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Worlds Apart

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BORN IN EAST BERLIN, I had lived in West Berlin's Marienfelde refugee camp with my mother and three sisters for almost nine months as a child, from October 1978 to the summer of 1979. The West German state of Schleswig-Holstein admitted us as a hardship case and our mother found an old brick farmhouse in a run-down village on the North Sea-Baltic Sea Canal, with a thatched roof, a large almost lightless threshing floor at its centre, and an apparently never-ending unfenced garden bordering on paddocks down to the canal. Anna wanted to drop out there and make a home for herself. Supported by benefits, she wanted to start a new life in freedom with her daughters.

No one knew her in West Germany; actresses were ten a penny. The labour exchange in the camp had told her to her face that no one was waiting for her here in the West. There was no chance of acting work for a thirty-five-year-old woman, single, with four children from different fathers, who hadn't worked for several years. Around the time of her first application to leave the GDR, she had stopped working at the Hans-Otto-Theater in Potsdam, intending to study stage design. Over the years of repeated summonses and rejections of her exit application, she had been allocated jobs as a dubbing artist, a postwoman and a graveyard gardener. The combination of her CV and her social situation rendered her unqualified for the West German labour market. She had been classified as a welfare case. Her training at the renowned Ernst Busch acting school, her many years at various theatres and her roles in East German films were not even enough to get her retrained, at least until the Wall came down.

We kept various animals. A sheep, a goat, a pig, a goose, a rabbit, a dog and a cat. At first, they were all female, apart from my twin sister's dog. None of them was to be alone for long, they were all to multiply. We dug vegetable beds beneath the knotty fruit trees and set up cold frames. We made jam, pressed juice out of elderberries, baked bread from our own hand-milled grain, milked the goats and made our own cheese. The only

thing we children didn't want to eat, other than our mother's nettle soup, was the lambs and piglets soon to be born. In the summer we picked sorrel, yarrow and dandelion leaves from the fields; who needed watery supermarket lettuce? None of us used recipes from books; we taught ourselves to cook any way we liked. Our apple cakes and oat cookies, Christmas biscuits and blueberry tarts were improvised. We got up alone in the morning, made ourselves tea, and in the winter we children shovelled the snow and ice from the pavement before dawn. We walked the five kilometres to the Steiner school on the other side of the canal, sticking our thumbs out in the cold when we reached the ferry, in the hope that someone might take pity and have space for us twins in their car. I remember the pain and the burning in my toes as they gradually thawed out under my desk during the day's first lesson. Damp socks in wet leather shoes. The bus was too expensive. When the snow melted in spring, we cycled to school on our patched-up bikes. Fixing a puncture, changing brake pads and replacing the cable between a dynamo and a lamp, changing a chain, repairing a bottom bracket and replacing the loose ball bearings, greasing parts – there was little we couldn't do ourselves.

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There was a boy, Schelsky, who would sometimes lie in wait for us at the hill by the ferry. We'd stand on the pedals to climb the hill. Our bikes had no gears; they were heavy. He positioned his bike straight across the road. The minute we braked in front of him and tipped sideways, he grabbed so hard at our handlebars that our bikes crashed to the ground; he showered us with insults and spat in our faces. More than once. He spat as much as he could, while he held first one and then the other of us down beside our bikes on the ground. Never before had someone spat in my face. There was no reason to do so; he just didn't like us. He was three years older and a head taller. We would have liked to forget him. Something of that smell sticks to you; you smell it days and years later.

Disorientated in the West Berlin refugee camp, Anna had set up a kind of tombola for herself. She wrote to all the Steiner schools in Germany and asked if they had free places for her three school-age daughters. The winning ticket took us to Schleswig-Holstein, near Rendsburg. Anna didn't know anyone in the area.

A nursery teacher at the regional Steiner school had volunteered to take us twins for the spring, which meant we left the camp slightly earlier

to move in with her and her husband. We were the strangers. Intruders. We spent those weeks doing everything wrong. We didn't know how to say grace, kept forgetting to wash our hands and comb our hair, ate with our mouths open, didn't hand over our dirty clothes for washing, and spoke a strange dialect. We knew no manners, no curtseys or meek looks. We lied when we dropped a glass and swept up the shards secretly but not thoroughly enough, we stole a biscuit from the plate on the table, we whispered and left our room without asking. Soon we were tiptoeing around the house. It felt bad, and we learned our first Steiner school joke: Felt? the husband asks with a faint smile, and fingers his wife's woollen sleeve. The teacher took us along every morning to the Steiner school, where we were registered as Johanna and Susanne. We only had to stay with her for a few weeks.

