

Memories of a Former Waldorf Student

by

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translated by Karin Di Giacomo

“But where there is danger, the saving force grows as well.”

This quote from Hölderlin has taken on an ever-deeper meaning throughout my life, and so it shall preface this attempt at writing an account of my experience as a student of the Waldorf School, Stuttgart.

The Beginnings

I was born on May 21, 1933 in Stuttgart. My father, Ernst Mehren, originally came from Bendorf near Koblenz on the Rhine. He would have liked to become a professional musician, but he had to choose the career of a merchant, and it was hoped that he would later manage the business of his father. However, these plans were never realized, as a result of World War I—in which my father served as a young volunteer soldier—and the ensuing worldwide economic depression. He settled in Stuttgart, where he had met my mother during a business trip. Later attempts to return to the Rhineland and to start a business there were always thwarted by my mother, who couldn't bring herself to leave Stuttgart. Every few years we planned a move to the Rhineland; we children already were saying goodbye to our classmates, the moving truck had almost been ordered, but at the last minute the move was always cancelled. This gave me a sense of living 'on the edge,' so-to-say, during my early years.

My mother, Melanie Mehren, born Klemm, was born in Ludwigsburg, but she grew up in Stuttgart. She was talented in painting and drawing and was interested in art and literature. As a housewife she surely felt unfulfilled. Life in a small rental flat in a house of nine families was in itself a burden. I heard the grown-ups say time and again “If I had been given the chance to study when I was young? If I only had taken a different decision? I wish I had?”

Would this happen to me, too? How could I avoid it? Once I asked my parents if God existed. I had heard the other children talk about it on our way to school. The answer was that one could not know for sure. Maybe there was something like a higher being, maybe not. This answer didn't satisfy me and I

never asked again. I thought, if the grown-ups didn't know, then I had to find out for myself. I began to read all the books that I could get hold of. My brother, who was five years older than I and whom I admired, was in many ways my guiding star. When he went to high school, I decided to follow in his footsteps. When I once discovered that he wrote poetry, I felt encouraged also to write poems and little stories at an early age. I started to regard my school essays more and more as an exercise for my future profession. I dreamt of becoming a writer one day.

The fact that Hitler came to power in the year I was born critically influenced the first twelve years of my life. I was completely submerged in national socialist propaganda and had hardly a chance to come to know anything else. My parents originally were members of the Protestant church, but they must have left the church shortly after I was born; therefore, my brother and I grew up without any religion. Hitler's propaganda, but also personal disappointments and misunderstandings apparently prompted my parents to leave the church. Their experiences in World War I and the events during the following years probably left my parents vulnerable to the promises of the Hitler Regime. My father became *Blockleiter* (city block-leader) in the German National Socialist Party (NSDAP). My childhood was overshadowed by tensions in the marriage of my parents and soon also by the war and the bomb raids on Stuttgart. My brother—barely fifteen years old—was drafted as an air force helper, and I, too, had to leave home for the first time in my life at the age of ten, when all the Stuttgart schools were evacuated in the winter of 1943. Our school was relocated to Freudenstadt in the Black Forest. This town had been declared an international Red Cross center (there were numerous field hospital units in Freudenstadt), and it was therefore considered a safe place for evacuated schools.

A family with three small children took me in; their father was a soldier at the Russian front. The young mother, a warmhearted woman of deep faith, simply took me in just like another child besides her three own. Every evening she prayed with the children. That was totally new for me. I didn't know what to do with it. She let me be and accepted me as I was. I began to love her, but wasn't able to express it. Finally her steady kindness thawed my heart. Sadly my time in her family came to a sudden end. When she received news that her husband had been reported missing in action, she suffered a breakdown. She returned with her children to her parents' farm and I was assigned to a new place.

When we girls were not at school or having our meals together (we only slept in our guest homes but got our food at the school camps), we were

scheduled for service seven days a week, so we were much more under the influence of the Hitler Youth propaganda than at home.

After eight months, this time of evacuation was over for me: During the summer vacations I was in Stuttgart, when the news reached us that the classes of the Mörike High School would be moved from Freudenstadt to another place where we would not live in families but all together in a camp. My mother resolutely refused to let me go there and managed to have me stay at home in Stuttgart, although there were no schools. Eventually I found a teacher who gave private lessons in German, English, and Mathematics to several children—not far from where we lived. Her name was Maria Fuchs. She was a Waldorf teacher, which I did not know at that time. We liked her classes.

She knew how to get us interested and how to give each of the different age groups in this motley little assembly their due. We sensed that she enjoyed teaching us. Without being aware of it, this was my first encounter with Waldorf education.

The Twelfth Year

I was 12 years old at that time. It doesn't matter how old I am now. How long does one's twelfth year last? At the time I thought that it started soon after my eleventh birthday and lasted until a few weeks before my thirteenth birthday. One cannot really pin it down like that. Some years seem very short; others last much longer than the calendar indicates. So it must have started some time in summer of 1944 and lasted till the end of 1945. At one point between those two dates, I was exactly as old as the "Thousand-Year Empire," when it collapsed. But I kept on living.

This is an unusual way to deal with time? At that time, nothing usual existed any more. I still was one of those, who called this end "the collapse", while for many others it meant liberation. I had grown up under the Swastika Flags, I believed in the *Führer* (leader) and in the final victory. I didn't know that there was anything else worth believing in. Later people said to me: But you were still a child at that time and you couldn't know?"

They forget that I was double as old as the war. That is all that counts.

Do not tell me: You still were a child.
I was double as old as the war,
Knew early-on how to seek shelter,
from bombs and terror,
I wore a uniform (two sizes too big),
Learnt to march with precision
through the streets
"when everything goes to pieces,"

I grew up among ruins,
Thought that Germany was the world,
And believed in final victory.

