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Lili Elbe: Her Life and Legacy
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The process of gaining rights for the LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) community has been an extremely lengthy and slow process for centuries all over the world. In many cases, the transgender part of that community has fallen behind the rest. However, there is one figure in history who did a lot to help the transgender community by just being true to themselves and not being afraid to take a chance. She was the first identifiable recipient of the Sexual Reassignment Surgery (SRS) in 1930. Her name was Lili Elbe. Lili Elbe’s help in aiding this then experimental procedure changed how the world saw people like her and would eventually aid the progress of transgender individuals’ operations over many years to come.

Lili was born under the name Einar Magnus Andreas Wegener on December 28, 1882 in Denmark. He was the youngest of four children, three boys and one girl. His childhood was fairly normal and happy. He enjoyed playing with both his brothers’ toy soldiers and his sister’s dolls. One early comment from his brothers was that he had a very effeminate voice, even as a young pre-pubescent boy. At the age of 17, Einar began visiting art galleries and reading art periodicals. His father was strongly against his youngest son becoming an artist, but after several failed attempts to convince him to join a more practical field, he allowed Einar to attend the Copenhagen Academy of Art at the age of nineteen.

During his time there, he met his wife, Gerda. They quickly became inseparable. They were married in 1904, one year after they first met. Einar’s first painting was sold just a few

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1 Registered Residence of Ejner Wegener and Gerda Wegener. Copenhagen City Archives.; There are some disputes over her birthdate ranging throughout the 1880’s. However this date comes from a government record, which means it should be the correct date.; Prior to Einar Wegner discovering their identity as Lili, I will refer to them as “he” since that is the pronouns they would have used prior to the discovery of their gender identity. Once her identity as Lili is discovered, I will begin using feminine pronouns.

2 Lili Elbe, Man Into Woman: An Authentic Record of a Change of Sex, Edited by Neils Hoyer (London: Jarrold Publisher's, 1933), 58-61.

3 Ibid., 62.
days after the couple was married. After they graduated from the Academy, they lived together in both Copenhagen and Paris. Both artists received great praise from the public for their talented artwork. Einar became famous for his scenic paintings that often depicted homes, buildings, or forestry. Most of his paintings were of locations in France and Italy. For his painting of Paris, he enjoyed painting structures such as buildings and bridges. His painting, *Overlooking Munkebjerg Hill in Vejle, Denmark*, is a prime example of what his artwork would usually look like. Gerda made her career as a portrait painter. Many of her paintings were of women. She also became famous for her erotic lesbian sketches. For those paintings, she had more success when they lived in Paris. Einar and Gerda lived there mainly for the progress of her artwork, but they still moved around between Copenhagen and Paris. The couple often attended parties that showed off their artwork. Their marriage was strengthened by their shared love for art. They were very supportive of each other’s work.

Einar seemed to have a great life. He made a good living as a painter, and he had a successful marriage to another talented painter. However his life was about to take a huge turn. It was actually through Gerda’s work as a painter that Lili would be born. According to Lili’s autobiography, Gerda asked Einar to model in place of the ballerina, Ulla Poulsen, for whom she was illustrating a painting of titled *The Ballerina Ulla Poulsen in the Ballet Chopiniana*. Only the bottom of the painting needed to be completed, so just Einar’s legs would be used for the

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6 Lili Elbe, *Man Into Woman: An Authentic Record of a Change of Sex*, Edited by Neils Hoyer (London: Jarrold Publisher's, 1933), 20.; Ibid., 63.
painting. Einar agreed to wear the dress for the session. After she was finished painting, Gerda suggested Einar dress up more by putting a wig on as a joke. Einar eventually agreed to do this too. After he put on the full outfit, Ulla finally arrived, and she was surprised when she realized the person in the dress was Einar. She was completely convinced he was a woman at a first glance. Ulla would be the person who suggested the name “Lili.”

