

A feather-light farewell to childhood and happiness



Detlev Meyer

Child of the Sun

Novel. 215 pp.

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»The Child of the Sun tramps through the streets of Berlin, wondering yet wise, loved by all, spoiled by his grandparents – a happy childhood of the type many people experienced, the product of Germany's postwar economic boom: sheltered yet not too buttoned-down, carefree yet not too dull, with liberal parents who had the occasional weakness for the unconventional.«

Frankfurter Rundschau

»Detlev Meyer describes how full of promise the dawn of life can be, trenchantly depicting a wealth of heightened everyday situations.«

Neue Zürcher Zeitung

This small, slight novel brings to life a vanished world. Set during a few months around 1960, its events unfold on a small network of streets in a working-class neighbourhood in Berlin. At the centre of this cosmos is nine-year-old Carsten Scholze, the author's alter-ego, a quick-witted child with a distinct talent for acting, popular with everyone on his street – a true child of the sun. His most important role model is his grandfather, an aging bon vivant who brings his grandson on his visits to the sophisticated world of Café Kranzler.

Various tragic and comical neighbourhood stories are told from the boy's perspective, revealing that life even in this small street runs the whole gamut of human experience. In this little world, people love, hate and die – just as they do in the wider one. *Child of the Sun* is an enchanting and nostalgic book, a hymn to life.

Detlev Meyer was born in Berlin in 1948. He studied librarianship and information technology in Berlin and Cleveland before becoming a librarian in Toronto and later an aid worker in Jamaica. Meyer was a member of PEN and received numerous literary grants. He worked as a freelance journalist and author in Berlin, where he died in 1999. During the final months of his life he recalled the child he once was, calling to mind his most intense moments of happiness and security.

Detlev Meyer

Child of the Sun

English translation by Steph Morris.

Pp. 7 – 22.

The boy had no doubt; one day, when he was grown up, he would know everything you had to know: the number of mountains on earth; the length of each river, its source; every capital city and country; the presidents and prime ministers; the kings and Kaisers to please grandma; and for papa, who scored which goal in Berne, along with Toni Turek's birthday. He would remember the title of every book in grandpa's library, its author and what it said. It was astounding what he knew already and how nicely he talked for his age. His grandma said so, his parents said so, even his older brother grudgingly admitted it, and the whole street, Truseweg, knew that the youngest Scholze boy was a little genius; Frau Dallmann had said so, the whiskey merchant's lady wife, as grandpa called her.

Out strolling with his grandfather, Max Wollin, they met Frau Dallmann at the tobacconists on Innstrasse. She greeted grandpa with, 'Oh, here comes our *grand seigneur!*'

Perfectly accustomed to such homage, Max Wollin ignored this flattery, donned a winning smile, and said, 'What a feast for the eyes! A good day to you, my dear Frau Dallmann!' with the slickness of an old charmer.

Upset not to be mentioned, Carsten acted the pageboy, adding loudly and chivalrously, 'May I wish you a good day too, Frau Dallmann, an excellent day!'

She clapped her hands together, almost in shock and said – no – cried, 'The boy is a child prodigy!'

Carsten was satisfied. To be a child prodigy and – at the same time! – a little genius was highly unusual. Such children must be very rare, certainly in Berlin. He didn't listen to the rest of their conversation; it was always the same. Grandpa delivered some witticisms, the women burst out laughing, sometimes going red, placed their hands on grandpa's upper arm, whispered risqué little nothings into his ear, even falling into coquettish teenage giggling. The boy didn't

like that at all. They shouldn't start all that silly giggling. They weren't little girls anymore, too old. Giggling, really!

Why did grandpa do it? Carsten wondered. And because he was a bright boy, he grasped straight away: grandpa did it so the women would say nice things about him, which were known as compliments of course.

It was universally agreed that Herr Wollin was a gentleman, a man of the world, a gallant, the last true gent, one of the old school, a charmer, a *bon vivant* and, most recently, a *grand seigneur*.

All these words the boy had learned! He knew what they meant and pronounced them correctly. He requested a definition of *grand seigneur*, the latest acquisition to his prize vocabulary. 'It means "great man,"' Wollin said.

