

Friendship and Estrangement. Margarete Schütte- Lihotzky and Otto Neurath

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Memory and Encounter

“Neurath was a giant, big and strong, with a long red beard and a bald head on which he wore a huge floppy black hat. A striking Andreas Hofer kind of figure, someone people on the street turned around to look at.”¹ Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky described Otto Neurath repeatedly using these same words, first in a volume that Friedrich Stadler published in 1982 called *Arbeiterbildung in der Zwischenkriegszeit* (Workers’ education in the interwar years) and lastly in her book *Warum ich Architektin wurde* (Why I became an architect), which was published after her death. What we know about their professional and personal relationship with each other has been gleaned mostly from memoirs such as these and a handful of letters. Schütte-Lihotzky’s recollections of Neurath that are also connected to the rediscovery of his oeuvre in the German-speaking world, which did not set in until the 1970s and 1980s, will be revisited toward the end of this essay. Before that, the tale of a friendship and the tale of an estrangement will be told—two stories that occur in succession in certain respects yet cannot be precisely separated from each other chronologically.

Otto Neurath was born in 1882, making him about 15 years older than Schütte-Lihotzky. The two of them first met in the early 1920s (fig. 1). On July 25, 1919, Neurath had been

1 Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky, “Mein Freund Otto Neurath,” in *Arbeiterbildung in der Zwischenkriegszeit. Otto Neurath – Gerd Arntz*, ed. Friedrich Stadler (Vienna: Löcker, 1982), 40–42, here 40. Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky, *Warum ich Architektin wurde* (Salzburg: Residenz, 2004), 79.

2 Also see S. E. Eisterer’s essay in this volume.

3 Günther Sandner, *Otto Neurath. Eine politische Biographie* (Vienna: Zsolnay, 2014), 168–89.

4 Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky, *Erinnerungen aus dem Widerstand 1938–1945*, ed. Chup Friemert (Hamburg: Konkret Literatur Verlag, 1985), 17.

5 *Ibid.*, 18.

6 Elisabeth Holzinger, “Widerstand in Zeiten des Terrors,” in Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky, *Erinnerungen aus dem Widerstand. Das kämpferische Leben einer Architektin 1938–1945* (Vienna: Promedia, 2014), 7–20, here 14.

sentenced to one and a half years’ imprisonment for “complicity in high treason” in his position as president of the Central Economic Office during the two Bavarian Soviet Republics. After massive political and diplomatic interventions and months of negotiations between the Austrian and Bavarian governments, he returned to Vienna in February 1920. There, he initially provided training for works council members and worked for a short-lived research institute for social economy before the settlement movement became the focus of his activity.²

His many years of work for the settlement movement marked his first attempt in the city of his birth, Vienna, to join social economic projects that he himself had developed as an economist and socialization theoretician. In January 1921, he took over at the helm of the newly founded Main Association for Settlements and Allotment Gardens and in October of that same year became secretary-general of the Austrian Settlement and Allotment Garden Association (Österreichischer Verband für Siedlungs- und Kleingartenwesen, övsk), for whose founding he had personally laid the groundwork.³

Grete Lihotzky returned to Vienna in the summer of 1920 from the Netherlands, where she had lived and worked for several months as an escort to poor, starving Viennese children who had been sent there to convalesce. In an interview in 1984, she estimated the time of her return as “around about June.”⁴ Wanting to make a name for herself as an architect, she took part in a competition for an allotment garden colony on Schafberg, a large hill in the far west of Vienna. She became acquainted with the director of the settlement office, Max Ermers, and through him, met Adolf Loos in the fall of 1920. Loos ultimately motivated her to become involved in the settlement movement.⁵ From 1922 to 1925, she worked as an architect in the building office of the övsk.⁶