When the days got hot, we moved into the old farmhouse in Schacht-Audorf.

We spent all summer long digging pigweed roots out of the black earth, tilling a potato field and sowing carrots. Often, our mother wouldn't get up until we got home from school. Presumably, she went to bed late. Everyone had their own rhythm.

Once we'd cooked, done the washing up, helped in the garden and the wood was chopped and piled, we twins ran off to swim in the Dörpsee lake and play in the paddocks behind the house. Before the fields were sold one day to build the ferry-view estate with its box houses, the paddocks were rarely fenced in with wire; rows of beeches, called a *knick*, served as windbreaks and boundaries. The owner had rented the paddocks to farmers for grazing cows and horses put out to pasture. The horses and ponies, at least twenty if not twenty-five of them, were old and sick; no longer useful. We would visit them, feed them shepherd's purse and dandelion leaves, bring them the first small apples at the end of summer, and watch them. We gave them names and decided which were too small and weak to be ridden. For as long as we could remember, we'd been Indians. We never played Cowboys and Indians – cowboys were dumb, no one needed them. We were Indians. One of our horses was bald, another had a concave back. Its backbone drooped like it had carried cement sacks all its life and would soon be scraping its belly along the floor. Another had dull blueish eyes that watered; it could no longer see, that was for sure. One

usually lay on the grass and buckled its front legs when it stood up. We picked out a rather thin grey horse and a stocky black pony. My sister wanted the small one; I tried to approach the grey. The scent of the skin tickled my nose. For days and hours, we tried our luck: mounting without saddle or bridle, staying put and not getting thrown if they suddenly cantered off. My oldest book, which I still have today, was published by the Lucie Groszer publishing house in East Berlin. I was given it for my third birthday. It's a children's book, originally from America, with the German title *Der kleine Zweifuß* – Margaret Friskey's *Indian Two Feet*. I've read it to plenty of children I was looking after, as a babysitter, nanny or friend. Indian Two Feet, the chief's son, wants nothing more than a horse. We hear all the things he can do and how he spends his days. The book's central line is his father's advice: *If you want to find a horse, you have to think like a horse*. He attempts the impossible, he searches and thinks and searches. One day, he falls asleep in the shade of a big rock, exhausted. Turning the page, you see it: *Oh no, he didn't find a horse, but a horse found him*. At first, he thinks it must be a dream, then he sees that the horse is injured and limping. He takes off his shirt and wraps it around the horse's leg, trying to help him, and he tells the horse to come with him. *Indian Two Feet had a horse, but he walked*. That story of a lucky encounter that speaks many wise truths impressed me. Wanting to think like someone else. Putting yourself in their place. Looking for someone and not finding them. Helping, taking care of someone else. Encountering a companion who comes along and accepts help until they're healthy and we can ride together. When we played Indians, we'd gallop across the fields, set up jumps and run horse races on two legs; we were always both at once, rider and horse. We would click our tongues like hooves and flare our lips when the horses snorted. I liked the scent of their skin, the warm shimmer of their eyes.

At the age of three, my twin sister had once tipped head over heels into the shallow water of the Baltic and almost drowned. She's said to have had turns now and then as a small child, turning blue and briefly fainting. I don't remember that but our mother sometimes talked about it. A consequence of her lack of oxygen during our premature birth. Her sense of balance matured later too, it seems. After the winter when we'd had swimming lessons in the municipal pool at Wildau just south of Berlin, I practiced riding a bike outside our grandmother's house in Rahnsdorf. I

was a big girl of five. The saddle on Inge's folding bike was lowered as far as possible. Suddenly, I could do it. The faster I pedalled, the easier it was to keep my balance. Cars rarely passed the house in those days. I rode up and down Fürstenwalder Allee outside the house, crowing with pleasure. Until Anna came running onto the street and called to me to ride further away. Off you go! Not until I turned around for the umpteenth time and cycled past the house did I hear her anger as she yelled at me. She told me to get going, out of view. She flapped her arms to shoo me away. Get out of here, will you! So my twin wouldn't have to see me and watch me. *Gosh, just imagine it!* were words I heard constantly as a child. Followed by the formula: *Put yourself in her shoes*. For as long as I can remember, I was supposed to put myself in my twin's position, to grasp how terrible all my skills must be for her. To understand I was making her jealous. I didn't want to make anyone jealous, unhappy or angry. Don't show what you can do. I learned to feel ashamed. Of my visibility.

