she wrote her plays *The Early Days of Our Meeting*, *My Mother's Book*, and *The Seduction*. All three of these works were autobiographical. Katharina Simon did not give up; she expressed her tormented life through activity. She also began learning Italian and then started painting (Katz 2010).

The Kruse dolls

In 1905, the Kruse couple's child, Mimerle, asked her father, who was living in Berlin, for the following Christmas gift, which her mother conveyed in a letter: "[...] I don't want a doll, but a child, like the one Mary has or like the one you have" (Kruse 1951, 66). The father, of course, couldn't find such a doll anywhere. He found the porcelain dolls sold in stores to be awful, cold, and stiff—incapable of evoking any maternal feelings. The father quickly replied: "Make a doll for yourselves! You couldn't ask for a better opportunity to develop your artistic skills" (Kruse 1951, 66). The fact that Max Kruse, a follower of the life reform movement, couldn't find a suitable doll for his daughter is evidence that his taste was influenced by the movement. However, the fact that he eventually asked his children's mother, Katharina, to make the doll should be seen as a mere coincidence. Käthe Simon wasn't lifted out of obscurity and abandonment by the life reform movement. She also needed a bit of luck. To prove this, we must explore the connection between Monte Verità and Käthe Kruse.

In her memoirs, Käthe Kruse describes her first doll as very primitive. She filled the middle of a piece of cloth with warm sand, tied the corners to form the doll's arms and legs, and tied a potato into the lengthwise part of the cloth to create the head. The eyes, mouth, and nostrils were made from burnt matchsticks. Mimerle was indescribably happy. Käthe Kruse immediately recognized what her daughter loved so much about this very simple doll. Mimerle sat for hours in her little chair, rocking the heavy little sandbag, humming all the children's songs to it. It was at this moment that the little mother, cradling and caring for her child with loving concern, was truly born (Pásztor 2015). Käthe Kruse went on to make increasingly perfect and detailed dolls for her children, and she was filled with happiness at seeing how they loved the dolls as if they were real. Their enthusiasm, along with Max Kruse's constant encouragement and support, propelled her further along the path of artistic development (Kruse 1951).

Word of her dolls spread quickly, and the "Spielzeug aus eigener Hand" (Handmade Toys) exhibition held at the Hermann Tietz department store in Berlin further boosted her popularity. The sudden fame was both joyful, comical, and frightening for her. Suddenly, the whole world wanted her dolls. Wealthy mothers did not hesitate to visit her at her home to place their orders. But business figures also began to appear. First, the doll traders found Käthe, and soon after, the doll manufacturers followed. Everyone wanted to see who was making these dolls and how, as the world became abuzz with them. They wanted to discover the secret of her success.

They couldn't understand how these dolls, without wigs, sleeping eyes, or the ability to move their heads or hands, could become so popular.

After their initial shock, the doll manufacturers, as well as the small and large retailers, could have returned home, but they all stayed. Fear of competition kept them there. Each of them was afraid that someone would include these dolls in their product range, putting the others at a disadvantage. Soon, they came forward with various suggestions about what and how to modify the dolls to produce them as cheaply as possible (Pásztor 2015).

However, Käthe Kruse never prioritized better business opportunities. She always preserved the handcrafted nature of her work because she believed that the hand is guided by the heart, and only through handcraft can a product speak to the heart (Kruse 1951). Her success may have stemmed from the tenderness that was missing in most simplified, rigid forms of playthings (Técsabó 2011). A doll must be lovable, something that can be caressed and cuddled. It should be something we can snuggle up to and take care of. You cannot love someone or something without wanting to hug or at least touch them (Kruse 1951).

Käthe Kruse's success was undoubtedly due to the tenderness and softness of her dolls, the absence of which caused the unpopularity of the rigid reform toys. Despite their simple, natural materials, the handmade reform dolls became luxury items and found their way into the children's rooms of upper-class families. Their value endures to this day, and they inspired, among other things, the Waldorf dolls that are part of the Waldorf pedagogy, which emerged during the third phase of reform education and is still present worldwide (Técsabó 2011).

One might think, with good reason, that Rudolf Steiner also visited Monte Verità and was directly influenced by the ideologies rooted there. Surprisingly, however, Steiner never visited the site. However, in 1911, he did attend a lecture in Locarno (*Christus – Impuls im historischen Werdegang*), which was attended by many theosophists from Monte Verità (Voswinckel 2009). At the core of Steiner's educational philosophy is the development of creative imagination, and the immense popularity of Käthe Kruse's dolls can perhaps be explained by the fact that these soft toys stimulated children's imagination, making them among the most beloved playthings.

Conclusion

From the very beginning of the history of the Kruse dolls, Max Kruse was there behind Käthe as her moral supporter. He essentially took charge of the doll-making endeavor and continuously encouraged his partner, Katharina, whom he finally married legally in 1909. After this, their relationship deepened, and it can be said that the Kruse dolls brought the family together. Käthe Kruse, formerly Katharina Simon, who could not fully align with the spirit of the Monte Verità commune and did not completely immerse herself in the reform movement, nevertheless began her artistic career from there. Kruse created dolls, which made her world-famous, that were handcrafted from natural materials and radiated human warmth and emotion,

standing in contrast to the industrial, machine-made toys. In this way, she aligned with the ideology of Monte Verità, which promoted a search for simplicity and naturalness in opposition to modernity.

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