A Friendship

It was in the övsk that Otto Neurath and Margarete Lihotzky became acquainted with each other. “My work brought me into daily contact with Neurath for years on end. In addition, I was also a personal friend of his,” she wrote much later,

summing up this time in her life.⁷ Lihotzky was also responsible for founding an office known as Warentreuhand (merchandise trust) within the övsk. Its purpose was to enable settlers to acquire suitable furniture at low prices.⁸ With the help of Otto Neurath, she received her first contract from the City of Vienna, under which she worked with others on the Winarsky-Hof, a multistory municipal housing complex erected in the 20th district of Vienna in 1924.⁹

The friendly collaboration between the two was of short duration, however. Lihotzky fell ill with tuberculosis in 1924, and when she returned from her sick leave, Neurath was no longer active in the övsk. In addition, the Social Democratic government had changed its housing construction policy. While settlements increasingly faded into the background, city policymakers began pushing multistory municipal housing complexes (*Gemeindebauten*) within preexisting urban areas. The Austrian Broadcasting Corporation (Österreichischer Rundfunk, ORF) completed a documentation on Neurath in 1990 called *Der unbekümmerte Denker* (The free-wheeling thinker). In an interview from that piece, Schütte-

7 Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky, "Zeitzeugin," in *Vertriebene Vernunft II. Emigration und Exil österreichischer Wissenschaft 1930–1940*, Teilband 2, ed. Friedrich Stadler (Münster: LIT, 2004), 629–33, here 630.

8 Schütte-Lihotzky, *Erinnerungen* (1985), 18–19.

9 Schütte-Lihotzky, *Warum ich Architektin wurde*, 63–65, 101–4.

10 Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky (interview), in Karo Wolm, *Otto Neurath 1882–1945. Der unbekümmerte Denker*, ORF production, Vienna, 1990.

11 Isotype stands for International System of Typographic Picture Education.

12 Schütte-Lihotzky, "Zeitzeugin," 630.

13 Schütte-Lihotzky, *Warum ich Architektin wurde*, 80.

14 This relates to Sa-Le-Fe, "Das Fremde," *Die Wage* 4 no. 5 (1923): 156–59, and La-Se-Fe, "Das Gespräch von der Weihe des Berufes," *Die Wage* 4 no. 15 (1923): 463–67. While these and another of Neurath's texts appeared under a pseudonym, he published literary texts under his real name in the *Österreichischer Arbeiter-Kalender* from 1927 to 1930.

Lihotzky talked about the three to four years Neurath and she were active together in the settlement movement.¹⁰

Grete Lihotzky was also involved, at least on the periphery, in the founding of the Gesellschafts- und Wirtschaftsmuseum (Social and Economic Museum). In this social museum, Otto Neurath and his team developed the Vienna Method of Pictorial Statistics, whose pictorial symbols are still known today, mainly under the later name Isotype.¹¹ In her essay for the book project on contemporary history entitled *Vertriebene Vernunft* (Banished reason), she recounts that Otto Neurath wrote a short exposé for a museum project, packed it up, and took a taxi to the leading figures in the municipal administration and to parliamentarians and city council members. She went on to write: "He returned to the taxi with a triumphant smile and nothing else in his pocket but two pieces of paper signed by Seitz, Renner, Deutsch, and others. That was the very beginning of the Museum für Siedlungs- und Städtebau (Museum for Settlement Construction and Urban Planning) in Vienna, from 1925 on known as the Gesellschafts- und Wirtschaftsmuseum (Social and Economic Museum), which would later become world famous." How could she have such precise knowledge of this episode? "I rode along with him," she revealed in her text.¹² That must have been in 1923.