Was I punished for it? Unexpectedly, three brand new bicycles turned up in Rahnsdorf at Easter. My twin sister got a shiny frog-green children's bike with a bell and stabilizers. My older sister was given a blue one with a larger frame like an adult's, with a bell, a light and a pretty net protecting the spokes, and my mother the same in red. Next to the new bikes stood my big sister's old one; it was mine now. It had neither a bell nor a light but it rode well, without stabilizers. At least I could ride it fast and slow and in a slalom. Wherever I wanted. I just wasn't supposed to show it.

When we went to the funfair at Wuhlheide once or twice a year, I had to go on the ghost train and rollercoaster alone. My twin sister didn't dare. Yet we both climbed into the seats of the swing ride, which was to make us terribly sick after the very first round. We vomited in full swing and had to spend minutes recovering afterwards, sitting still on the floor until the dizziness faded. If we wanted to be cosmonauts, we had to have absolutely no fear of heights and giddiness, we were told. Like Laika and Yuri Gagarin, whose pictures we had seen at kindergarten, we wanted to go into space one day, so we had plenty ahead of us.

She was alright in a paddling pool, but my twin was scared of deep water. The early incident on the Baltic coast was blamed. She almost threw up when anyone said we were going swimming. A swimming teacher in the

Wildau pool had simply thrown her in the water one day, clearly thinking that would overcome her fear. The opposite was the case. Over the next few years she gave swimming pools a wide berth. She was excused from swimming at school. In Schacht-Audorf, she learned to swim in the Dörpsee lake, aged eleven or twelve. Her head held high out of the water, she swam a few metres out of the non-swimmers' section in short strokes. Then she could do it.

I had learned to swim just before I turned five, and I loved all kinds of water and swimming, breaststroke and backstroke, floating on my back and somersaulting, I'd dive underwater and open my eyes, in the Baltic, rivers and lakes and in the swimming pool, where I spent whole afternoons practicing underwater swimming and deep diving.

The silence under water. The way you could move your ribcage like you were breathing. Feel your diaphragm, your muscles, the current. At around the time my sister learned to swim, I got my intermediate badge and started practicing for the rescue swimming test in Rendsburg. My head between my outstretched arms and my fingertips out front, I jumped from the starting blocks. Feet-first from the diving tower at a height of seven and a half metres and, despite my fear, one day from the ten-metre board. Not many of the boys in the swimming club dared that. You just had to make sure you didn't do a belly flop. The pain on the soles of my feet. You can only feel brave if you feel fear. The tingle in my tummy on jumping, like the tingle as a small child when the swing swung downwards.

I had to go with her to the lake; she refused to go alone. The Dörpsee was too shallow for high diving towers. The lake had only a small one with a one-metre board and a three-metre board. I dived head-first from the top one into the opaque water. We never had to tell anyone where we were going. No one was ever waiting for us. There was no time we had to get home by. There were neither fixed mealtimes nor bedtimes. We went to sleep whenever we wanted. No one woke us in the morning; my alarm clock rang, we got up alone, swept the road in the grey light of dawn, cycled to school and went to bed in the evening when we were tired.

In our seventh year at school, aged thirteen, we were late almost every morning; classes started at twenty past seven. One day, our teacher lost his temper when we opened the door. He'd had enough, he said, he'd be calling our mother. We didn't tell him she was often still asleep in the

morning. Clocks were for other people. She didn't value punctuality. When she didn't get the day wrong, she'd arrive late to every appointment.

Without tea, which we made for her, Anna couldn't get out of bed on the weekend either. When she sat down with us at the breakfast table we'd laid, Sundays at noon, she couldn't yet hold a knife. A peculiarity I've never seen in myself or heard of from others: She couldn't grip just after getting up, the muscles in her hands and arms wouldn't work. Her teacup and cigarette were the first things she could hold. She had no strength in the hands she used in the afternoon to lift pails full of pig feed into the wheelbarrow and carry water for the animals. After rising late, she still didn't have the strength to cut a slice of bread for lunch. So we sliced it for her.

She was not shy of hard work, it was just that she couldn't do two things at once, or even perceive them. She couldn't follow a conversation if there was music playing. A pronounced sensitivity. When she lost control of herself, which happened easily, she had a short temper. We'd complain about this and that. When the kitchen stank of smoke in winter, and when she put out her cigarette stubs everywhere, on lids of jars, in egg cups and on plates. There were times when she'd remain untouched by the outside world, and on other days her own chaos upset her. We found it stressful that she'd only start tidying a few days before Christmas, and would lock herself into her room until midnight on Christmas Eve with crates of decorations from previous years, to arrange everything just as she wanted it – while we had cooked and our meal had long since gone cold on the stove, pulled our sister on a sledge around the village for hours until she stopped crying and fell asleep. There was barely a Christmas when we were allowed entry into her magical room before eleven at night.