I survived bomb raids,
Collected shards of bombs
Like June bugs and flowers,
I knew hunger and death.
I was born
In the time
Of the great seduction
And believed the lies:
When all was already lost,
I believed ceaselessly in victory
“when everything goes to pieces,”

Until in my and its twelfth year
The “Thousand-Year Empire”
Had come to an end
And with it the war.

Then I woke up
Like from a heavy dream,
Surrounded by silence.
I can hardly grasp it.

Do not say: you were still a child.
I was double as old as the war,
And I have experienced the lie.
Don’t count according to your years!
Do not say: You were still a child.

I helped build the underground bomb shelter for the people in our street and was proud of that. Some older men who were not fit to serve at the front, among them my father, pushed a tunnel into the mountain with the jack hammer. Others shoveled rocks and dirt into the awaiting buckets. The women formed a line—I was right among them—and we passed the heavy buckets from hand to hand down the line out to the open where a mound started to grow in someone’s garden. We dragged the support beams into the tunneled room; they were then joined into support structures and paneling for the tunnels. Later we painted fluorescent stripes and numbers onto the walls—about 6 feet high—and benches were installed below the numbers, where everyone had their own place. Our four places, for the parents, the brother and myself, were in one of the deepest and safest areas (given the exits wouldn’t be blocked) “Above us are 66 feet (22 meters) of grown earth. No bomb can penetrate that, said my father who surely knew. Grown earth—that sounded good.

The underground bomb shelter was a network of tunnels under the mountain, with main and side shafts, closed off from the outside by several air pressure safe iron doors. When the tunnel system was built, it became like a home to us. We spent many hours down there, especially the nights, but more and more frequently we also went there during the day.

A time came when we often went there already in the early evening and spent most of the night there; we slept on the benches no matter if there had been an alarm or not. That happened after the double attacks: two bomb raids during one night. After the first attack, when the sirens gave the all-clear signal, everyone went home and started to put out the fires they found burning. Then suddenly all hell broke loose: The second attack surprised many people on their way home or while putting out fires. Nobody had expected that the alarm could mean a second attack on the same town; they thought the airplanes were an air squadron en route to another target city. Then suddenly the bombs rained down again. Many people lost their life in that night. The next morning I had to pass by the big house in which close acquaintances of ours lived. In the middle of the street gaped a huge hole, a large bomb crater. In the front yard several corpses had been laid out in a row, scarcely covered by black paper used to darken windows during raids. My glance caught sight of a foot with a white sock, which peeked out from under the paper. Our friends, Mr. and Mrs. Lederer, were also among the dead—during the night after the first attack I still had said hello to them. I could still hear their voices saying to us after the all-clear signals:” We are going home. It’s over for this night.” My parents and I had hesitated and we were still close to the shelter when the alarms went off a second time. So we quickly found shelter. Otherwise it could have hit us too.

I couldn’t let go of the scene in the front yard. In the Nazi Party (NSDAP), Mr. Lederer had been the superior of my father, whom he called “comrade.” That sounded good. He had always been friendly to me. When I was little I once told him, “you are my friend.” From then on he called me his little friend, quite seriously, not in that condescending tone that some grown-ups use towards little children. His wife was a painter. She had hair that was nearly black and wore it parted down the middle so it framed her face like a curtain and she had quiet, luminous eyes. I used to admire her paintings that covered the walls of her flat. How often had she lent me children’s books with beautiful illustrations. Now she and her husband lay dead in the front yard. The house still stood, nearly undamaged. The bomb had diagonally entered the cellar window and had killed all those who had fled down there in the night of the double attack. Upstairs in the house nothing was broken.

Finally, I tore myself away from that sight and ran to the yard of my former elementary school. There they had set up a kind of military field kitchen. They gave out a stew cooked in big pots, because we couldn't cook anymore at home due to the gas supply lines being broken—as it often happened after bomb raids. Each day I fetched food for the three of us, for father, mother, and myself. My brother was no longer with us. Together with his entire school class he had been drafted to serve as an air defense helper when he was just 15 years old. They were deployed to the Alsace after their training, in order to give cover to an air fighter squadron stationed there!

In the house next door there was a boy who had been drafted to the same service. His name was Gerhard, he had blond hair and a friendly disposition. I had met him many a time on the street. He wasn't in the air force for long. After a few months his parents were notified that their son had died during an attack on his command post. He was only 15 years old and their only son. From that day on I knew my brother too was in danger.

For days I had to pass the bomb crater, as long as I had to fetch the food for us.

After two days the corpses no longer lay in the front yard, but each time I had to think of them. The house still stood there and looked as if it had to beg pardon for still being whole while all its inhabitants were dead.

Nineteen Forty-Five

The year 1945 had begun with reports of the Russian offensive that now extended between the rivers Weichsel (Vistula) and Oder. This major offensive had already begun on June 22, 1944, but in my mind that had still been so distant that it had not alarmed me greatly. Now the front had moved much closer. Millions of people began to flee Pomerania, Silesia, and Eastern Prussia. Nearly seven million people went on those treks. Since the radio reports were very one-sided and deceptive, we at the time didn't come to know much about what was really happening. Anyone who dared to express doubt in the 'final victory' in public, endangered the lives of their families along with their own. Only much later was I able to fill in the blanks about what had happened in those last months of the war. For example I do not remember having heard anything about the liberation of Auschwitz on January 25, 1945. Only after the war had ended did I hear about the concentration camp in Auschwitz. That's how thoroughly we were kept ignorant of the truth by false propaganda. It is possible that our neighbors knew more, but they didn't talk to us about it because they knew that my father was a block-leader in the Nazi Party. Even though he never would have denounced anyone—that just wasn't his way—the people could not have

known that and just were careful. That's the only way how I can explain why we came to know so little of what was really happening—we only got the official (propaganda) news.