After a few weeks since his first time dressing as Lili, the couple began attending public parties at which Einar would wear dresses and be presented as a female. Gerda told the partygoers that Lili was her cousin. Gerda began painting more paintings of Einar as Lili. Lili became Gerda’s favorite model, and Gerda’s name as an artist spread quickly because of her Lili paintings. She even had a gallery in Paris dedicated solely to her sketches of Lili. As Gerda continued to paint her Lili paintings, Einar’s strong connection to the identity slowly began to blossom. Something that started as a joke had been a huge discovery for Wegner. When Wegner revealed this revelation to Gerda, she accepted her as Lili. She agreed that Wegner was much happier when he was dressed as Lili, and she agreed to help him live as Lili. The couple found safety in Paris, where same-sex relationships were still illegal, but more accepted than in other parts of the world. There they were able to be more open about their relationship as well as take the opportunities offered by the Paris art community.

However, just dressing as a woman publicly was not enough satisfaction for Lili. She started to discover that instead of separating the two personas of Einar and Lili, she felt more comfortable staying in her Lili appearance. She began to have nose bleeds every month that did

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9 Ibid., 69.
not have a medical diagnosis as to why they occurred. She wanted to find out more about her identity, so she did research and spoke to doctors. The doctors she saw were not very helpful. Their diagnosis were usually either that she was neurotic or she was a homosexual. Lili was not satisfied with those answers. She knew that she had a strong connection to her life as Lili, and she was desperate to make that a reality. By the time she reached her forties, she was struggling to find a doctor who could help her. She was so distraught with the lack of answers that she had decided to kill herself on May 1st if she did not receive any help by then. Then after a suggestion by a friend, she decided to meet with Magnus Hirschfeld, a revolutionary sexologist at the time. He was the first doctor she had spoken to that actually took her claim that she was a woman seriously. At their meeting, Hirschfield conducted a brief examination of Lili’s body. Based on one area where Lili’s said she had been feeling pain, he concluded that she may already have ovaries inside her body. This theory both shocked and excited Lili. He also concluded from the examination that Lili’s case was so rare that he had only seen one other person who was in a similar situation as her. Hirschfield proposed an operation that would bring Lili to life. He would remove her dead male organs, and he would surgically restore the female organs already inside her and create female genitalia. Lili happily agreed to the surgery, and she went to Hirschfield’s Women’s Clinic in Germany.

During the train ride to Germany, Lili wrote an obituary for Einar Wegner. She believed that this surgery was going to be the death of Einar, but with that death, Lili would be fully alive. For the time of death, she wrote that Einar “died on the train between Paris and Berlin.” The rest

10 Ibid., 11.
11 Ibid., 12.
12 Ibid., 104.
13 Ibid., 25.; Ibid., 30.
of the obituary focused on his previous work as an artist. After leaving the train, she went to the Women’s Hospital.

Her first operation took place in March 5, 1931. This first operation was completed under the observation of Hirschfield, but it would be the only operation of her’s that he would personally supervise. She wrote two letters before her operation; one to Gerda and one to Dr. Hirschfield. To Gerda, she announced that her operation was to take the next day and that she had thought only for Gerda for every moment leading up to the operation. To her doctor, she wrote a letter expressing her thankfulness to him, and regardless of the results, she was still grateful for all he had done. She looked over her male form for one last time before laying down for the operation. She set a picture of Gerda nearby her. The first operation was castration, to remove her testicles. Her first memory after waking up was the pain she felt. The pain started to recede, and she was able to observe the aftermath of the operation. One nurse noted that her voice already sounded much different. It sounded much more feminine and clear. There was also a note in her autobiography that her writing became more feminine after the surgery was completed, but that would not have been affected by the operation.