Her short temper didn't kick in as a reaction to us complaining, for example, that we didn't get proper sneakers like other kids. Whereby we didn't want a certain brand; it was about the firm sole we needed for ball games, light athletics and running in the school gym. Her fuse blew when a branch of the Christmas tree caught fire during her explanation of our lack of money, and two things came together. It wasn't predictable; it could be a tiny thing that made her flip out. Someone expressed surprise at the wrong moment over the pots and pans sometimes soaking in the sink for days at a time? The minute the phone rang, a child yelled or she remembered the

goat needed milking, she would leave the kitchen and forget the pans on the stove, the rice would burn, the potato water would steam away and the potatoes would char, a dish in the oven would blacken. Discovering the smoke herself an hour or two later or called back by one of her daughters, she would hit the ceiling with rage at herself. There was no dishwasher. She hated washing dishes as much as we did. She only did it if one of us or a friend read to her for hours as she worked. The plates and glasses weren't clean enough for us? She might have a tantrum and throw crockery at us. Smashed crockery was glued together as best we could manage, plates and cups, bowls and even egg cups. We were ten years old, our big sister sixteen, when one such argument ended with each of us daughters, apart from the two-year-old, now having two washing-up days a week, and Anna only one. There was not one electrical gadget in our house and garden, neither a mixer nor an electric grain mill, no saw, no lawnmower. An hour or two on the grain mill affixed to the kitchen table gave us blisters on our hands and sore wrists. On our washing-up days, we had to wash all the dishes from morning to night for our five-person household and our guests. If we didn't manage it in one day, we were to finish the rest the next day. If we wanted to stay over with a friend we had to swap days. A few months later, she got sick of our constant criticism of her cooking. We didn't like her dandelion salad or the nettle soup with grains. The rice was too soggy and the pasta too soft. She foamed over with rage. Fine, then we were each to take turns cooking for a week from now on. It stayed that way from the time we twins were eleven and our big sister seventeen, until we moved out one after another a few years later. Cooking for one week a month, plus two washing-up days a week. Despite having one more household chore, we were glad. At last we could decide and cook what and how we liked. Spaghetti didn't have to stick together like a tree trunk, we could stir it in salted water and drain it in time. Rice could be cooked in less water and stay firm to the teeth, not a mushy mess. Onions didn't have to burn black and taste either sour or bitter, we could braise them over a low heat. The roux for a mustard sauce was quickly lump-free. The worst dish, in my view, was Anna's lentil soup with blubbery boiled gristly bacon. The smell, the consistency, the look of it. It made me nauseous. Faced with a bowl of it, I'd simply sit unmoving. The bowl would be plonked down again that evening and the next day. When everyone left the table, I had to stay seated

and just go hungry. Once the last person had left the kitchen, I got up secretly and took the lentils to the toilet, where I gagged even as I flushed. No one was allowed to throw food away. I had a guilty conscience and a light heart at the same time.

Anna loved all forms of bacon, most of all pure white speck, smoked, fried, boiled. She would cut thick chunks and pop them in her mouth. She even thought she had to hide the bacon so the mice wouldn't steal it away from her. That meant a slab of bacon might well fall on your head when you took an upturned bowl out of the high cupboard.

In summer, hay had to be made. The scythe was big and heavy compared to us, but one day we too learned to cut the grass. Turning the hay, collecting fallen fruit. In autumn we bottled apple sauce and preserved plums for the winter.

No one noticed me skipping handicraft classes. When I got sick with tonsillitis and couldn't get out of bed for a few days, it once happened that Anna only found out days later, when my sister mentioned it in passing. Then she came into my little room in the northernmost corner of the house. She asked what was the matter and did I need a cup of tea. I nodded. Tea would be good. I waited hours for that tea, until I made myself a cup that evening. She'd long since forgotten it and me again for an unforeseeable length of time. It wasn't meant badly. She was simply occupied with her life, with herself, her animals and friends. Aside from that, she was scatty – that was what she called her forgetfulness.

It might sound idyllic, Pippi Longstocking-esque, but I had neither a monkey nor a horse. Nor was I as strong as Pippi Longstocking. Ashamed of the faded clothes from the Red Cross donations box and the knitted suits arriving in parcels from our grandmother in East Berlin, especially commissioned in green, orange and brown stripes, with straps and bloomer-like trousers that made them look like baby rompers, which even the other children at the Steiner school laughed at, I sewed my first dress at the age of eleven. It was made of scraps of fabric and old clothes, which I cut up and put together again in my own design. To start with, I worked on the old Singer I'd learned to sew on in Adlershof, back when I was six. One day, though, our grandmother from East Berlin brought not only our walnut trees, roots and all, from our older sister's father's garden in Rahnsdorf. Inge had also hidden an electric sewing machine in the large

trunk of her Lada estate car, in among the young trees, watercolour paints and badger-hair brushes, and from then on I used it to sew dresses, take up and patch trousers. She would presumably not have been allowed to remove such an important product from the German Democratic Republic's national economy.