The terrifying news reports on February 13–14, 1945 of the allied bomb attack on the city of Dresden, which was overflowing with refugees at that time, was a great shock. In that night approximately 25,000–35,000 people lost their lives. Out of 28,410 houses in the inner city, 24,866 were destroyed. Such news was beyond my comprehension and my power of imagination. All that remained for me was helpless horror.

My brother and his friend had enlisted in February, against the opposition of my parents. I believed at that time the two of them wanted to save the fatherland no matter what. They all led us to believe that. Only many years later I came to know that they already knew much more than we did at that time, and that the entire class had volunteered to join in the army in order to avoid being forced to serve in the Weapen-SS. They sensed that the end was drawing near, and they didn't want to fall into the hands of the SS. That way the two seventeen year olds were taken POW, without having ever engaged in combat—but we didn't know that at that time.

Even though events unfolded at breakneck speed and the war was already clearly lost, I still believed in a miracle that could bring us the final victory. I hadn't learned anything else. But I felt a growing threat from within and without, an intuition that my first and only belief system could crumble. What then? Those were tormenting questions and contradictions, which I couldn't share with anyone. It would have seemed like a betrayal to me.

The Final Attack

In February 1945 our quarter of town—Stuttgart-East—was hit especially hard. That evening my father had gone two houses down the road to a meeting of the small animal husbandry association. They stood in the yard in front of the rabbit cages and all at once saw the awful “Christmas trees” in the sky—that's what people called the triangles of air flares. They at once responded to the danger, even though no sirens sounded. My father quickly ran back to our house, where my mother and I already met him on our way to the cellar, because our cat had warned us by acting up. Before air raids, long before the sirens shrilled, she would be obviously disturbed, run to the door scratch it and meow loudly as if in panic until she was let out into the yard from where she disappeared at once. We had learned to react to this signal of impending danger.

We barely had made it to the cellar when the first bombs dropped and the air defense canons thundered, but too late. There was no time left to go to the

underground bomb shelter we had built—it was too far. Nobody knows why the sirens didn't go off that night. There were rumors, but nothing was known for sure.

The others, who came down to the cellar after us, already had in their hair the dust from the bursting walls. Judging from the roaring noise, air mines were falling all around. Several times it sounded as if our house had been hit directly, but that wasn't the case. As soon as silence set in, I started to walk to the air shelter because the cellar wasn't safe in spite of the iron beams with which we had fortified the ceiling after the first attacks. By now we all knew that these iron rails would bend like wire when the house was directly hit. "We have to get out of here. More bombs are coming," I called out to my parents and was already gone. With a juice bottle in hand, which I had quickly snatched from the cellar supplies, (it would serve in place of water to wet a rag through which I could breathe if I would have to pass through smoke) I ran out onto the dark street, which was already covered with rubble and debris.

I jumped over it without stumbling or hurting myself. Only afterwards this seemed like a miracle, when I saw the next morning what kind of obstacles I had crossed during the night.

The closest entrance to the bunker was not assigned to our street. Our entrance was a bit further away. But terrified by the imminent danger, everyone crowded to the closest entrance. Any moment more bombs could fall. There was no time to lose. At one of the entrances panic started to break out. I was pushed ahead by the rushing crowd and noticed how it was harder to breathe and how the pressure from so many bodies steadily increased. Suddenly a voice called out: "Do not push ahead! We will all get in. Just stay calm." The voice was clear and soothing. The pressure decreased noticeably and I was relieved. It had been my own voice! Nobody noticed that it was only a twelve-year old who wanted to help them and herself in that way. It was one of those strange situations, in which I felt as if I were set free from my usual shyness of other people and transcended my limits in the face of danger.

Soon we were all in the shelter, and dispersed into the various tunnels where we sought out our own places. More and more people streamed in from the other entrances. They called out names, looked for family members, and exchanged the first news. I heard that the house, in which my father had been earlier, was destroyed by a direct hit. We feared that all those who had sought safety in the public bomb shelter at the corner had died. I heard my parents call out and answered: "I am here. All is in order! What does it look like outside?" "You won't be able to sleep in your bed tonight" my mother said. "That doesn't matter—I'll sleep here in the underground shelter. Did anyone get hurt?" "No,

but the apartment surely will look bad. We'll see tomorrow. The apartment door is in splinters, destroyed by the air pressure of the bombs. That's what we already know." I thought, "Where may our cat be? How was she?" She didn't know, after all, what war was. How could one explain something like that to an animal? Up to now she had returned after each attack. She must have had a good hiding place somewhere. Finally the all-clear signal came. In our place, so deep under the mountain, we could not hear the sirens, but others, who were closer to the exits, heard them and reported it. I stayed with others in the shelter wrapped myself in an old felt coat and lay down to sleep on the bench. My parents went to look after the apartment. After a while my mother came back alone and said: "We cleared the sofa of the worst dirt and debris, and Papa wants to sleep there tonight, to prevent looters from stealing anything. The door to the apartment is broken and anyone can enter."

The next morning he reported that during the night indeed some man had come in, and as soon as my father called out to him, the other noticed that the apartment was guarded and took flight.

I also inspected the apartment during the day. It was clear that it would take several weeks to make it inhabitable again. In my parents' bedroom such a big hole gaped in the wall that it was no trouble at all to slip over to the bedroom of our neighbors on the same floor. There they started to hammer and patch up the wall. From both sides the hole was covered with strong cardboard as an interim solution. We couldn't do more at first. The entire neighborhood resounded with the usual hammering and pounding, a typical sound after bomb attacks.