Gerda arrived to the hospital to see the results of the operation. She was surprised to see that not only was Einar gone for good, but the Lili she had known was not the Lili in front of her. In a letter to a mutual friend, Gerda wrote that Lili seemed to feel guilty for putting Gerda through so much. She was concerned that Einar had taken away the chance for Gerda to live a good life. In her letter, Gerda did not hold any grudge against Lili. Instead she blamed Einar for

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14 Ibid., 36-39.
15 Ibid., 126.; Ibid., 127-128.; Ibid., 125.
16 Ibid., 128.; Ibid., 131.
not letting Lili live sooner. Lili got a chance to read that letter months later. It was clear that even though Lili and Gerda were still happy as a couple, they faced many challenges ahead if they planned to stay together. Soon after the first operation, Lili introduced Gerda to one of the professors at the clinic. The professor quickly claimed his recognition of Gerda as being “Einar’s wife” and not “Lili’s wife.” While neither Lili nor Gerda replied to this, it was unsettling to them.

After her recovery in the hospital, Lili and Gerda started going out again. During a party, they made the excuse the Einar was busy and was not able to leave Paris. No one at the gathering had any suspicions about Lili. Lili was still nervous interacting with people, but Gerda supported her. Lili also began to worry as she had thoughts similar to how Einar would have thought. She saw a landscape in front of her, and she began to think of it as a painter would. She was convinced that those thoughts should have died along with Einar. She feared that she would never truly be rid of her old life. However, it was during her time observing the land that she would pick her new name. After observing the Elbe River that flowed near the hospital, she decided to make her last name “Elbe” in honor of the city where Lili was born. Lili still felt happy with the operation, despite the initial worries and struggles. When she walked through the town near the clinic, no one questioned her womanhood. Both people in town and in the hospital referred to her as “madam.” She began to worry less about her past and instead focused on her future.

17 Ibid., 134-135.
18 Ibid., 137.
19 Ibid., 142.; Ibid., 162.;
20 Ibid., 174
A few months later, she returned and had the remainder of her genitalia removed. During this operation, they confirmed that Lili did indeed have ovaries, but they had not been able to function due to her previous genitalia. Healthy ovaries from a donor were transplanted to her. There is not much that Lili personally recalled about that day, but it is the day she referred to as her proper birth.\textsuperscript{21} She was very happy with the results, and she remained very thankful to Dr. Hirschfield, who she regarded as her protector. She did have a third operation, but the reasoning for it is not completely clear. It is suspected that this operation dealt with the insertion of a canula.\textsuperscript{22} After these operations, Lili was finally felt like the person she was always supposed to be. She felt more comfortable and complete with her identity.

Lili Elbe was finally content with her new identity, but the rest of the world was not as readily accepting. Some positive legal action came from her operation. She was able to officially change her name, which at first was Lili Elvenes, but then changed again to Lili Elbe. She also received a new passport to reflect her name change.\textsuperscript{23} However, her operations ending up costing Lili and Gerda their marriage. Lili wanted to see her family in Denmark again, and she knew that life for her and Gerda as a married couple would be nearly impossible while in Denmark. She did not want Gerda to suffer a life of hiding. Divorce would have taken over a year to be finalized. Lili decided it would be better for both of them to end the marriage as quickly as possible and appeal to the King of Denmark for their marriage to be annulled. They went to a court to speak to the King, and he declared that since she was now legally a woman, her marriage to another woman was invalid. Since Lili and Gerda were both women, the marriage would have never

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 179.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 181.; Ibid., 13.
been legally binding in the first place. Lili and Gerda continued to be close friends. Lili also ended the painting career she used to have under the name “Einar Wegner.” Her career as a painter was something that was to be left behind in her life as a man. She wanted to have a fresh new start now that she had the body she always felt she should have had.