AS AN OFFICIAL VICTIM OF THE NAZI REGIME, Inge had special travel privileges and didn't have to wait until retirement age to visit the West. Only for a short time after her youngest daughter's imprisonment in 1968 and subsequent escape from the country was her freedom of travel rescinded for a short time in the early 1970s. Born and bred in West Berlin's Charlottenburg and as a young woman, first in Italian exile during the war, then in hiding in the Black Forest, Inge had moved to East Berlin at the beginning of 1950, heavily pregnant and bringing along her two older children. She regarded herself as a passionate communist. Unlike her children. With the Berlin Wall in place after 1961, they saw themselves as captives and found little to admire in the state-controlled world in which they were expected to attend school, work and live. Inge's eighteen-year-old son and his lover took their own lives a few months after the Wall was built. Her youngest daughter Rosita wrote and distributed flyers in August 1968, in the echo of the Prague Spring, along with the dissidents Thomas Brasch, Sanda Weigl and others. Brasch and Rosita were taken into isolation custody overnight and sentenced within weeks to two years and three months' imprisonment. Having followed the case with indignation and concern, Inge petitioned the court and wrote to Comrade Erich Honecker in response to the verdict, which was announced to the people of the GDR in their central information organ *Neues Deutschland* in October 1968. Was it her letters and petitions or more effective leverage from the other side that eventually led to an amendment, not communicated to the press, and their release on probation? After three months in solitary confinement and saddled with probation, my aunt Rosita would not have been allowed to finish school or start university in the GDR. She was placed

in a typesetting apprenticeship. What was she to do? Kill herself, like her beloved big brother a few years before? With an escape-helper, she came up with a plan and escaped to the West with a boy her age, Hans Uszkoreit, in a near-empty oil tanker in the summer of 1971. They were not a couple, just friends, and the first thing they both did in West Berlin was to catch up on their schooling. Rosita studied medicine, became a psychiatrist, neurologist and psychoanalyst, examined the transfer of trauma in her generation. Uz studied linguistics and worked first in computer linguistics at the Stanford Institute for Artificial Intelligence, then later as a research professor in Saarbrücken, heading the Language Technology Lab at the German Research Center for Artificial Intelligence. Perhaps it was their youthful political activism, imprisonment and escape that made them into educational refugees with high-flying careers.

After her daughter's escape, Inge was punished with a travel ban and other petty measures, the full extent of which she could barely know. Particularly the obvious loss of her previous privileges as a recognized *Victim of the Nazi Regime* incensed her, prompting more letters to the government. She always opened her trap, Inge was proud to say of herself. I could read the traces of that outspokenness in her Stasi file, despite several gaps in the documents. In files classified as Operative Procedures, the East German secret police collected years' worth of reports and surveillance notes on people they considered suspicious. Informers meticulously recorded when Inge met whom, what she said, how *subversive*, *negative* and *hostile* her statements and behaviour were. Alongside receipts for flowers and chocolates given to her on visits by one of her informants, the file contains ideas on covertly hindering her career to keep her in political check.

Soon afterwards, Inge's oldest and last remaining child Anna submitted an exit application with her then three children in 1974, and repeated the application until it was granted for her and her by that point four children in 1978; my grandmother had then lost all her children, in a way. At least politically. Even after the Berlin Wall fell, she never entertained doubts in her own political passion and conviction.

I did not read Inge's Stasi files until after her death in 2009. What I read closed gaps in my memories, confirmed suspicions and brought surprising details to light. On the Stasi informers' whims, names such as

