

## Chapter 4

### The Institute for Radium Research in Red Vienna

As this work has now been organized after several years of tentative efforts each collaborator has *his* or *her* [emphasis mine] particular share to take in making the practical preparations necessary for an experiment. Besides each has *his* or *her* particular theme for research which he pursues and where he can count on the help from one or more of his fellow workers. Such help is freely given certain workers having spent months preparing the means required for another workers theme.<sup>1</sup>

When Hans Pettersson submitted this description of the work at the Radium Institute in a report to the International Education Board in April 1928, several women physicists were already part of his research team on artificial disintegration. A number of other women explored radiophysics and radiochemistry as collaborators of the institute, formed their own research groups, and worked alongside some of the best-known male physicists in the field. More specifically, between 1919 and 1934, more than one-third of the institute's personnel were women. They were not technicians or members of the laboratory support staff but experienced researchers or practicum students who published at the same rate as their male counterparts. 1

Marelene Rayner-Canham and Geoffrey Rayner-Canham have already drawn our attention to the fact that women clustered in radioactivity research in the early twentieth century. Identifying three different European research schools on radioactivity—the French, English, and Austro-German—the Rayner-Canhams argue that women "seemed to play a disproportionately large share in the research work in radioactivity compared to many other fields of physical science."<sup>2</sup> Through prosopographical studies of important women in these three locations, the authors address the puzzle of why so many women were attracted to this particular field. The explanations they propose focus mainly on the character of mentors, directors, and chief collaborators. The more supportive these figures were, the easier it was for women to be accepted into physics laboratories specializing in radioactivity. Once they gained professional access to the field, women developed strong networks and maintained close contacts with one another, thus fortifying and sustaining their positions. 2

A second set of explanations touch on research practices—the fact that radioactivity involved meticulous, routine, and repetitive work. The Rayner-Canhams, like many others, hold that women were more willing than men to 3





















































