She began a relationship with a man named Claude, and he proposed to her. It was because of this new relationship that she decided to have another surgery. She went to see Dr. Hirschfield and asked him to help her become a mother. With this final surgery she hoped to transplant a uterus and construct a vagina to bear children. It was her wish that she would be able to become a mother after marrying her new partner. In July 1931, she began the operation. She wrote letters to her editor, Neils Hoyer, during the time of her operation. Unfortunately, this is the surgery that would bring a stop to Lili’s bright future, and the letters she sent clearly indicated her decline. By August, she wrote that she was weak, and she urged Hoyer not to tell Gerda about her declining health so she did not worry. On September 12, her brother went to visit her. By that point she could barely speak, but her brother’s support seemed to cheer her up. It was not enough to keep her strong unfortunately. The transplanted organ rejected her body, and on September 12, 1931, she passed away. She was buried in the cemetery near the woman’s hospital a few days later, as she wished to be.

A few years later in 1933, her autobiography was published. Prior to her passing, she had written parts of the autobiography and collected letters to be used in it. Niels Hoyer collected all the papers and published the autobiography on her behalf. By her request, all the names in the

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25 Ibid., 265.; Ibid., 273.
26 Ibid., 267- 270.
book had been changed, such as her name being “Andreas Sparre” instead of “Einar Wegener” and Gerda being referred at as “Grete.” Through her autobiography, more information about her identity was revealed. In her autobiography, Lili confirmed that the doctors speculated early on that she already possessed both male and female parts, and that the operations helped confirm the theory. If this were true, it would mean she was one of the first positively identified intersex people.\(^{27}\) If she was intersex, it would mean that her condition was not only about gender identity, but there was also biological reasons for the way she was feeling. She ended her autobiography with a line by Hans Jager. She said, “When I am no longer here, I want my sad book of love to be my legacy, a testimony that I once lived.”\(^{28}\)

While she was alive, there were a few newspaper articles that told the progress of her surgeries. After her first surgery, people thought that Einar Wegner had gone missing. It was a shock to them when they discovered that he was now a she. In February 1931, an article was published by Loulou Lassen titled, “A Life Between Two Existences; A past as a man and a future as a woman. Lili Elbe tells about the painter Einar Wegener and themselves.” During this interview, Lili was questioned about why the artistic creation of Einar Wegener was terminated. She replied that it was part of Wegner’s duty as a famous artist to tell the truth.\(^{29}\) This was her admission that her painting career was a creative outlet while she was known as Einar Wegner. It was not something that was going to be a part of Lili’s life.

\(^{27}\) Intersex is a nonspecific term for an individual who has anatomical characteristics of both sexes or whose genitalia are ambiguous. Prior terms have been used to describe this condition such as “hermaphrodite”, but this is the politically correct and scientific term to use; Robert T. Francoeur. *A Decriptive Dictionary and Atlas of Sexology* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1991), 316.

\(^{28}\) Lili Elbe, *Man Into Woman: An Authentic Record of a Change of Sex*, Edited by Neils Hoyer (London: Jarrold Publisher's, 1933), 288.

Later, another article by Fischer-Lichte was written with an interesting perspective that was surprising for the time. The title of his article was "The little boy with the doll carriage." It began with the announcement of when Lili’s parents declared him to be a boy and then continued into his childhood. According to the article, as a child Einar liked playing with his brothers, but he also loved playing with the toy doll carriage his sisters had. The interviewer also spoke to one of the surgeons who operated on Lili, Kurt Warnekros, and it was the conclusion of Warnekros that Lili possessed both male and female parts, and between the two she possessed more femininity.

However, the biggest part of the article discussed the relationship between Lili and her wife Gerda. It questioned the validity of the marriage. The subhead of the article declared them to be friends instead of something more. While it is true that we know they had a very close friendship even after their marriage was annulled, it may not be accurate to say that once Lili became a woman, their married life was over. The article seems to disregard that some of Gerda’s most famous paintings were of women, and she was also famous for creating lesbian erotic works. Because it was so early for being to even think of the idea of someone going through an operation to change their gender, they obvious did not know how to perceive that when the individual was already in an existing relationship. This article was a prime example of those confused perceptions, especially since Denmark did not allow gay relationships at the time. It was easier for them to ignore that they could have been a happy couple and instead declare that since Lili is a female, she must only be interested in men. The article also reflects the opinion of Denmark’s King, declaring that the marriage was invalid because they were both women in the

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30 Ibid., 48.
first place and therefore it did not count as an actual divorce if the marriage was never real to begin with.