family club were invented for certain gatherings of young opposition circles in Inge's Rahnsdorf house, Inge's surveillance file was given the title *Putschist*, while she had given herself the cover name *Ursel* years previously, when she sublet a room in her home to the Stasi. How did she arrive at *Ursel*? Might she have been thinking of her overtly political childhood friend Ursula Hirschmann? She seems to have had the Stasi pay for some of her travel, for instance to France to visit her young love, the educational reformist Ernst Jablonski alias Ernest Jouhy – allegedly because she wanted to organize clandestine meetings with French communists to engage in dialogue. There are also indications in her file that she cooperated with the Soviet secret service. Many pages from the hand-numbered files are missing, either taken out by historians and journalists in the years before my research or removed by the Stasi itself in 1989/90. Whole sections of her file and binders that may have been started at a later date could have been shredded. Up until her death after the end of the GDR, she herself denied to us, her closest relatives, that she had ever worked with the Stasi. When, in the 1990s, the first historians wrote about her Stasi collaboration of the late 1950s and early 1960s, she was appalled and called it libel, apparently with utter conviction. Perhaps she thought a hand-written declaration of obligation for cooperation with the state security organs as the sub-letter of a *Clandestine Apartment* made her something entirely different to a *Secret Information-Provider* and the later-used term *Unofficial Collaborator*. It appears that *Ursel* also acted as a messenger between informers and the Stasi, forged contacts.

After her death, I clearly recognized her wild handwriting in her file and on *Ursel's* declaration to cooperate, and her signature on receipts for rent, coal and travel expenses, signed sometimes with her whole name, sometimes as *Ursel*. That handwriting suited her iridescent charisma, sparkling with enthusiasm and passion, and the heroic legends she always told about herself in front of other artist friends and comrades. Even as a young girl, she claimed, she had helped poverty-stricken children in the working-class district of Wedding, given them pencils and tutored them; as a student, she said, she had advised the already well-known, significantly older artist Käthe Kollwitz on working with stone in their shared studio at Klosterstrasse. Later, in the GDR, Inge brought together opponents of the regime in her home. If not enough was being done for art in her view,

which was generally the case, she would not only get worked up in front of friends and colleagues; she would make loud complaints in the artists' association, in the Academy of Arts, to the party and to *them up there*. She adored art. She idolized Michelangelo and Rodin, Frida Kahlo and Picasso, her teacher Fritz Cremer and Käthe Kollwitz, and otherwise only Rosa Luxemburg. For inexplicable reasons, I found my grandmother deeply unsettling, from my earliest childhood. She would breakfast on rock-hard wholemeal bread with butter, a sliced clove of raw garlic and salt. She drank tea with it, pouring glasses of bright orange sea-buckthorn juice for us children. I thought it tasted mouldy and sour; she considered it delicious. Every morning and afternoon she spent with pick and anvil at her larger-than-life stones, hammering away. She was barely five foot one. She always seemed to know what she wanted. She would stand on a stool to reach the heads and shoulders of her sculptures. Using charcoal, she marked the stone where larger chunks had to be knocked out of the block. She occasionally employed an assistant for that job. She liked men, young men. The unshakeable confidence and the pride with which she performed her work, which she called art, placed her sculptures in public space, employed nude models, stonemasons and moulders, signed up musicians and poets to perform at her exhibitions, received an untold crowd of friends, acquaintances and comrades in her house on birthdays and let them celebrate her with freshly rhymed political songs and sketches, had something joyful and yet bristly and stubborn about it, something naïve and frightening. I remember men in transparent negligees and women with glued-on moustaches, black suits and opera hats. I couldn't know at the time that the constantly present Stasi informers, observing and covertly reporting, needed no costume to go unrecognized. In her tales of heroism, Inge had always fought for the right cause, proven civil courage, defended the poor and the workers. A heroine. Why had she not gone to France before the war broke out, not joined the Résistance like her young love Ernst? She turned down the affidavit her father had got hold of from influential colleagues in the USA to support his two older children's American exile. As an aspiring sculptor, she saw no future for herself in the States. Italy was Michelangelo, marble and light, everything she needed. Mussolini couldn't be as bad as Hitler. Inge didn't like it when people questioned her decision, decades later. She did not consider herself either

naive or blind. On the contrary; she said she'd known exactly what she wanted: art. She was a sculptor, nothing else. And had she not gone to Italy, she would never have met Helmut. Their two children Anna and Gottlieb wouldn't have been born, and neither would we grandchildren.

What would I want there? There's no Michelangelo in America! Inge had just been expelled from her degree in the course of the National Socialist *purges*. She didn't want merely to save her life – she didn't want to go into exile. In the midst of the inhospitable preparations for war, she wanted to go to her promised land at last.

How did it come to be that I wasn't born near the little Sicilian town of Enna or in Berkeley, but in East Berlin? Though our great-grandmother Lotte was not a communist and grew up in the southwest of Berlin, in Schöneberg and Wilmersdorf, the closely guarded oldest daughter of a Jewish family going back generations, one that had never been secular.