'Like Herr Funke?' the boy asked; their caretaker was six foot two – he had been measured in the presence of witnesses at a barbeque – making him the tallest man in Truseweg.

'No,' Max Wollin said, 'Herr Funke is not great. Herr Funke is tall.'

'But you're great, grandpa?'

'Well if Frau Dallmann says so, I'm sure it's true.'

'And great? What is great?'

'How terribly, terribly difficult to explain it to a child. Great means... special... significant.'

'Are you special and significant, grandpa?'

'If that's what Frau Dallman says. No, joking apart, you mustn't tell your father I describe myself as special and significant. He thinks I'm losing my grip as it is. You keep that to yourself, Carsten!'

'Oh, ok.'

'Promise?'

'Promise, grandpa!'

That evening, no sooner had he entered the flat, the boy explained to his father what grandpa was now, a *grand seigneur*. His father shook his head, 'What have you picked up now? Did you meet Frau Dallmann by any chance?'

'Oh, papa, that was supposed to be the surprise. You were meant to guess who we met.'

Georg Scholze put his arm round the boy and said, 'So if I know you, you'll already have learned the words *grand seigneur*.'

'Obviously, papa. That's what I always do.'

Once, grandma had hinted to her ladies' circle – less elegantly put, her cronies – that Max had once been a philanderer. Everyone knew it, and in front of the child she didn't wish to elaborate. Again Carsten reported straight back to his father: 'Papa, grandpa used to be a philanderer.'

'He was a party member too, back in the day, your fine upstanding grandpa,' Georg Scholze said, 'but in the Wollin household they prefer not to discuss it.'

No explanation of the expression 'party member' was forthcoming. His father said he was still too young to understand it. 'And keep it to yourself too. Not a word about party members. Promise?'

'I swear, papa!'

My God, the boy thought to himself in bed that night, all the things he had to remember. You could say *grand seigneur*, but you couldn't say party member. He hoped he don't get it muddled up. 'Nonsense,' he said out loud, 'not me! Other children maybe.'

And then he thought about how, yet again, he knew more than yesterday. Maybe he wouldn't have to wait till he was grown up. Maybe he would know everything by the time he was a big boy. The cities, countries, the rivers and the presidents.

Someone could easily have found out if his grandmother, Else Wollin, née Gellert, 1890, was indeed a Countess von Veltheim. It would not have involved expensive, time-consuming genealogical investigations of the kind needed to determine whether, for instance, the house of Greifenclau was first recorded in the eleventh century or the twelfth.

No, in the Gellert/Veltheim instance you need only have visited a couple of registry offices to ascertain once and for all, that Else was indeed a Veltheim, deprived of her fine title and no less fine inheritance solely due to her grandmother's profligate disposition. For Else Gellert's ancestry included a dashing estate manager with a jaunty little beard and fiery eyes – a rogue – who ensnared the countess, whipped her up into a passion and finally possessed her, in the hay as per usual, on one of those hot summer nights which made even the stoniest of squires and most virtuous of spinsters feel the blood in their veins. So no-one accused the blossoming young countess of deliberately defying her class and its conventions. She had simply followed an overpowering urge, had stilled the desires of her heart and body in a tumult of passions.

Asked if she had known her love-struck grandmother, Else Gellert gave no answer. 'Best not ask,' she would reply, with conspicuously suppressed pain, while her gaze drifted into

the dim past where a louse-ridden asylum or poorhouse stood, last refuge of a certain Frederieke Karwunke, born 'von Weltheim', the final abode of a lost, outcast soul.

Else's origins were accepted by the family out of love, out of respect and – in the case of Else's husband Max Wollin – because they were part of an unspoken agreement which required both not to test each other's stories too carefully for their verisimilitude, just to leave them the way they were told. This was also the reason why Fräulein Reeskow was officially grandpa's former secretary and nothing more! And for this reason she was permitted to enter the Wollin household, to drink tea with Else, exchange secret glances with Max and keep his cheeky grandchildren at bay with bright fondants. The boys were terribly curious and had inherited none of the Wollins' discretion. Every time she visited their grandparents, they got all excited and told their mother that Fräulein Reeskow had been looking at grandpa all strangely again. The oldest son, Stephan, asked what was going on but was fobbed off by Elsa's daughter with a terse, 'not now.'

