

# A woman ahead of her times

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# A woman ahead of her times

Emilie Kempin-Spyri battled against all the odds to become the first woman to gain a law degree in Switzerland in 1887 - and later founded a law school in New York.

But circumstances and the prejudices of the time meant that she could never quite fulfill her dream of a glittering law career. The niece of Heidi author Johanna Spyri died broken and alone in a Basel mental asylum.

Her Alma Mater, Zurich University, recently unveiled a monument in her honour: a huge blue chaise longue designed by Swiss artist Pipilotti Rist. But until recently Kempin-Spyri's story lay forgotten, and for some her rehabilitation is long overdue.

She was born into a wealthy family in 1853 but married against her father's wishes. Her husband, a rebellious curate, later lost his position. Kempin-Spyri, then 32 and with a young family, was faced with having to earn a living. She realised that a woman of the time with a family of three children did not have any options for earning money for the whole family. Kempin-Spyri opted to study law at Zurich University, at the time one of the most progressive universities towards women. She went on to obtain a PhD - the first Swiss woman to do so in law and one of the first in Europe. But then the problems started.

Her application to be admitted to the Swiss bar was denied on the grounds that she did not have active citizenship, at that time only granted to men. And the seemingly liberal university balked at allowing her to teach its mostly male students.

Kempin-Spyri decided to emigrate with her family to New York, where there were also hindrances for women entering universities, but also more possibilities. A number of US law schools already admitted women and several female lawyers were already practising.

However, Kempin-Spyri's appeal to join the city's bar was rejected because she was a foreigner. Undaunted, she co-founded a free legal clinic for the poor. It quickly became clear that more female lawyers were necessary, but no law schools in the city admitted women. So Emily Kempin, as she was now known, and her colleagues decided to set up their own: the Women's Legal Education Society (WLES).

The WLES eventually gained permission to hold classes at New York University (NYU). In 1891 her first graduates were celebrated in the school and the press. She had laid the foundation for a brilliant career, but the family wanted to go back to Switzerland, and she followed. Her son had also become gravely ill. But the women's law class continued and by 1900 more than 600 women had graduated.

Back in Zurich, Kempin-Spyri failed in her second attempt to join the bar, but was offered a teaching position at Zurich University. As the first female teacher the students didn't accept her and there were horrible scenes, with students shouting at her and saying this would not work having a woman professor.

She eventually left, separating from her husband, and went to Germany. In Berlin she worked as a legal translator and campaigned for women's suffrage. But the strain became too much and she suffered a nervous breakdown. Kempin-Spyri was transferred to a mental asylum in Basel where she died, alone, in 1901.

But her work was not in vain. In 1898 the Zurich bar finally decided to accept women. In New York State, this honour went to one of Kempin-Spyri's students in 1889.

She was a bourgeois woman of the 19th century who took the promise of the enlightenment seriously - the idea that all men are equal and that man is not the

male population but rather mankind... so women should have the same rights. Women finally gained full equality under the Swiss constitution in 1981, after gaining the right to vote ten years earlier. In many ways Kempin-Spyri was ahead of her times, a pioneer who, like many women today, had to juggle family and work.

PS: Eveline Hasler hat das Leben von Emily Kempin-Spyri in einem ergreifenden Roman dargestellt: **Die Wachsfügelfrau**, erschienen bei dtv (dtv 12087)

## April Fools Day

Did anyone think the April Fools Day story was under the Wellington Club News, "Jassen for Gold", where I wrote that large numbers of keen Jassers had come to the clubhouse? You are right: This was not true. It was wishful thinking, or a down-right lie: The truth is that we couldn't even muster two full tables. The rest of the report was true, though: The seven members who did turn up had a good evening, and all those who didn't attend really missed out on an evening of warmth and trust and friendship. Although my Jass skills are far from adequate, I'm glad I was there to enjoy the generous atmosphere.

I'm sure you found the real April Fools Day article. Of course it was "Heidi looks back on a life less ordinary". Johanna Spyri lived from 1827 to 1901. As a young woman, around 1850, she spent some summer holidays in Maienfeld. She wrote many children's stories before she published the world famous "Heidi" in 1880. Even if she had met Heidi only shortly before writing the book, say in 1875, Heidi would now be about 140 years old...  
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