Most of the windows had no glass. There was no use in replacing the panes, even if we had had enough glass, though we didn't have any, in fact. During the next bomb raids the air pressure waves after the explosions would just destroy them again.

Everywhere I found glass splinters. The aquarium had burst. The glass of the few windows that hadn't yet been destroyed in the earlier raids now too was scattered on the floor. Even in the beds the mattresses and in the pillows, we found fine glass splinters—often by touch without even seeing a hole through which they had gotten in. Dead fish lay on the piano, which showed extensive water damage. All the water from the aquarium had poured over the furniture and the floor.

The doors had shattered into splinters and there was debris and rubble everywhere. Our food stamps were gone. Now we qualified to register as bomb victims and could apply for new food stamps, which we indeed received. That was luck found in the midst of bad luck—German proverb. The new allotment contained more stamps than those we had lost—and we had already used up most of those. When we found the old stamps under the rubble during the clean-

up work, we told nobody about it and at least had some more to eat, while our apartment was still for some time unfit to live in.

A Bowl of Milk

One of the first things I did was remove the rubble under the coat rack in the entry hallway, where our cat used to sleep. I put an old woolen cloth there, after carefully having removed all glass splinters, and next to it I put her milk bowl. I poured some milk from my ration into her bowl, added a few morsels of bread and waited. My mother watched my preparations for the return of our cat with reservations. What if the cat wouldn't return? All around heavy air bombs had fallen. I waited.

In the afternoon I heard a scratching on the patched-up door. I opened and our cat walked in, her tail held high, as if nothing had happened. She ran to her spot, sniffed everything and started to lick up the milk, as usual, in three-quarter-time with pauses: one, two, three,—stop, one, two, three,—stop, the little red tongue hadn't lost its rhythm in the inferno of the attack. I squatted down next to the cat and watched it intently; how she licked the bowl clean until even the last drop of milk was gone. Then she sniffed at the woolen cloth, turned around herself a few times and finally deigned to settle down on it and began to purr. She glanced at me askew and then she had fallen asleep. I had observed the whole process keenly as if a lot depended on it. Then the tension eased and gave way to deep relief because, at least this tiny corner the world was made whole again, in the midst of chaos, and I had contributed to it in my way.

The Collapse

In March and April precipitous news arrived of Allied troops advancing from all sides. On March 7, they crossed the Rhine at Remagen in the west. On April 16, the Russian major offensive was initiated from the Oder and Neisse rivers in the east. On April 25, Soviet and American troops met at Torgau by the Elbe River. While the front advanced towards our town, our region was gripped by a panic—with belated waves of flight attempts. The last minute refugees spurred us on to take flight from Stuttgart towards Lake Constance. We packed everything that we wanted to save and stacked it on a hand-pulled cart, dragging it to the next tramway station. We were still waiting for one of the few remaining tramways to take us to the train station, hoping to catch a train southward from there, when my mother suddenly changed her mind, “We are going back. It makes no sense. The front is everywhere.” So we took our baggage back home. The shortest exodus of my life was over.

We retreated into an air raid shelter to wait there for the Allies to occupy Stuttgart. On April 20, 1945 the French troops moved into the first Stuttgart neighborhood, Plieningen. The following day the French and Moroccans entered Stuttgart and advanced as far as the Neckar River. The right bank of the Neckar was occupied by the Americans. Thirteen of the fifteen bridges over the Neckar had been destroyed. That delayed the entry of the Americans. At first the conquerors vied for the town, and only on July 8, 1945 the Americans were given the legal occupancy rights. During all this, we spent most of our time in the air raid shelter. Stuttgart lay in ruins. In the first day after the occupancy, the law of the victorious ruled. We heard of rapes, especially in Degerloch, where the Moroccans had their quarters.

Nearly every day there were home searches for weapons, but they also took carpets, cameras, clocks, radios, and other valuables. When we finally dared to leave the air raid shelter and return to our apartment we were glad that we had nothing they could want. The damage of the last bombing raids was still visible. French soldiers came repeatedly into our home with rifles raised to search for weapons and ammunition. They also looked for German soldiers in hiding, some of whom had managed to exchange their uniforms for civilian clothes in the general chaos and dissolution of the German army; helpful people had given them clothes so they might escape capture and rejoin their families. It was dangerous to be caught helping a soldier escape.

It was fortunate that my father could speak French; that alleviated the situation. Also the fact that we had a French housemate was helpful. He had been pressed into working in a German factory and lived in an attic apartment. Now he received the soldiers and told them no German soldiers were hiding in our house and only good people were living here.

Around this time, massive looting occurred in the factories, mostly by people living close-by, who wanted to squirrel away as much of value as possible before it would fall into the hands of the French. Bales of fabric were stolen from a textile plant in the neighborhood and months after that dresses started appearing that were made from that same cloth. Many concepts became fuzzy during that time of need and general social chaos shortly after the entry of the French troops: no one talked of “stealing.” It was called only “organizing”—scrounging for what was needed to survive.

Dé já Vu?

One afternoon shortly after the French occupation of Stuttgart, I was standing at the bay window in our living room looking out upon the street. Tanks, heavy artillery, military vehicles, and occupation soldiers moved down the street in front of our house. Many German soldiers in ragged uniforms, exhausted and

dirty, walked with them as prisoners on their way to some POW camp. Hadn't I seen something like this before? Then I remembered a news broadcast I had heard in September 1939: "England and France have declared war on Germany." At that time I had been 6 years old. Hitler had already attacked Poland. I heard myself again saying to my mother: "Mama—you'll see there will be a second world war!" Then my mother trying to dispel that notion, no, there would be no such thing. And I said, "Oh yes, and the tanks and canons will then drive by our house down the Schwarenbergstrasse." I really had seen it like that then. Was that only happening in my imagination? I do not know.