How could their friendship be described? Let us start by reading how Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky characterized Otto Neurath in retrospect: "Besides being highly engaged in a variety of activities centered on intellect and reason, he also wrote fairy tales at the time and painted small, fanciful, intertwined animals on wood in meticulous detail. This giant—Neurath always signed letters and cards not with his name but with elephants, happy and sad, laughing and crying, running, jumping, sitting—was imbued with a subtly reacting and imaginative sensibility. Several of these fairy tales and paintings are still in my possession today."¹³

Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky's estate does in fact contain several of these fairy tales and paintings by Otto Neurath. At least some of these consistently literary texts have also been published.¹⁴ However, Otto Neurath did not appear in name as the author of these stories. He invented not only Chinese



Fig. 1. Otto Neurath, 1920s, photograph.

literary figures but also the appropriate Chinese authors to go with them, such as a La-Se-Fe and a Sa-Le-Fe. In other words, the original Chinese stories, of which these texts purported to be the translations, did not even exist. Nonetheless, the name La-Se-Fe appears in a German-language literary history of China. As Sebastian Meissl aptly wrote: the egg landed “in the literary historian’s nest.”¹⁵ The translator of the Chinese tales, a Peter Zirngibel from Dresden, was clearly not a real person either, just another one of Otto Neurath’s pen names.

One of these literary texts, the typescript “Der gestaltende Gott” (The creative god), bears the note “Autumnal thoughts 1923” and the dedication “To my dear creative friend.” It is an allegorical story about creative genius, about the utopia of a new age, about obstacles and hindrances on the path there, but also about assurance and encouragement. Another story in the estate is dedicated to a Li-Ha, namely by “der Masslose” (the unbridled one), yet another also to Li-Ha, “das tanzende Sonnenstrahlchen” (the little dancing sunbeam). Li-Ha undoubtedly stood for Grete Lihotzky,¹⁶ and it is not difficult to guess who was being referred to as the unbridled one. In any event, all this points to a very close, perhaps even intimate relationship between the two.

Neurath regularly wrote literary texts of this sort from the early 1920s till about 1930. They are parables and discourses that in certain ways create a bright counterworld, a world of love and happiness, which is a key concept in his ethics and in his utopian writings. They also represent a counterproject to Oswald Spengler’s *The Decline of the West*, which he covered thoroughly in his book *Anti-Spengler*.¹⁷

A certain tension between the ability to create an individual way of life and the collective achievement of aspirations for happiness is an omnipresent theme in these texts,¹⁸ which can be considered part of Neurath’s scholarly and political work, perhaps not in style but certainly in substance.

Along with these texts, Schütte-Lihotzky’s estate contains at least one “painting” by Neurath, a fanciful Christmas card from 1922 (fig. 2). The small collection of documents also clarifies what had been an unanswered question up to that point—namely, why Otto Neurath was called Peter instead of Otto in so many letters from old friends from his

15 Sebastian Meissl, “Vom Literaturhistoriker zum Literaten. Wege und Umwege Otto Neuraths,” in Stadler, *Arbeiterbildung*, 112–18, here 118, note 29.

16 Schütte-Lihotzky also signed a letter to Otto Neurath on November 14, 1938 with the name Li-Ha (Nachlass Otto und Marie Neurath, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek (ÖNB), Handschriftensammlung, Sig. 1224/17).

17 Otto Neurath, *Anti-Spengler* (Munich: Georg D. W. Callwey, 1921).

18 Meissl, *Vom Literaturhistoriker zum Literaten*, 117.

19 The extremely extensive correspondence between Otto Neurath and Dora Lucka can be found in Otto and Marie Neurath’s estate in the Austrian National Library’s collection of handwritten documents (Nachlass Otto und Marie Neurath, Handschriftensammlung der ÖNB). Also see Sandner, *Otto Neurath*, 287–88.

time in Vienna. His boyhood friend Dora Lucka, for instance, continued even in exile in England to use forms of address such as “Lieber Peter” (Dear Peter), “Lieber Peterfreund” (Dear Peter Friend), “Lieber Oberpeter” (Dear Peter-in-Chief) or—for Otto and Marie Neurath together—“Liebe Peterleute” (Dear Peter People).¹⁹ The signature on the greeting card to Grete Lihotzky reads: “Herzliche Grüße, Peter Pan” (Warm regards, Peter Pan). Otto Neurath as Peter Pan, the adventurous child who never grows up.



