

Katharina Heinroth

Rebuilding the Zoo



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Katharina Heinroth with her Newfoundland “Ajax” and four co-workers on their morning rounds at Berlin Zoo, 1946. (AZGB, image: Liselotte Orgel. All rights reserved.)

Katharina Heinroth (née Berger, 1897-1989) was the Berlin Zoological Garden’s first, and to this day only, female director. In the image above, she is pictured with zoo staff on her daily morning rounds. One of the men in work clothes appears to be reporting to her. How did Katharina Heinroth come to be the first, and at the time only, woman to occupy the position of zoo director?

Katharina Berger completed a degree in education before going on to study zoology, botany, geography, and geology in Breslau. She earned her doctorate summa cum laude in 1923, with a dissertation on reptilian hearing. In 1933, she married the widowed director of the Berlin Aquarium (Oskar Heinroth), with whom

she continued the research on bird life cycles and behaviour that he had previously conducted with his first wife Magdalena Heinroth. Much of their research was done in the apartment they shared at the Berlin Aquarium.

After zoo director Lutz Heck fled Berlin at the end of May 1945, Katharina Heinroth and the remaining staff looked after what was left of Berlin Zoo. In August 1945, the city administration finally appointed her the zoo's director. Katharina Heinroth successfully led the reconstruction of Berlin Zoo during times of great scarcity and much political uncertainty. The only woman at the helm of a German zoo, she still managed to assert herself despite the male-dominated government bodies, the British command of the occupied sector, and her predominantly male staff (see image). Eventually, however, the supervisory board of the Zoological Garden's stock association forced her into retirement in 1955. For more than 30 years, she continued to carry out research and work as a lecturer at the Technische Universität Berlin. She published numerous books and articles, particularly in ornithological journals.