Six years later it has become a reality. I am standing at the window and feared for the bedraggled, tired figures passing by the house. Where are they going? Into some POW camp, no doubt. Everything is uncertain. So the war is really over. That also means no more air raids. One would have to slowly get used to that, not to be jolted out of sleep by sirens blaring in the night. But there is another danger now. During the house searches, they are now also looking for Nazi literature, pictures of Hitler, swastika flags, and other Nazi symbols. I was supposed to hide my father's party badge, by burying it in the ground. There were rumors that people who had gone to surrender their weapons had been shot. Maybe it was just a rumor, but it also said children found to have weapons or other incriminating items would not be harmed. So I was supposed to get rid of the party badge, flag, Hitler pictures and similar things. I did bury the party badge, but I didn't tell my parents that I had hidden the other things in our apartment: in my grandmother's upholstered night chair, whose function was well concealed. There I hid in a hollow space under the night pot a small swastika flag, Hitler's book *Mein Kampf*, Alfred Rosenberg's *Myth of the 20th Century*, a picture book about Hitler and some issues of the magazine *Völkischer Beobachter*. Most of this literature I had not yet read and probably wouldn't have understood anyway, but I wanted to save it; I didn't know for what purpose. It was part of my "wanting to remain loyal even if all others fall away." My hiding place was never discovered during the house searches. My parents had no idea that these things were still in our apartment.

A curfew was proclaimed! Was it in effect between 9:00 PM and 6:00 AM? I only remember the fear, when my mother and I returned late from a visit with an acquaintance, and we had missed the last tramway. After the curfew had started, we had no choice but walk back home for more than an hour, always expecting to be discovered by patrols.

During the day, I collected stinging nettles on the rubble heaps and in overgrown front yards of destroyed houses. We cooked the greens like we cooked spinach. We had not seen bread for a long time. But there was a recipe

for a potato soup: If several raw potatoes were grated into boiling hot water and cooked for a while, they became soft and starchy like a porridge and resulted in a type of mush, sufficient for three to four people, who could eat it morning, noon, and night. If cooked with salt and onions it was palatable and filling enough. We only worried what we could scrounge up to eat for the next day, and that thought left no room for anything else. In a kind of numbness, as if it all were unreal, I heard the news that followed each other now at great speed and crashed down upon me:

The last days of the fight for Berlin was announced. On May 1 the news came: "The Führer has fallen during the fight for Berlin, surrounded by his loyal supporters." Soon afterwards, even this last lie was exposed; he had committed suicide on April 30. The day after that Goebbels and his wife poisoned their children and killed themselves. On May 2, Berlin capitulated. On May 8 the unconditional surrender of the German army was signed and on June 5 the Allied forces took over the governance of Germany.

At some point during that time I happened to meet my former BDM leader (*Bund Deutscher Mädchen*—the Nazi organization for young girls) in the street. Finally, someone I could talk to, I thought! I ran towards her expectantly and assaulted her with my questions: "Luitgard, I am so happy to see you! How are you? What are we going to do now? Do you think it's true what they are saying? Some people are saying that Hitler is not dead. Whom should we believe? What should we do now?" I still expected something like guidance from my former "leader," who was barely six years older than I. I was still wearing my brown uniform jacket from which I had just removed the badges. Luitgard was visibly embarrassed and seemed to ignore my questions on purpose. She said in a tone of voice different than any other I heard her use before: "I secured an apprenticeship position with a hat maker." I stared at her in shock. How can anyone be interested in ladies' fashions when everything around us has come crashing down? It was only much later that I understood she was as bewildered and clueless as I was. We parted with an embarrassed farewell. I have never seen her again.

I remembered my former school director from elementary school. Maybe he had some advice. Hadn't he raised the flag together with us, sat in his brown uniform behind the desk in the director's office, very impressive under the big Hitler picture and flanked by swastika flags? And when I had left the school after the fourth grade to transfer to another school, hadn't he shaken my hand in parting and said: "I am proud of you. I hope to read about you in the newspapers and hear of you in the radio!" I asked around where he lived and found him in a suburb of Stuttgart in his garden, digging in the soil and tired, leaning on his

spade. He stood in front of me, clad only in threadbare old pants that bunched at his ankles. Emaciated and without the glamour of his old uniform he was a sorry sight. My questions stuck in my throat. This tired old man with the discomforted look could not give me any answers either. So I soon took my leave and made off for home. And my parents? They didn't say anything. I never came to know how they experienced the collapse.

Soon other worries distracted me from such questions for some time. The potato supply was running out and there was no bread. Distant friends, who had a farm close to Winnenden, promised us a sack of potatoes if we would pick them up ourselves. So one morning, my father and I set out, pulling behind us a borrowed cart. It was on my twelfth birthday. We had to walk more than 26 kilometers [about 18 miles] crossing fields and forests, over country roads and through small towns and villages. When there was a downhill stretch, we would sit in the wagon, my father at the helm, the handle between the legs so he could steer it. I sat behind him. The downhill rides were the only rest for our feet. We didn't stop to rest anywhere.

After five to six hours we arrived at the farm, just in time for a hearty farmers' lunch the likes of which we hadn't seen for a long time. When the farmer's wife heard that it was my birthday, she said I could have one wish. I saw the huge loaf of fragrant bread on the table, took a deep breath and then dared to make a bold wish: "I want a whole slice of this bread with butter and jam!" Much to my surprise, the farmer's wife laughed: "If that is all!" and I received this unique birthday gift and ate it with great pleasure. We were allowed to stay on the farm for the night. The next morning we took off with about 100 pounds of potatoes—this time not by foot but riding on a flatbed train car. The train conductor had allowed us to ride the train, and we gave him some of the potatoes. I don't think I could have walked the 26 kilometers again, certainly not dragging a cart with a heavy sack of potatoes.