A final article was published in February 28, 1931 by Ekstra Bladet. This article was an interview of Warnekros questioning the medical procedure and the legality of Lili changing her sex. Warnekros is quoted in the interview as saying that “the opportunity was greater than the risk” and that it was a complete success. This article also confirms the fact that Lili possessed male and female parts. In his opinion, he was fixing an error, which for the time was an understandable view. It seems like before her final surgery, everything was going great and nothing could go wrong. Unfortunately, the medical technology would be taken one step too far, and it would cost Lili her life.

The story of the man who became a woman quickly became world famous. Newspapers from all over the world were telling the story of Lili Elbe. Some papers like the Brookshire Times from Texas featured a small article announcing the surgery, while others like the Des Moines Register published a full page. The first article by the Texas newspaper had limited information, because it was published around the same time when Lili received the surgery in 1931. The article from the Des Moines Register was published in 1933. It included facts about her life and photos of her as Lili, and most of the article referred back to Lili’s autobiography, which was just about to be released in America with an English translation. The article went into great deal and was surprisingly accepting for the time period during which it was written. The author of the article was respectful to the story and throughout the whole article referred to Lili

31 Ibid., 51.
as “she.” That fact shows that people were starting to slowly come around to the idea of people like Lili being able to live as they please. Though it would be many years until the surgery was accepted in America and other parts of the world, this one article shows a promising start to a turn in history.

Since then, the surgery has developed greatly as medical practices have evolved. While Lili Elbe is considered the first person to receive sex reassignment surgery, it is likely that there were those who had it before her. There are mentions of similar procedures back in the times of Ancient Greece and Ancient Rome, and two diaries from the seventeenth century describe two people who went through the procedure, but it was crude and self-inflicted. There may have even been people around the time of Lili who had similar operations done. The fact that makes Lili Elbe so important to the progression of the surgery is that she is the first recipient whose name is known. It is possible to speculate what happened during those previous surgeries, but it cannot be known for sure the same way it is known with Lili Elbe’s story. It is also extremely useful that she had made preparations for her autobiography before her passing. It has allowed those since her time to not only learn about the medical parts of her procedure, but also the emotional impact it had on herself and her close friends and family.

Initially, the first term coined for people like Lili was “transvestites,” and it was actually first said by the man who helped Lili get her operations, Magnus Hirschfield. However, this word later changed to “transsexual” years later. It would not be until 1952 that the modern practice of sex reassignment surgery would be closer to perfection. It was developed by a Danish

33 Ibid.
plastic surgeon named Paul Fogh-Andreson, and the operation was given to Christine Jorgenson, an American G.I.\footnote{Ibid., 137.} This was the surgery that instantly became world famous, but it happened decades after Lili Elbe had done it. Lili Elbe gave her life in order for the surgery to progress on.

Despite her contribution to the surgery, it took a long time for her to gain any notoriety outside of Denmark and Germany. In 2000, a novel was by David Ebershoff published called “The Danish Girl.”\footnote{David Ebershoff. \textit{The Danish Girl: A Novel}. (New York: Viking, 2000).} It told a fictionalized version of Lili’s life. The key parts of her story, such as how Lili discovered her identity, her operations, and her death, were kept in the novel, but Ebershoff added extra characters and scenes. He also changed Gerda’s name to “Greta” and gave her an American background instead of her true Danish heritage. Ebershoff wrote that Greta was born in his hometown in California. Almost all the side characters in the novel did not exist. In the end of the novel, Ebershoff himself admitted that this book was a work of fiction. He used the basic, true facts and his own imagination to create a story around the love life of Lili and Greta, and he stated that the book should not be used for any biographical purposes of Elbe’s life.\footnote{Ibid., 271.} The novel had a decent amount of success. It won the Rosenthal Foundation Award from the American Academy of Arts and the Lambda Literary Award, and was a \textit{New York Times} Notable Book. It also was a finalist for a few other awards.\footnote{Ibid.}