Carsten loved Fräulein Reeskow. Firstly she had painted fingernails, secondly she smoked with a silver cigarette holder – now who might have given her that? – and thirdly she had the habit, when eating cakes, of placing her fingertips to her lips as if to kiss the crumbs away. Each time she did it, one of those infamous looks was exchanged.

Fräulein Reeskow's hair was a fluctuating shade of blonde which looked to Carsten like gold. He liked her tall high heels and the short skirts of her otherwise demure outfits. He also liked the way she ran her ringed left hand through her hair. He practiced this gesture in front of his mother's dressing table mirror, pouting each time he said, 'Oh, my dear Herr Wollin, how choice!' (her response to grandpa's *bon mots*) and laughing as only Fräulein Reeskow could laugh: pearl-like, according to grandpa; affected, according to grandma. The fact that Fräulein Reeskow was left-handed made her Carsten's ally. No-one could force him to use his right hand. He would reply immediately, 'Fräulein Reeskow doesn't, and she was grandpa's secretary.'

This was from 1925 to 1945, at which point grandpa was pensioned off. At thirty-four he had been made head of department at an insurance company. Fräulein Reeskow now entered his professional life, and soon his private life, belonging to both till Max Wollin took his final breath. She was fourteen years younger than her boss. In high heels she was also four inches taller than his wife, and several stone lighter than the rather plump Else Wollin. Back then the blonde was still real and its effect was not lost on the new boss. Hair like gold, he thought, and launched into an affair.

Unpleasantness occurred. The wronged wife received anonymous letters saying her husband had spent a fortune furnishing a bedroom for his secretary, in which adultery was

frequently committed. He was maintaining this hussy, festooning her with jewellery, locking the door to his inner and outer office at lunchtime. What went on inside, even a respectable woman such as Else Wollin could undoubtedly imagine.

She said to her friend, 'As if I hadn't known for ages. A woman can sense these things. No-one need send me anonymous letters.'

'Will you ask for a divorce?' Berta Barbe asked.

'No, Berta. Max knows full well where he belongs. He always comes back. The appeal of his Fräulein Reeskow is limited to certain times and places, if you know what I mean.'

'That's quite an attitude!' Berta said, impressed. 'Well yes, what goes on behind closed doors is nobody's business, is it?'

Else Wollin straightened up. 'It is indeed nobody's business.'

'What a strong woman you are!' Berta Barbe took her friend in her arms and both women shed a few tears, which undoubtedly helps in such situations.

'How I hate the woman!' Else Wollin sobbed, 'How I hate her!'

The intensity of the hatred dissipated over the years, but even the grandchildren sensed it, in Else's looks and comments.

No-one realised that Max Wollin's mistress was being carefully integrated into the family, as she came to tea, went to the zoo with the daughter and accompanied her to the dressmaker and hairdresser when Else Wollin couldn't rouse herself and claimed to be indisposed.

Else had soon realised that a husband with a guilty conscience was an attentive, generous husband, forfeiting the right to chastise or counsel his wife. Thus, for instance, there were no comments about Else's moods because there was always the risk his wife would state she was far from moody, she was deeply hurt; Max could hardly expect her to dance on the table about Reeskow. After two or three years Else Wollin saw the advantages of the liaison: Max, the philanderer, no longer played the field, and drank less. There were no other women, no other affairs. If Max didn't come home late at night, Else knew where to find him. She thought of Fräulein Reeskow almost with admiration: she'd cracked it! He would never shake this little secretary off. He'd fallen into her trap and there was no escape. If Max left her, he'd be up in court. Reeskow wouldn't let herself be palmed off like the others. She was from a legal family; lawyers and judges, all of them.

So why had she felt the urge to cheapen herself in the first place? She's just like every floozy, Else thought, delighted at the chance for one of her favourite words, 'floozy'. It was ahead of 'queer fish', 'trollop' and 'minx'.

'Fräulein Reeskow is very well bred, isn't she, grandma?' Carsten said one afternoon.

'No,' Else Wollin replied testily. 'She is affected and coquettish. Well-bred ladies do not as a rule smoke in public, or run around with red painted fingernails.'

That meant of course that she, grandma, was indeed well bred, which was only to be expected considering her ancestry. *Noblesse oblige*, in other words.