Fig. 2. Christmas card from Otto Neurath to Margarete Lihotzky, 1922, lacquer paint on cardboard.

In 1926 Grete Lihotzky moved to Frankfurt am Main. Little is known about the contact the two had with each other in the years that followed, but they did at least work on the same project again a few years later, in 1932: the Wiener Werkbundsiedlung (social housing settlement in Vienna) and the associated exhibition staged by the Werkbund (association of craftsmen). Along with a host of other prominent architects, Schütte-Lihotzky designed two cubical housing units for this settlement project. But at the time the Werkbundsiedlung was being built, she was living in Moscow and was not able to supervise construction on site.²⁰ Otto Neurath, for his part, had a multifaceted role in the project. He was involved in planning and concept design, personally conducted tours through the exhibition, and wrote two articles for the *Arbeiter-Zeitung* on it.²¹ However, the two of them probably did not encounter each other at the Werkbund exhibition in Vienna.

Estrangement

After her stay in Frankfurt, Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky, as she was called after her marriage in 1927, spent the years 1930 to 1937 in Moscow. That was followed by stays in London and Paris until she was appointed to a position at the Academy of Fine Arts in Istanbul.²² While still in Paris prior to her departure to Istanbul, she paid a visit to Otto Neurath and his then colleague and later wife, Marie Reidemeister, in Den Haag, where the two of them lived after fleeing Austria in 1934. Otto Neurath's wife at the time, Olga Neurath (née Hahn), had also been living in Den Haag until her death on July 20, 1937. This meeting led to a rift. In her memoirs, Schütte-Lihotzky describes the visit:

In 1937 I visited him [Otto Neurath] in Den Haag. I stayed at his house for five days but they were excruciating days. We no longer understood each other politically. There were countless, futile debates. Marie Reidemeister wanted to act as mediator; I personally did not even want to touch on political topics anymore. After all, there were still so many other things that connected us. But he kept returning to political issues time and again and tormented himself and me without achieving the recon-

ciliation that was so desired. It was there that he showed how obstinate he could be—both an advantage and a disadvantage in his life! He stood on the station platform in Den Haag as my train departed with a despondent look on his face that I will never forget. Back then was the last time I saw him.²³

What were their political differences? Astonishingly, Schütte-Lihotzky does not address them at all. In Red Vienna, both of them, Otto Neurath and Grete Lihotzky, had been members of the Social Democratic Workers' Party (SDAP). Otto Neurath had already joined the SDAP in 1918; Grete Lihotzky did so several years later. But unlike Neurath, she already left the party again in 1927. Her comment on this step: "After the events in Austria on July 15, 1927, I resigned from the Austrian Social Democratic Party with a somewhat pathetic letter after being a member for two and a half years."²⁴ Otto Neurath played an indirect role in this resignation, at least by Schütte-Lihotzky's account. After she arrived in Frankfurt, it was Neurath who brought her together with Carl Grünberg, the well-known socialist economist and director of the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research. He had an influence on the Austrian architect that Schütte-Lihotzky described as follows: "It was Carl Grünberg who opened my eyes about Austrian social democracy and proved to me that it would not lead the country to Socialism."²⁵ Despite her positive attitude toward the Soviet Union, she did not join the Communist Party either in Frankfurt or in Moscow. It was not until 1939 during her stay in Turkey that she became a member.

Otto Neurath had already had his own experiences in the Soviet Union. He cooperated with a pictorial statistical institute in Moscow, the Izostat, from 1931 to 1934. The project involved having a small team train Soviet colleagues in the Vienna Method of Pictorial Statistics. This collaboration led to him being accused of Soviet propaganda, especially later on.²⁶ It is not possible to elaborate on the project in this essay.²⁷ In any event, it ended negatively in a material sense because a final installment of USD 6,000 was no longer paid out by the Soviet authorities, and Neurath faced massive monetary problems in Den Haag for several years after going into exile in the Netherlands following the events of February 1934.²⁸

23 Schütte-Lihotzky, *Warum ich Architektin wurde*, 82–83.

24 *Ibid.*, 120.