Even with the mild success of the book, it still only reached the attention of the literary community. It had helped Lili Elbe’s fame grow, but not by very much. It was the release of a movie based off of the previously mentioned novel that began to raise awareness of her story to the American public as well as the rest of the world. The movie went by the name \textit{The Danish}
*Girl*, the same as the novel. It was released in 2015, and it was well received by the film community. It was nominated for four Academy Awards, including Best Actor in a Leading Role, Best Actress in a Supporting Role, Production Design and Costume Design. Out of those awards, the movie won for Best Actress for Alicia Vikander, who played the role of Greta.40

Since the movie was based off of a book with a fictionalized story, the movie had several faults with its authenticity. The movie also used the name Greta and indicated that she was from America. Instead of focusing on the medical aspect of Lili’s life, the movie focused on the relationship between Lili and Greta. According to the movie, it was Lili’s discovering of her identity that caused their marriage to break apart. There was an impression that now that Lili was a woman, she did not love Greta as a wife anymore. Greta seemed upset about Lili’s transformation, because she would not have her husband anymore. However, the two of them stayed friends, and Greta supported Lili as she went for her operations. Instead of showing four operations, Lili only underwent two surgeries in the movie before her death.41 By doing this, the movie completely overlooked Lili’s last relationship before her death and her desire to become a mother. The movie and the novel also created a fake relationship with a childhood friend named Hans Axgil, who became a love interest for Greta. According to the movie, Lili and Hans had a childhood romance, but this never happened.

One key issue that still existed back then and has continued to today was the view of Lili’s relationship to Gerda. Back then they did not believe that Lili and Gerda’s marriage would be allowed, because they were both women. That was an understandable view for the people of

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41 *The Danish Girl*. Directed by Tom Hooper. Performed by Eddie Redmayne (Copenhagen: Working Title Films, 2015). DVD.
that time. It was already revolutionary enough that a person could go through the surgery that Lili went through. The thought of her having the surgery while also staying married to the wife who she used to be a husband to was way too much for anyone to comprehend. Today society should have moved past that a little bit, but the way Gerda and Lili’s relationship was portrayed in both the book and the movie shows that there is still progress to be made. By showing how society has moved forward and also how it has failed to progress, Lili’s story gains more meaning. Even though it has been 86 years since Lili had her first surgery, a large amount of society still struggles to understand the lives and relationships of people like Lili.

Looking at Lili’s story from the view of the 21st century is fascinating. Since then the knowledge of what it means to be a transgender individual has become more readily available. When Lili was alive, there was barely anything to help her understand what was happening to her. In her mind, the only explanation was that she was two separate people. She believed that Einar needed to die in order for her to receive peace and become Lili. After her surgery, she did not believe she should have any thoughts like she had in her life as Einar. When she did have thoughts like that, such as a moment when she started thinking like a painter, she became angry with herself, because that part of her was supposed to be long gone. Today’s science would have been able to tell her that she was still the same person as she was before, but now she just had a different physical appearance. Her brain was the same as it had always been. That is why it is so important to understand the stories of people like Lili. Her autobiography and the writings of doctors at the time showed just how little they understood back then, and it shows how far we have come now.

While many people today would not know Lili Elbe by name, her contributions to the progress of the transgender community still are very meaningful. She wanted to create a new life
for herself in a body that made her comfortable, and unfortunately that journey led her to her
death. Her death was not in vain, because her experiences helped form the sex reassignment
surgery. She gave her life, but now those who do receive the surgery will have a better chance of
living. They will get to live the life that Lili always strived for.
Bibliography


