



*Rahel Szalit, Die Fencerin, Selbstbildnis (The Fencer, Self-Portrait), in Die Dame, 1930.  
Kunstbibliothek, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin—Preußischer Kulturbesitz.*

# Did I Always Know? Bisexual Visibility in Life and in the Archive

Kerry Wallach

I first discovered Jewish artist Rahel Szalit in Berlin archives in 2008, but it was not until twelve years later that I stumbled upon the “smoking gun,” something I never expected to find. This was a letter from Szalit to a close friend that confirmed she had relationships with both men and women. Until I read that one personal letter, I would not have dared comment on Szalit’s sexuality. None of her other letters or writings made any reference to lovers or relationships. We know she was married briefly, to a man, so what else was there to say?

To be sure, I felt called to write Szalit’s biography long before I had access to such details. The immediate affinity I felt for the east European-born illustrator and painter Rahel Szalit (1888–1942) is something I cannot explain in words. Her short, dark hair and her self-portrait as a fencer suggested she took part in so-called masculine activities and trends, but this was not uncommon for New Women of the 1920s. Maybe I always guessed there was more to her story. Did I have special insight into someone born nearly a hundred years before me because of my own experiences? Still, it seems absurd to suggest I could somehow sense she was bisexual.

Bisexuality is among the most invisible of the LGBTQIA+ identities. There are few effective ways for people in long-term relationships to come out as attracted to people of multiple genders, especially in professional settings. Even though I am openly queer and married to a woman, I am visible as bisexual only to those familiar with my past. I am accustomed to feeling as if people don’t know my full story. Upon first meeting me, most people (conditioned to presume heterosexuality) assume

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I am straight until I mention my wife. Then they assume I am gay, but I have never considered myself a lesbian. Within the queer community, too, bisexual people are often viewed as insincere. My present doesn’t reflect my whole self.

To write the life story of any historical figure, a good researcher keeps an open mind. Whether or not the archive holds evidence of queer relationships, or of other difficult-to-detect qualities, the possibility is always there, below the surface or between the lines. It can be particularly challenging to determine if someone was bisexual, especially when this label was not yet widespread. If we hold space for this, we might stumble onto queer lives in unexpected places.

In the case of Rahel Szalit, there were many people in her social circles who were known to be gay, bisexual, or sexually fluid. The friend to whom Szalit wrote the “smoking gun” letter, Eleonore Kalkowska, notably separated from her husband and lived with a female partner, Milly Steger. Many artists active in the Association of Women Artists in Berlin were known for their radical approaches to sexuality. Further, Szalit’s illustrations of Thomas Mann’s biblical story “Dina” appeared in the journal *Die Aufklärung* (The Enlightenment), which was coedited by the prominent sexologist and gay rights advocate Magnus Hirschfeld. Szalit’s proximity to queer worlds makes it easier to categorize her as someone interested in both men and women.

One piece of the puzzle that remains unsolved is Rahel’s marriage to actor Julius Szalit. The two separated even

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before Julius's suicide at age twenty-seven, in 1919. His death record indicates that the first name of his wife was unknown, implying estrangement. Nevertheless, some blamed Rahel for Julius's suicide. Others claimed he became distraught after receiving a telegram-like notification about someone (possibly a woman) he loved.

But another document may tell a different story about Julius Szalit. Director Moriz Seeler, who was homosexual, composed a deeply laudatory "open letter" to Julius shortly after Julius died. This is Seeler's only such work of this kind. Most of his writings discuss friends and acquaintances using the third person, but this one directly addresses his deceased friend. Seeler concludes, "Dear Julius Szalit! Rest comfortably and finally at ease, and wait with a floating mind and dapper heart for a resurrection day that will not be disturbed by any kind of disharmony or moral objections." Though the letter doesn't explicitly mention sexuality, there is nevertheless a hint of an untold story in these mournful lines.

In my biography of Rahel Szalit, I stop short of drawing definitive conclusions about Julius Szalit's sexuality but point to the possibility that they may have had a lavender marriage or a marriage of convenience. It would not be surprising if Julius's suicide were linked to closeted homosexuality (or bisexuality), given what we know about Rahel and the circles they both moved in. But for Julius, there is no "smoking gun"—only whispers. All we have is speculation.

Many individuals do not come out as queer out of fear for their safety or reputation. Rahel Szalit may have worried she would jeopardize her hard-earned standing in the Jewish community if she had been more open about her bisexuality, which she never wrote about or mentioned publicly. But, in the end, it was not Jews who ostracized her. Szalit saw the writing on the wall and fled Berlin for Paris in 1933, when Jewish artists were cast out of most German organizations. Even the Association of

Women Artists in Berlin, formerly supportive of women in the avant-garde, excluded its Jewish members under pressure from the Reich Chamber of Culture. Later, Szalit was arrested by the French police and murdered at Auschwitz because she was Jewish.

Today, queer Jews are experiencing another turbulent and precarious moment, and not only because of current threats to the legal rights of LGBTQ individuals. Jewish and queer identities continue to be shaped by both antisemitism and homophobia. With antisemitism again on the rise worldwide, many Jews no longer feel welcome in groups that previously embraced them. Is it more dangerous to be visibly queer or visibly Jewish? The fear of harm applies to physical safety as well as to psychological and social well-being. When should we conceal these identities to protect ourselves? And when should we double down and make ourselves even *more* visible—either for our own benefit, or to educate those around us?

To understand the world, or the past, we must open our eyes to all possibilities. As I argued in my first book, *Passing Illusions*, some people want to be seen as Jewish or as queer (or bisexual, etc.). For this to be possible, the people they encounter must be willing to fully read for hints of difference, including subtle ones. By keeping an open mind, and by encouraging others to be receptive to the full spectrum of identities, we can ultimately tell a more complete story.

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**KERRY WALLACH** is professor and chair of German Studies and an affiliate of the Jewish Studies Program at Gettysburg College. She is the author of *Traces of a Jewish Artist: The Lost Life and Work of Rahel Szalit* (Penn State University Press, 2024) and *Passing Illusions: Jewish Visibility in Weimar Germany* (University of Michigan Press, 2017).