25 *Ibid.*; Marcel Bois, "Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky und das Frankfurter Institut für Sozialforschung," *maybrief* 049 (June 2018): 16–17.

26 Clive Chizlett, "Damned Lies. And Statistics. Otto Neurath and Soviet Propaganda in the 1930s," *Visible Language* 26 (1992): 298–321; Robin Kinross, "Blind Eyes, Innuendo and the Politics of Design. A Reply to Clive Chizlett," *Visible Language* 28 (1994): 67–79.

27 Julia Köstenberger, "Otto Neurath's 'Wiener Methode' im Dienste der sowjetischen Propaganda," in *Gegenwelten. Aspekte der österreichisch-sowjetischen Beziehungen 1918–1938*, ed. Verena Moritz et al. (Vienna: Residenz, 2013), 275–82; Emma Minns, "Picturing Soviet Progress: Izostat, 1931–4," in *Isotype. Design and Contexts 1925–1971*, ed. Christopher Burke, Eric Kindel, and Sue Walker (London: Hyphen, 2013), 257–80.

28 Sandner, *Otto Neurath*, 231 and 236.

20 Iris Meder, Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky, Wien–Moskau" in *Werkbundsiedlung Wien 1932. Ein Manifest des Neuen Wohnens*, ed. Andreas Nierhaus and Eva-Maria Orosz (Vienna: Mury Salzmann, 2012), 220.

21 Otto Neurath, "Glückliches Wohnen. Die Bedeutung der Werkbundsiedlung für die Zukunft," *Arbeiter-Zeitung* (June 19, 1932): 10; Otto Neurath, "Ein Schlußwort zur Werkbundsiedlung," *Arbeiter-Zeitung* (August 6, 1932): 6.

22 Also see Burcu Dogramaci's essay in this volume.

Otto Neurath had pinned certain hopes on the Soviet Union and did not want to pass up the opportunity to further spread his pictorial statistical method. But he remained a Social Democrat his whole life and had also obtained the consent of the SDAP in advance for his collaboration in Moscow.²⁹ In letters from that period, he refers to himself—be it ironically or cynically—as a “Social Fascist,” which was the derogatory term the Communists applied to the Social Democrats.³⁰ Although he left behind no text that could be called a systematic analysis of the Soviet Union, many of his handwritten notes in pertinent books on the subject indicate that he had adopted a decidedly detached attitude toward that country. Later, Marie Neurath wrote Schütte-Lihotzky that he had been shocked by the “inhumanity that was becoming ever more apparent.”³¹

As a later letter from Schütte-Lihotzky indicates, she and Neurath had met in Moscow in the early 1930s. Marie Neurath, whose name was still Reidemeister at the time of the meeting,³² later wrote to Schütte-Lihotzky that a “friendly skepticism” toward the Soviet Union prevailed in those conversations.³³ The political disputes of the time still resonated when the two of them corresponded in 1981 about the publication of *Arbeiterbildung in der Zwischenkriegszeit*. Marie Neurath was not the publisher but she proofread Schütte-Lihotzky’s text, “Mein Freund Otto Neurath” (My friend Otto Neurath), from which the opening quotation of this essay is taken. In an initial version, Schütte-Lihotzky asserted that Otto Neurath had already “arrived at the far-right fringe of social democracy” at the time of their quarrel in Den Haag.³⁴ Marie Neurath emphatically disagreed: “Neurath did not move to the right.”³⁵ She called Schütte-Lihotzky a “devout Communist” or in fuller context: “The misfortune for us was that you had become a devout Communist.”³⁶ Schütte-Lihotzky was indignant: “I was not a Communist at the time and did not feel like one and can therefore also not say that I was one. Let alone devout.”³⁷ According to Schütte-Lihotzky, Neurath had kept bringing the conversation in Den Haag back to the Soviet Union and pushed her into a corner argumentatively. At that point she had long since lost all desire to talk about politics anymore, but he would not stop.

