The funeral of Elisabeth Zimmermann-Modler in Duisburg: “An extraordinarily courageous personality”

Ulrich Rippert, Honorary Chairman of the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei
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“Elli was an extraordinarily courageous personality. She pursued her path in life with great clarity and consistency.”

This was said by Ulrich Rippert, honorary chairman of the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party, SGP) at the funeral of Elisabeth Zimmermann-Modler. “Elli,” as she was known to everyone, had been a member of the SGP for 50 years. She died on 28 November at the age of 69 as a result of a tragic accident.

On Friday, a grey winter day, around 50 mourners gathered at the Ruhrort cemetery to pay their last respects to Elisabeth Zimmermann-Modler. The violinist Ella Rotsch played “Air” by Johann Sebastian Bach. Among those present, in addition to SGP members who had known Elli for many years, were work colleagues from Siemens, several colleagues of her husband, Peter, who had been a steelworker at Thyssenkrupp, as well as neighbours and friends. Thas, a Tamil comrade, recalled at the graveside how Elli had taken him and other refugees from Sri Lanka into her home, educated them in the principles of Trotskyism, and proved herself a friend in every situation in life. “She was our family,” Thas said.

Ulrich Rippert’s speech was a tribute to the life of Elisabeth Zimmermann-Modler. Many of those present, including the steelworkers in attendance, later said that Rippert had captured Elli’s character exactly. The speech follows:

Dear Peter, dear relatives of Elli, dear comrades and friends,

We are still deeply affected by Elli’s sudden and tragic death. We still do not know what happened on the morning of 28 November, or how this devastating fire in her flat came about. We remain deeply shaken.

We knew that the stroke she had suffered three years ago, and the medication she had had to take since then, took a heavy toll on her. Many of those gathered here today witnessed the effects of her illness. It is truly tragic. We were in the process of improving Elli’s medical care, and now death overtook us.

Despite her illness, Elli wanted to continue taking part in everything. Many of us had met her only a few days earlier in Berlin at an event and spoken and discussed with her.

Elli was an extraordinarily courageous personality. She pursued her path in life with great clarity and consistency.

Elli was not born on the sunny side of life. When she came into the world, war and Nazi crimes had ended only eleven years earlier. Her childhood and youth were marked by the wounds and scars left by the crimes and wars of the Nazis, penetrating deeply into German society and into families themselves.

Her mother had been expelled from northern Bohemia, in what is now the Czech Republic; she was only 17 years old when Elli was born. She was a single parent, a teacher, and had to work. Elli was placed with a foster family and spent her first childhood years there. At the age of twelve, Elli underwent a complicated spinal operation and had to lie for months in a plaster bed. Back problems accompanied her throughout her life.

But Elli defied all these difficulties. She was a very life-affirming person.

It is more than 50 years since I first met Elli. It was at the beginning of May 1975. She was 19 years old and preparing to graduate high school. I remember that we already had intense discussions at this first meeting, and a close collaboration began.

Elli belonged to a generation for whom the crimes of Nazi terror were still very vivid. The question of how such a relapse into barbarism could occur in a modern country with a highly developed culture and a strong workers’ movement, occupied her, and all of us, at that time.

Even at a young age, Elli had read writings by opponents of Nazism, including Rolf Hochhuth’s play *The Deputy*, which dealt with the collaboration between the Vatican and the Nazis. And, consistent as she was, she then left the church.

Many at the time explained the causes of fascism in terms of mass psychology and the supposed susceptibility of the German people to manipulation. Elli was not satisfied with such simple and superficial answers. She wanted to get to the root of things.

Elli discussed the relationship between fascism and capitalism. She knew that Hitler had been financed by big industry and brought to power by it.

Later, she wrote several articles emphasising why this connection between capitalism and fascism is so important if

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one wants to understand why fascist parties are again being built up and brought to power today.

But then a further question arose: Why had the working class in 1933 not stopped the Nazis' victory and prevented such a relapse into barbarism?

To answer this, Elli participated in an intensive study of the writings of Leon Trotsky, who had defended the perspective of socialism against Stalinism. Trotsky had shown that Hitler could only come to power because Stalin, with his policy of "social fascism," split and paralysed the working class.

The conclusion was clear: There is only one social force capable of preventing war and fascism, and that is the working class. But for this it requires a strong revolutionary party.

Elli drew this conclusion and became an enthusiastic fighter for building a new workers' party—one that is, first, socialist and, second, international.

Dear friends, as I thought in recent days about what I should say here, at Elli's grave, I asked myself what Elli herself would say. Suddenly I heard her clear voice very distinctly—Elli could speak loudly, clearly, temperamentally and very convincingly—and she said: "Why do you not simply tell the truth? I led a very political life. And I am proud of it!"

There is something very typical and impressive about Elli's life. I believe it is called consistency. She lived according to the maxim of Karl Marx: "One must have the courage to think, without fear of the conclusions one reaches—and then one must act on them."

Elli lived by this maxim. What she recognised as correct, she put into practice—radically and with all the consequences. She was not the only one of her generation who demonstrated against war and fascism, but she was among the very few who drew the correct conclusions and held fast to them uncompromisingly.

She hated the turncoats of the Greens, who transformed themselves from pacifists into hysterical militarists. She fought against the lies of the Left Party, which talks left and acts right.

Two things in Elli's life stand out in particular.

First, she knew the working class and understood it. She was part of it. She worked for 35 years at Siemens and was a shop steward there. Forty-two years ago, she met her future husband, Peter Modler, who worked shifts as a steelworker and was a shop steward at Thyssenkrupp, and who strongly supported her political work.

But even when speaking to workers, Elli stressed that it is not enough to complain about the brutality of the capitalists, about layoffs and the constant deterioration of working conditions. It is not enough to be outraged by the irresponsibility of the government and the ruling elite. It is necessary to recognise and assume one's own responsibility.

Elli knew Marx's statement, "The emancipation of the workers must be the task of the workers themselves," and she took it very seriously.

The second striking feature of Elli was her internationalism.

It was not only that she had friends all over the world. She understood internationalism as a political programme. She fought against the nationalism of the trade unions and capitalist parties. She knew that workers have no fatherland and are globally interconnected in the world production process. She often emphasised that workers in every country face the same or similar problems, and that the struggle against capitalism can only be successful if it is conducted internationally.

At many meetings, Elli fought against the systematic abolition of the right to asylum and against agitation targeting foreigners. She stressed that migrants and asylum seekers are an important part of the international working class, and that workers can defend their own rights only if they resolutely repel all attacks on foreigners.

Elli knew that every opportunist current in the workers' movement begins with adaptation to nationalism, and when such a dispute arose in our ranks forty years ago, she immediately and without hesitation sided with the internationalists.

Elli was very proud of our party as a world party and took part in many international meetings and conferences.

For several decades, she was a member of the executive committee of the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei, stood as a candidate in many elections, and advanced our programme on radio and television.

Despite this intense political work, she found time for culture. She loved literature, cinema, opera and concerts.

The tragedy of Elli's death lies precisely in the fact that she was torn from life at the very moment when the political ideas and perspectives for which she fought throughout her entire adult life are gaining such great relevance and significance.

Dear Elli: We are deeply saddened that you are no longer with us. We miss you. But we will continue the struggle to which you devoted your life.

In our memory, you will always remain alive as a fighter for the liberation of the working class. We promise that.

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