Pretty little Lotte was just seventeen when she met Heinrich Franck, three years her senior, through her brother Ernst in 1908. The two young men attended Berlin's French lyceum. They would meet at the tennis club, where Lotte was apparently a much-sought-after player. Franck sailed on the Wannsee lake and invited her for a trip on his dinghy. A secret rendezvous. Heinrich wrote letter after letter, which Lotte's mother regularly intercepted and destroyed. Under no circumstances would the Steinitz family tolerate a relationship with a goy. They banned any further contact, any courting and wooing.

It made no difference that the impetuous admirer's father was a renowned painter, a Secessionist and the director of the royal art college. Franck was merely the most defiant of Lotte's flock of admirers, and so the Steinitz family dispatched their daughter to safety in remote Agnetendorf for several months, hoping the pack wouldn't follow her scent. Lotte kept a box of the letters that arrived there, containing pledges, locks of hair and pressed flowers. The occasional young man did find his way to her window, having cycled three days. There were years of covert meetings and a flood of romantic letters, provoking Herr and Frau Steinitz to put up ever new hurdles and tests. It was only once the young chemistry student finally had his doctorate to present at the impressive age of twenty-four, following a diploma, initial positions and various other testimonials, that the newly widowed Martha Steinitz allowed the goy to marry her beautiful Lotte in

1912. Reluctantly. Lotte's sisters were to marry Jewish men. The youngest, Lilli, would one day make it to American exile, traveling via the Netherlands with her husband, the pianist Erwin Bodky, and their young daughter Angelica. Steffi, whose real name was Stephanie, had married a Herzberg and taken their son to safety in Palestine before returning to Berlin, marrying a second husband by the name of Berju and working loyally for the Jewish community. Lotte's big brother Ernst was best man to Heinrich and Lotte. Having studied in Berlin, he managed to save himself to British exile just in time in the mid-1930s, starting a family in England.

Though Lotte and Heinrich were only a few years apart, he aged increasingly to befit his titles and offices, while she seemed to remain a young girl, a princess. He adored her. There is a photo of them with friends and children at a beach on the Baltic, taken in 1920 or 1921. Lotte perches happily in a bathing suit on her husband's shoulders, he too in a bathing suit. Legs wide, he has both fists stemmed against his hips while his beloved rests her hands elegantly on his head. His high, wide brow. With her long legs, Lotte looks like his daughter, at most the older sister of the many children in the sand in front of them. Peter and Inge are wearing striped bathing suits, Gisela is naked, like other small children. Little Michael is not yet born. Dressed in thick tunics and blouses, the older housemaids sit between the children and their standing employers.

Although a Social Democrat and an opponent of the Nazis from the very beginning, Franck cannot bring himself to go into exile after Hitler seizes power. Does he feel he is indispensable? Is he afraid of foreign languages, does he not dare to make a new start as a scientist in America, are Heinrich and Lotte too attached to the city of their birth, do they not want to leave her aging parents behind in Berlin? The letters the two of them exchanged throughout their lives might one day shed some light for me. Heinrich did not serve in the First World War, deferred from the draft as a scientist. The Nazis repeatedly demand he divorce his wife, and he refuses to do so. Little by little, he is discharged from all previous positions and offices, loses the chair of his research laboratory at the Bavarian Nitrogen Works, is expelled from his professorship and sidelined into glass research. In the later years of the war, he hides Lotte from Gestapo raids and denunciatory neighbours, first on their storey of a Westend villa, then in his father's garden house on the Wannsee, and finally in nearby bushes,

as he once put it. Despite all that, he appears to have not considered, or to have decided against, going into exile with Lotte. When the war breaks out, Lotte and her one-year-younger sister Steffi are the only remaining relatives in Berlin who can take care of their frail mother Martha. Ernst and Lilli have long since gone into exile. Steffi is employed by Berlin's Jewish community, some say as a nursery teacher; others say her last job was as a carer for the elderly. All three of them have to wear the yellow star; Lotte believes she is protected by her marriage. Their old mother Martha is not allowed to sit on a park bench, is evicted from her home and robbed of her assets, has to keep moving house. The last address I find for her in the Berlin directory is at Regensburger Strasse, near Viktoria-Luise-Platz. According to a family register, Martha dies on 2 August 1941, thus evading deportation by a matter of months. The card from the religious community announcing her death states her last address as Niebuhrstr. 1 in Charlottenburg, her date of death as 6 August 1941. In the face of all the requirements and restrictions, Lotte and Steffi manage to have her buried in the Jewish cemetery in Weissensee with her husband, who died more than three decades previously. On 13 January 1942, Steffi and her husband are deported with around a thousand other people from platform 17 of Berlin-Grunewald station, and murdered on the way to Riga. Lotte could not prevent it. On at least one occasion, Lotte is picked up on the street by the Gestapo and also once from home; both times, Heinrich must have been able to collect her. He later told the diarist Viktor Klemperer they had spent the last three weeks of the war in the cellar. His head had been grazed by a bullet and his wife was shot through the upper body. Klemperer noted it in his diary. Heinrich held firm to his beloved Lotte. These physical injuries were never mentioned in the family. It may be that they preferred not to tell their children, scattered around the world, so as not to upset them. Letters also had to be formulated carefully at that time so as not to reveal information that might endanger the senders, recipients and their nearest and dearest.