The French occupation ended on July 8, 1945 and the Americans moved in. The time of the American Military Occupancy had begun. All citizens of Stuttgart had to be checked for tuberculosis. They announced that school would resume in September for all children. Slowly there emerged a way out from the chaos.

By that time we had visitors. My Aunt Alice, a cousin of my mother's, together with her husband, Uncle Karl, five children and their grandmother had fled Karlsbad to escape the Russians and had come to Cannstatt. They had mostly walked while dragging a cart with their belongings, on which sat also the grandmother and the youngest son, only five years old. We gave temporary shelter to three of the children in our small apartment, until a house was found

for the entire family. We put a bed and a few mattresses on the floor of the small room, which I used to share with my brother, and that gave us enough sleeping spaces. Relatives in Cannstatt took in the older ones.

It was more difficult to get food, but we somehow managed it. If necessary, my father and I would go on “hamster” forays to his former bakery clients, who sometimes gave him loaves of bread without requesting food stamps. We couldn’t afford to be choosy. The bread was defined more by quantity than by quality, because the bakers had to bake ever more loaves from the same allotment of flour in order to be able to hand out some loaves without food stamps. They did this by adding bran or potato flour to extend the dough and by using lots of water. The resulting bread was very damp and first had to be dried out by the stove to make it edible.

For a quite a while, my father and I also had helped an older couple, which owned a large orchard. My father knew how to work with a scythe; he cut their lawn in front of the house and also the big meadow; with a rake I spread the grass so it would dry and we would have hay for our rabbits during the winter. We also helped these people harvest the fruit trees and received many a basket full with fruit to take home. The apples and pears, plums and red currants were just what we needed. We even could give some of them to our refugee relatives.

When we sat together in the evening, little by little they told us about all the horrors of their flight, of cruelties and rapes that the Russians committed on many girls and women. They had been spared such ordeals, but had often been in danger. The fear still haunted them.

The meeting with my relatives was to have a special meaning for me. I grew fond of them. Aunt Alice was a smart and warm-hearted woman. She radiated charm and kindness that impressed me. I felt how she kept the family together through this time of need and poverty. They had been very well off before the war, but they had lost their house in Berlin and all their possessions and they accepted this situation without complaints. “We are poor but happy that we are all together,” I heard them say. I had never met my uncle and soon grew very attached to him as well. He was fascinating and was both a good storyteller and a great listener. When he conversed, one felt fully accepted. He obviously had been a follower of Hitler, prompted by idealism and conviction, and he had last held some administrative position in the so-called “Reichs-Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia.” I heard the adults say in conversations that he had been a frequent visitor to the seat of the Nazi government during his time in Berlin. Now he was talking of turning himself in to the Americans. My father implored him to think of his wife and his children and rather go underground until the situation had stabilized. This was not the moment, he said, to play the hero. It

was an intense argument, which I had followed with trepidation. I was impressed by my uncle's courage, but at the same time I was afraid for him and his family, especially the children. Finally my father's arguments won out. My uncle did not turn himself in to the Americans.

But I had again been pulled right into a turbulence of most contradictory feelings. This uncle embodied for me the prototype of the idealist in the Nazi Party, full of conviction. At that point in time I had not yet seen through the worst aspects of the Hitler regime. His presence evoked the hope in me that I might not have to let go of my ideals, my singular belief in the "Führer," or the "Reich" (*empire*). He sounded convincing. Some time later he helped us get hold of some Nazi literature printed in the underground; I read it secretly and clung ever more to the illusion fostered by this kind of reading that this was not the end after all, that a lot of what we heard was simply enemy propaganda, that Hitler had been deceived, and similar excuses for horrible events that were reported.

False Gods Die Slowly!

In the brochures he brought for us there was also talk of leading party members who had escaped to Chile or Argentine, and still operated from there. Whom was I supposed to believe?

Some time later he found an attic apartment for his family in a village close to Heilbronn, where we visited them a few times. His hiding in the underground nearly failed, when the villagers were set on making him their mayor only a year after he moved there. Uncle Karl refused. Later the family moved back to northern Germany. Since my own path was destined to lead in a different direction I would never see them again. But in later years I have often wondered how these kind and educated people could fall for Hitler and the Nazi ideology. They never had struck me as fanatics. I couldn't imagine that Uncle Karl had ever directly been involved in any Nazi crimes. When I heard many years later that he had never fully distanced himself from National Socialism, the question arose again, to what degree can idealism blind you to reality and even make you a servant of crime?

The verdict chambers, specific courts, were instituted to implement 'de-nazification.' All party members, especially those who had held an office in the party hierarchy, had to submit to this process, this included my father. Those who were classified to have just been 'nominal members' of Hitler's party got away relatively unscathed. Many reported to have been just 'nominal members.' I was amazed how many there were of those, whom I had believed to be convinced members of the National Socialist Party (NSDAP).

My father had to work as part of a building crew of former Nazis; he helped to rebuild the Stuttgart dairy processing facilities as an unskilled laborer. Altogether 20,000 Stuttgart citizens had to remove rubble for more than four weeks. At the area of Birkenkopf, a new mountain rose, consisting of the rubble of the destroyed city. The people called it *Monte Scherbelino* (Mountain of shards).

During the verdict chamber trials there were denunciations, and many a personal feud was played out there. Many seized the opportunity to take revenge on former party members, who had bullied or tormented them.

