

SALUTING THE PIONEERS

By Sandy Mesics

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One could say that the modern-day treatment of transsexuality began in 1952 with Christine Jorgenson's much-publicized sex-reassignment surgery. To be sure, no transsexual had ever before become so famous. It brought the issue and the patient worldwide notoriety.

But Christine Jorgenson was not the world's first transsexual, nor the first person to undergo a gender change . . . the phenomenon goes back throughout history. In ancient Rome, after the death of his wife, Poppaea, emperor Nero sought to replace her with someone who resembled her. A young man named Sporus resembled her closely, so Nero ordered his surgeons to transform Sporus into a woman. They did the best they could, and when Sporus recovered from the operation, Nero married him.

The famous sexologist, Dr. Magnus Hirschfeld, described the case of "Rudolf," born about 1891. As was the custom in those days, the young boy was kept in dresses until the age of five or six. When his parents tried to get Rudolf to wear trousers, he resisted with all his strength. After this, he wore his sister's clothing whenever possible, and when he grew up, he lived completely as a woman, calling himself Dora. When Rudolf reached the age of 30 in 1921, he had the first of three operations to transform himself into a woman. The other two operations were performed in 1930.

For transsexuals who lived in historical times, without the possibility of medical relief, life must have been a desperate struggle, to some, almost a death sentence. Fortunately, we are blessed with the tenacity of those pioneer transsexuals who tried to understand what they were going through, and sought out medical help despite the bleak prognosis. Without them, medical science would not have made the effort to acknowledge the problem and develop methods to treat it.

One such early transsexual was the Danish painter Einar Wegener, whose story was told in a book published in 1933 by E. P. Dutton, titled, "Man Into Woman." It is a detailed story, told through Wegener's diaries and has photographs and medical input from a physician in the Introduction.

The book chronicles the emergence of Wegener's female self, Lili Elbe, when he began dressing as a woman at the age of twenty. In his own words: "I liked the feel of soft women's clothing ... I felt at home in them from the first moment."

Lili gradually began to assert herself, demanding a life of her own. Wegener spent time studying the sparse medical literature, and unsuccessfully trying to find about other persons such as himself.

What were the fates of strange persons to me unless I could find consolation of reading about a person of my own kind? But of such a person no author had been able to write..."

He sought medical treatment, only to be told by one doctor that he was neurotic, by another that he was homosexual, and still another treated Wegener with x-rays. Despairing of finding medical help, Wegener gave up and set a date for suicide if nothing should happen.

Fortunately, before time ran out. Wegener found a German physician who was sympathetic. He theorized that Wegener had both male and female gonads, and would begin a series of operations to transform Wegener into a woman.

In the first step, Wegener was castrated. A few months later, his penis was removed, his abdomen opened, and ovarian tissue from a 26 year old woman was transplanted into him. At this time, rudimentary ovaries were detected in his abdomen. A third operation was performed, but its nature was not made clear in the account.

Wegener, now living completely as Lili Elbe, returned to her native Denmark, where she put her legal affairs in order, obtaining a new passport with her new identity, and being granted a dissolution of her 20 year marriage by the king. The news of this astounding change broke in the press, causing quite a sensation in 1931.

A French painter who had been a friend of Lili's for many years proposed marriage to her, but before Lili would give her consent, she visited her German surgeon for an operation that would create a vagina and complete her transformation. The procedure was carried out, but shortly thereafter Lili died of heart trouble.

Lili Elbe lived as a woman for only more than a year. To achieve this, she had to push the limits of medical knowledge in her day. Her indomitable spirit is summed up in her own words:

" ... I, Lili, am vital and have a right to life I have proved by living for fourteen months. It maybe said that fourteen months is not much, but they seem to me like a whole and happy human life. The price which I have paid seems to me very small. If sooner or later I should succumb physically, I am quite reconciled. I shall at least have known what it is to live."

The year Wegener died, Roberta Cowell was Robert Cowell, a 13 year-old British lad, whose passions in life were automobiles and planes. Later, during World War II, these pursuits led Cowell to a position in the Royal Air Force. He flew with a fighter squadron, was eventually shot down, and was in a German prisoner-of-war camp when the war ended.

In civilian life Cowell became successful in business but nonetheless he became depressed and eventually commenced psychoanalysis. During a series of psychiatric tests, Cowell received a shock:

"The biggest shock to my self-esteem was my discovery, through these tests, that my unconscious mind was predominantly female And, as the analysis proceeded, it became quite obvious that the feminine side of my nature, which all my life I had known of and severely repressed, was very much more fundamental and deep-rooted than I had supposed ... I was psychologically a woman."

With no prospect of a solution to this dilemma, Cowell did as Wegener -- he set a date for suicide one year hence, should he be unable to solve his gender problem. During this period, Cowell consulted a sexologist, who pointed out that his body showed prominent female sex characteristics: wide hips, narrow shoulders, no Adam's apple, and some breast development.

Cowell underwent hormone therapy, and sex reassignment surgery on May 18, 1951, prior to Christine Jorgenson. Afterwards, some cosmetic facial surgery was performed. While Cowell told her story with humor and wit, and quite a lot of scientific background, she is sketchy on surgical details, or details of her personal life after surgery.

Since the transsexual phenomenon stretches as far back as recorded history, it is logical to assume that it will continue to be a condition plaguing some individuals far into the future. Perhaps breakthroughs in diagnosis will lead to correction of the problem while in utero, or possibly advances in genetic engineering may make treatment more effective. Either way, the path will continue to be blazed by researchers willing to experiment, and patients willing to push them to do so.

Sandy Mesics is a regular contributor to the TRANSSEXUAL VOICE. In addition to her writing, she is a graphic designer, and knows more about The Civil War than any sane person should ... She welcomes your comments, criticisms, and ideas. Just write c/o The Transsexual Voice.