Heinrich and Lotte had obtained those affidavits of support for their two older children in 1938. They were no longer able to offer a way out to their younger and rather delicate children. All their attempts to evade the worst and get their little boy and Gila to safety failed. Asthmatic Gisela was put to work caring for children in an orphanage. The little boy, as Lotte

called her youngest, having been one of the last 'half-Jews' permitted to graduate from the French lyceum in Berlin in 1941, was allowed to begin neither a university course nor an apprenticeship. Immediately after finishing school, Michael was taken to a labour camp to build roads, and had to perform forced labour for the Organisation Todt until the end of the war.

Heinrich worshipped, desired and admired his beloved Lotte, he protected her, but in his letters he apparently also pressured her, mentioning that he could have her arrested. Their lifelong letters are our family's perhaps greatest treasure, guarded like the Holy Grail for decades by my Aunt Rosita.

After their first son, Heinrich and Lotte had a girl in 1915, who amazed everyone by bearing not the slightest resemblance to a princess. She was considered a whirlwind, a tearaway, stubborn and strong-willed even as a child. No one was surprised when the whirlwind first took an art foundation course in Berlin and then began training as a stonemason in Würzburg in 1935. Inge was presumably the only woman in her cohort. She returned to Berlin to learn sculpture under Ludwig Kasper at the Klosterstrasse studios, until the Nazis laws forced her to abandon her studies in 1938. Her older brother Peter, enrolled at university in Berlin as a law student until 1936, completed his law qualifications in Basel in 1938 and went into exile via Paris to Berkeley, California. He became a US citizen in 1941, took a PhD in economics and gained his first professorship. The exiled school friends' paths crossed several times between Switzerland, France, Italy and America. Peter and Inge made an effort to keep in touch with Ernest Jouhy, Otto-Albert Hirschmann and his beautiful sister Ursula.

Peter and Ursula were the same age, as were their almost two-years-younger siblings Inge and Otto. Like the young Francks, the Hirschmann children were part of the German-Jewish youth movement, in the hiking group *Kameraden* – Comrades – and soon in its breakaway organization, a socialist youth group by the name of *Rotes Fähnlein* – Little Red Flag. They met Ernst in the group's hut on Wallstrasse, where he led the working group on reading and discussing Marx and Engels, and Inge fell for him, head over heels. They came together with the League of Socialist School Students and published a newspaper, *Der Schulkampf* – The School Struggle. These youth groups were broken up and banned after 1933. For

years, Peter worshipped and wooed Ursula, and Otto did the same with Inge. Even in front of the wider family, his second wife and his two daughters at his mother Lotte's 1984 funeral in Berlin-Pankow, the oldest son Peter, by that point speaking German with a strong American accent, will praise Lotte's generous heart and joy in bringing people together and recall how she once put Ursula and him in a boat on the Wannsee and pushed them off from the bank. The Hirschmanns had studied with Peter at the Friedrich Wilhelm University until their emigration. But Ursula would not give in to her childhood admirer. In Paris, she meets up with the impressive Eugenio Colorni, whom she was to follow via Switzerland to Italy, marry and bear three daughters. After Colorni's death, she marries his longstanding friend Altiero Spinelli and has another three daughters with him.

Albert, only ever known as Otto in his youth – the name under which I was to meet him at Inge's house in Rahnsdorf with his wife in 1993 – called himself Albert O. Hirschman in America and became one of the most important economic theorists of his day.

Since Inge was determined not to board a ship to America in 1938, her father wrote to friends in Italy to tell them his daughter was coming and looking for a room.

In Florence in 1939, Inge met the young German painter Helmut Ruhmer while he was enjoying a residency awarded to him at the Villa Romana. As Germany began the war, love broke out in Florence, beneath olives and cypresses on the monastic hill of Villa Romana.

It was not long before Inge had to tell the pastor's son they could not wed. The Nazis had banned 'mixed marriages' in 1938.

In Italy and during the immediate post-war years, in fact in all her legends, Inge rode her Muckepicke. That was her pet name for her motorbike. Carrying stones and dogs, with Helmut and pregnant. It wasn't always the same one; the vehicles changed, the name stuck.