One day our apartment was confiscated by the authorities as a result of a denunciation by a neighbor. An official notice was posted on the door saying that anyone who needed an apartment (e.g., former inmates of concentration camps or foreigners who had been forced to work in German factories) could demand to be lodged here and the current renters would have to move out. There was no word of where we were supposed to go. For weeks the notice hung on the door. For weeks we had no idea where to go, if anyone would claim the apartment. But nobody liked the damaged rooms. Until one day a Polish Jew gave notice that he was looking for an apartment. It was Jakob Magier. He got the only fairly intact room, which I had formerly shared with my brother and now had lived in by myself. So I moved to the living room and Jacob Magier got my room. I have already described the meeting with him elsewhere, in the short story "The Foreigner." I never forgot how he asked my mother that first evening to fry him a long sausage which he had brought with him, how he then put bread on the table and invited us all to share the meal. We had not seen bread for months, let alone a sausage! Later that evening he played a game of chess with my father. From then on, he shared nearly every evening his special rations with us, which the Americans gave out only to former forced laborers and concentration camp inmates. He did not take revenge on us that we were former Nazis. A human being like Jacob Magier must never be forgotten. I owe him the experience of humaneness in a time of greatest confusion; a humaneness that always sees and respects the human being for what one is, transcending all barriers of race, culture, and religion. Maybe it was my encounter with him that started my renunciation of Nazi ideology, even though I was not conscious of that at the time. I still had a long way to go.

The radio stations broadcast the Nuremberg trials. Horrified, I heard that all those who had been presented to me at home, at school, and in the girl's club (BDM) as authorities and models, were now being tried in court as war criminals. They also showed documentary films.

In fall of 1954, the Stuttgart schools began to open again. Many schools first had to move back after the evacuation, because they had fled from town to town forced by movements of the military front. My school returned also from the place of evacuation. Now the process of the so-called de-nazification reached the schools as well. One morning I saw the former math teacher stoke the wood burning stoves in the classrooms. He was no longer allowed to teach. The schoolbooks that were still available, had to go through a cleansing process as well. All text passages and pictures or symbols reminiscent of the Third Reich had been covered with thick black ink and were no longer recognizable. The history books for the first grade had to be completely confiscated and destroyed. They were steeped in Nazi ideology and no longer useable.

Sometimes I still felt an inner split and refused to let go so quickly of ideals that were deeply instilled in me. Whom should I believe? I couldn't ask my parents. I felt they also had no idea where to turn. There was a wall of silence separating us. They also were burdened by worries for my brother; we had not heard from him again. I had to think of him all the time and often talked with him in my mind. But that didn't help me move forward either.

Then something happened that opened my eyes once and for all to the full extent of the horrible truth, which so far still had been concealed from me. In the process of de-nazification, we had to watch movies in school that showed the liberation of Auschwitz and of other concentration camps. I just could not comprehend what I saw there. I was seized by a horror that defied all words. The images of the wretched figures behind barbed wire, the eyes of the children, the mountains of corpses, the unthinkable suffering of so many people who were murdered in the gas chambers! After the first movie I ran out into the open. I ran and ran, and yet could not escape the reality of the pictures I had seen. I only know that I ran right through the middle of the evening traffic. Right and left brakes screeched, in front of me a tramway nearly brushed against me, I didn't care about any of it.

It was only then that my former world collapsed totally. "I will never again believe anything adults say," I swore to myself. The next thought was: "I can no longer live in a country where so many people were cruelly murdered. Why should I go on living?" I felt like choking. I felt, I also had been guilty, because I had believed in the slogans of this regime. I didn't want to live anymore. There was so much death in me and around me. "Yes, if one could just slink out of this world without leaving a trace, then I would do it! but how?" Finally, consideration for my parents prevailed, the deeply rooted habit of wanting to protect them, this time from me and from my thoughts of suicide.

Maybe we can keep on living while something dies in us without anyone else noticing it?

At that time I wouldn't have been able to tell a soul what went on within me. What I had seen went beyond anything imaginable. It seemed to me as if all of Germany was covered by a dark, poisonous cloud, which could not be dispelled by anyone or anything. The murdered human beings were still so close and seemed to look at me. One image had etched itself into my memory more than any other. There was a mountain of children's shoes, hundreds, thousands! The pictures haunted me everywhere. In those hours—and for years after that—a horror formed within me of the people who were able to commit such crimes, and I had a horror of myself, because I too was a human being and had believed in such a “leader” and had followed him.

“Do not say ‘you were still a child!’ ”

When I finally returned home late and my mother asked me where I had been, I only said that I had taken a walk after school, “just so.” But everything had changed. I had returned a different person from the girl who had gone to school at noon. But no one needed to know that. I had to deal with that by myself. But I didn't know how that was supposed to happen.

Sometime after that day, I stood by the window one evening and looked at the ruins of the burned-out neighboring house. The empty, scorched caves of the windows were etched against the evening sky, the light of the setting sun glowed reddish golden. Then I discovered a white blossoming tree through one of the window openings, as if framed like a picture; the tree probably was part of a garden on the hill behind the ruin. I looked at it, as if it were a miracle. Something alive had survived in the midst of destruction. And while I stood and looked the thought blossomed in me, I never had seen this tree before. I had not known that it existed. As long as the house had still been there, its walls had completely blocked all sight of the tree. Could it be that sometimes something has to be destroyed so that we can see what it had concealed?