There was a tragic note to Else's love for the aristocratic; it remained unrequited, the lover denied even a modest 'von', and the grandmotherly glamour landing, as it were, in the gutter, where there are no bright lights, no-one is dazzled, there is just social decline, the rogue Karwunke's inebriety – and that may or may not have been his name, depending on whether he even existed or not! Wollin, Else told herself, was a fine name, suggesting a Brandenburg background. It suited a respectable Berlin family, but, she fretted, *von* Wollin would be rather finer – and more appropriate.

It was entirely natural that she had loved the sport of tennis while Gottfried Baron von Cramm was still active. Along with his splendid name came a slender, elegant body, powerful, graceful movements and those white, impeccably cut trousers the baron liked to wear, which still appeared fresh from the ironing board after the match. Else Wollin rhapsodized about this blue-blooded tennis star, although Max insinuated that Herr von Cramm's tendencies made him immune to female rhapsodies. Frau Wollin took this for slander. Later, when she heard about Cramm's imprisonment, she interpreted these tendencies as a sign of aristocratic decadence, the penalty for a family tree reaching back into the middle ages. Whatever Gottfried von Cramm did, she declared, he would do with style.

'That much is true,' Max said sardonically.

She remained cross for days about his marriage to Barbara Hutton, 'that American dollar-princess.'

'Look at it this way, Elsie,' her husband said, 'at least he'll be provided for now. Your prince in white is getting on. He won't make any more money from tennis.'

'But an American, whose grandfather was a hawker. There's no need for that. There are plenty of rich ladies in Germany, and here there is old money.'

‘New money is also accepted,’ Max said, demonstrating yet again that his sense of irony justified its legendary reputation.

‘A gentleman wears long underpants at all times, even the height of summer,’ Max Wollin explained to his nine-year-old grandson, surprised as he watched his grandfather dressing.

‘Those short underpants are just knickers, things little girls wear. Knickers, I tell you!’

The boy was upset to hear grandpa implying papa wore girl’s knickers. Best not mention it at home or there’d be cross words again.

Carsten and Max Wollin were planning a promenade down Ku’damm and had got dressed up. Carsten was in his favourite knee-length socks. They were yellow, very yellow. He’d been allowed to choose them himself. They went well with his beige and brown argyle shirt and his brown brogues.

Max looked approvingly at his grandson. ‘Who dressed you? Mama?’

‘Oh grandpa, I’ve been dressing myself for ages!’

‘My apologies, young man. I meant, who chose the clothes?’

‘Me, grandpa. Looks good, doesn’t it?’

‘Certainly. The colours are tastefully co-ordinated.’

Max Wollin was pleased his grandson didn’t knock around in a lurid mishmash of colours. It made kids look like organ-grinders’ monkeys. He knew he could rely on his daughter. She didn’t buy her sons sweetie-coloured shirts or silly striped socks. Rieke had taste!

Max demonstrated his taste day for day. He was appropriately dressed for every occasion, modest yet elegant. There was nothing conspicuous about him, a master of understatement. And yet everyone on Truseweg noted that Herr Wollin was the best dressed man in this short street, just six tenements – which didn’t mean he wouldn’t cut a dash on Ku’damm too.

Today he was wearing a grey lounge suit with a dark green waistcoat, a pale blue shirt, a black and green spotted tie, black shoes, and dark green knee-length socks matching his *pochette*.

When he once informed Carsten that a gentleman never wore ankle socks, Carsten rushed home and announced to his mother he would only wear long socks from now on. He would not be touching those stupid short ones again. After he’d promised to calm down, his

mother took him Schmidt's underwear store in Anzengruberstrasse. That evening he proudly showed three pairs of knee-length socks to his father.

'They're for Sundays, Carsten! You mustn't be wearing them to the playground,' Georg Scholze said.

'Ok, papa.'

The boy had the brainwave he would simply visit the playground less often. It was mostly the bigger boys anyway, and they never let you play with them.

Grandpa put a coat on (a dust coat), a hat (a homburg), and reached for his umbrella.

'What, no gloves?' Carsten was disappointed.

'Best not. I'll only forget them and your grandmother will complain again. "Such lovely, expensive gloves! The second pair this year and it's only August. The man spends a fortune on gloves. If it was me I'd never hear the last of it!"'