29 Ibid., 233.

30 Otto Neurath to Martha Tausk, Easter Monday 1932 or 1933 (International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam, Martha Tausk Papers); see Sandner, *Otto Neurath*, 232.

31 Marie Neurath to Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky, November 22, 1981, University Archive of the University of Applied Arts Vienna, Nachlass Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky (UAUAK, NL MSL).

32 Otto Neurath and Marie Reidemeister married in England in 1941.

33 Marie Neurath to Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky, December 22, 1981, UAUAK, NL MSL.

34 Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky, “Mein Freund Otto Neurath,” UAUAK, NL MSL (typescript), 5. Interestingly, Marie Neurath’s corrections also contain errors which are then found in the final version of Schütte-Lihotzky’s essay; these include the claim that Otto Neurath was president of the Central Economic Office under Kurt Eisner’s government. In fact, he only became so after Eisner’s murder (see Sandner, *Otto Neurath*, 122–32).

35 Marie Neurath to Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky, November 15, 1981, UAUAK, NL MSL.

36 Ibid.

37 Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky to Marie Neurath, [November] 1981, UAUAK, NL MSL.

38 Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky to Otto Neurath, November 14, 1938, Nachlass Otto und Marie Neurath, ÖNB, Handschriftensammlung, Sig. 1224/17.

39 See Hans Schafranek, *Widerstand und Verrat. Gestasospitzel im antifaschistischen Untergrund* (Vienna: Czernin, 2017), 81–82.

40 Schütte-Lihotzky, *Warum ich Architektin wurde*, 82; Schütte-Lihotzky, “Mein Freund Otto Neurath,” 42.

41 Schütte-Lihotzky, “Zeitzeugin,” 631; in almost identical wording: Schütte-Lihotzky, *Warum ich Architektin wurde*, 83.

42 Austrian Science Fund (FWF), P 31500-G32.

What were the consequences of this rift? A political estrangement had obviously occurred, probably also a personal one, but by no means a complete break. A letter from Istanbul dated November 14, 1938, the only letter from Schütte-Lihotzky in the Neurath estate at the Austrian National Library, shows that the two resumed contact again after one year at the latest. In the letter, Schütte-Lihotzky invited Otto Neurath and Marie Reidemeister to visit her in Istanbul and offered to let them stay in a guest room in her lovely apartment.³⁸ The visit did not materialize, however.

In December 1940, Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky returned to Vienna on behalf of the party to become an activist in the Communist Resistance. Just weeks later, she was betrayed by a Gestapo informer³⁹ and sentenced to 15 years’ imprisonment. In her memoirs, she writes that she found out after the war that Otto Neurath had immediately organized a fund-raising campaign for her upon hearing about her conviction in National Socialist Vienna. He wanted to use the collected money to make her life easier after she was released. She writes: “This touching action proves that in him, I have lost a good, loyal, and caring friend, who brightened my youth and who had a not insignificant influence on my development.”⁴⁰ After the end of the war and National Socialism, Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky tried to reorganize her professional life in Vienna. But as a Communist, she received virtually no public contracts in postwar Social Democratic Vienna. The literature contains reference after reference indicating that she was given almost no opportunities to bring her competence and experiences to bear. She wrote this about Otto Neurath: “In the fall of 1945, he wanted to return to Austria, but just a few days prior to his planned departure, he met his sudden death.”⁴¹ Yet in truth, Otto Neurath had already concentrated his future plans on his new home of England, the country to which he had fled from Den Haag in May 1940 before the advancing troops of National Socialist Germany. His sudden and also somewhat surprising death in Oxford on December 22, 1945 foiled those plans.⁴²