The boy loved hearing Max Wollin imitate his wife, it was hilarious. Carsten was learning this art too. He particularly liked to copy Fräulein Reeskow, her 'My dear Herr Wollin...' which she sprinkled generously into the conversation. The frequency with which she addressed her lover this way was a message to Else that etiquette was being observed: no familiar first-name terms at Truseweg 2. Even after thirty years!

Carsten's father claimed Fräulein Reeskow was incapable of speaking like a normal human being, certainly not in front of her former boss; she chirruped and trilled like a nightingale. 'The woman's hardly in her twenties!'

'She's not in her fifties either,' Rieke pointed out, and the Scholzes laughed. The boy didn't like it; no-one should make fun of his beautiful Fräulein Reeskow. Pity he couldn't forbid his parents.

In the U-Bahn Max Wollin found a seat where he could see his reflection in the window opposite. The boy was too small; he could only see his hair. He sat on his grandfather's knee instead, looking curiously at his reflection. He pulled faces, the ghastliest grimaces imaginable. His grandfather missed most of them. He was so absorbed with his mirror image he noticed nothing else.

Neither said a word, except when the train approached each station; the boy called the name out, eyes closed, before asking his grandfather quietly, 'correct?'

'Yes, Spichernstrasse: correct.'

Max and Carsten sat at a table on the terrace outside the Kranzler, watched the women and the cars, drank coffee and Sinalco, conversed, and laughed at the Bavarian tourists with

their knee-breeches. They had a whale of a time. Max bought cakes and ice cream for Carsten, and treated himself to a brandy.

‘You know what, make it a double!’ he said to the waitress. ‘Don’t tell grandma, will you?’

‘I never tell, grandpa, you know that.’

The brandy was served in a large, rotund glass. Carsten looked at his glass, with ‘Sinalco’ written on it, a right kids’ glass.

‘Grandpa, can I have a glass like that?’

‘A brandy glass? You can’t drink fizzy pop out of that.’

‘Why not? It looks much nicer.’

‘That much is true. You know, Carsten, I think one day you’ll be a real dandy. Fine, I’ll call the waitress.’

‘Could you fetch a brandy glass for my grandson, please.’

The overworked waitress was aghast. ‘A brandy? For the boy?’

‘Not a brandy, my dear lady, just a brandy glass.’

‘What for? He already has a glass.’

‘But it’s a stupid Sinalco glass!’ Carsten cried.

The waitress shook her head. ‘Some children are unbelievable!’

‘You’re right there,’ Wollin said, winking at his grandson.

The waitress returned with a brandy glass. ‘That do you?’

‘That’s very obliging of you. Carsten, say thank you to the lady.’

She said quietly, ‘You shouldn’t spoil the boy.’

‘Give me one good reason why not,’ Grandpa said.

At the end, the waitress received a handsome tip.

A young blonde woman was sitting at the next table.

‘Look, grandpa. She looks like Fräulein Reeskow.’

Grandpa laughed. ‘Pity she’s not here to hear you say that. She’d be delighted.’

‘Why?’

‘Because she’s rather older than this young lady.’

‘How old is she then?’

‘That I cannot disclose. One must hide the age of women under a cloak of silence.’

‘Why?’

‘Because women are terribly vain and awfully sensitive.’

‘That’s true, grandpa.’ Carsten looked at the young blonde and then at his grandfather.

‘Do you like Fräulein Reeskow a lot?’

‘Yes, you could say that.’

‘And grandma?’

‘Well yes, Grandma likes her too.’

‘But not all the time, does she?’

‘No.’

‘Why doesn’t Fräulein Reeskow have a husband?’

‘She’s very much the single woman; she doesn’t want a husband.’

‘Perhaps she’d like you?’

Max Wollin looked down at his hands. ‘Could we change the subject, please!’

‘Sure, grandpa. I’ll tell you a joke, shall I? Stephan told me it.’

‘You know I don’t like jokes. Let’s get going. You’d best get back before your father comes home from work.’

‘It’s been a lovely afternoon. Thank you, grandpa.’

‘My pleasure, young man.’

In the U-Bahn neither said a word, as always.

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