The Great Dream

Again and again something sparked in the inner darkness, something like a promise, a vague and fleeting shimmer, but enough to keep me groping forward. Around me there seemed to be nothing but despair. There was a time when I was plagued night by night, week by week, with the same nightmare. The stories of my refugee relatives from Karlsbad, about the rapes committed by the Russians, the images from the concentration camps, the fear instilled by the first nuclear bomb dropped on Hiroshima on August 6, 1945, whose catastrophic effects shocked the world. All this coalesced and was woven into my nightmares, as

well as the onset of my own puberty and a recurring fear of being trapped with no way out.

The dream always started with me running through underground corridors, hearing my pursuers' steps behind me, Russians who tried to get me and would rape and murder me. With a desperate effort I ran on, but my feet became heavier and heavier and started to drag as if made of lead, and the pursuers nearly got to me. Just when they were about to seize me, I started up in shock and had escaped them one more time. I always needed some time until I could tell myself that it was only a dream. But the next night the dream happened again and so it went on for weeks. I just about reached the limit of what I could bear.

My mother had told about the life of Friedrich Hölderlin, when I was a child. She revered him and in her tales she had also mentioned that he had lived many years in a mentally deranged state in a tower owned by a carpenter in Tübingen. I had thought about that again and again. How could something like that happen to a person? Maybe I myself was now getting close to such a state of mind? I did not want to frighten my parents with such thoughts, therefore, I didn't tell them what I was dealing with inside.

Then, one night, everything started happened in my dream as usual. I was being chased through the subterranean corridors, but then the dream took a different turn. When the pursuers were already close on my heels, all the sudden I was able to break through to the outside. There I met people desperately seeking shelter from bombs. To the right there was a wide plain where fires raged, like after a nuclear explosion. I saw mushroom clouds rising. The people urged me to show them a way to the air raid shelter. I saw the entrance to our former shelter. It looked ramshackle and neglected. I knew it could not offer any protection anymore, and told the people, "No shelter can protect us from nuclear bombs." Then I noticed that a different group of people had started to climb up a mountain, away from the plains where the flames raged. They walked like people who had an aim and knew the way. I joined them. Singing they climbed the mountain. The higher we climbed, the clearer and more peaceful the atmosphere became. At a turn on the way, I looked one more time down to the burning plains; it looked like the end of the world. Then I left the chaos behind me. At the top of the mountain, I discovered something like a musical organ under the free sky. People flocked around it and sang. One person was sitting and playing the organ. He was dressed in a white garment that seemed to be woven of light. His dark hair reached nearly down to his shoulders. His face was half hidden, since I stood sideways, half in back of him; but I saw his hands glide over the keys, producing this wonderful music. Meanwhile, I had the

distinct impression that he knew of my presence even though he looked ahead and not at me. Finally I asked someone who stood close: “Who is it that plays?” The answer came, “The master.” “And what does he play?” “He plays your life and all our lives.” At that point I woke up and felt released from a crushing burden. All fear had fallen away. “The master knows of me. Whomever he may be, one day I will find him.” I dared again to be happy.

During that dream, I had no thought of God. That word had no meaning for me at that time. I lacked any kind of religious vocabulary. I had not grown up with religious tradition. Only in retrospective, much later, I realized how the depth of our being knows about that highest (first) reality, long before it enters our consciousness and long before we can find words for it. It is as if we carry in us a memory of our source. Maybe it was good that I could not avail myself of any of the conventional notions of God at that time. That way, such notions could not block what was emerging from my own depth and started to grow from there. The nightmare never returned. I felt a new strength rise in me, even though outwardly my situation had not changed. The healing dream makes me think of Hölderlin’s words which have become dear to me, “But where there is danger, the saving force grows as well.”

A Temporary Garden

It had started with a conversation across the garden fence. I had ambled along the side of my old elementary school, which was closed since the general school evacuations. It served as a camp for refugees and displaced people. At the fence of the former school garden I met the old school janitor. I nearly didn’t recognize him. He was emaciated and looked tired. We had sometimes been afraid of him in former times. He had seemed so strict. Now I could no longer understand how we could have been afraid of him. I felt sorry for him. While he was busy mending a hole in the fence, we got into a conversation. The school garden looked sad. It was completely overgrown with weeds and marred by a pile of rubble. “Pity about the garden,” I said. “I know it’s looking awful. But I can’t take care of it alone. I have enough to do. Well, if there were someone to help, but the garden is so run-down—who would want to help with that,” said the janitor. We were silent for a while. All the sudden I had a thought. It was so bold that at first I didn’t know how to tell the janitor about it. But the matter was so urgent and finally I dared to say, “My father knows how to work a garden. He had a big garden by the Rhine, where he had lived when he was younger—he told me a lot about it. What would you say about giving us a piece of the school garden—just for a time of course, as long as it isn’t being used for the school? We could grow lettuce and tomatoes, beans and maybe even potatoes!” I already

saw the beans wind around the beanstalks. We were so hungry and needed food and here was a neglected garden that was now of no use to anyone; we might be able to put it to good use, and even the janitor would benefit from it. He looked up in surprise and let the idea sink in. “Maybe more people in the neighborhood would be interested in that. One could ask them?” I spun the idea further, “If the school garden would be shared among several families, who are willing to cultivate it.”

“Then ask your father what he thinks about that and let me know,” the janitor said and all of a sudden he no longer looked so tired. I thought he was a very nice old man who was agreeable to talk with. I bade him farewell and ran home, inspired by the idea of just having secured a garden for us, a “temporary garden.” My parents listened to the story and agreed with my plan!

That is how our gardening time began. We were allotted a big piece of ground that had never been cultivated before. The soil was tough and full of roots. Digging it was strenuous work. I helped my father with the digging and enjoyed testing my strength. I learned how to use a spade and a hoe and enjoyed working on a piece of land in the middle of a city. All our free time was spent with digging, weeding, and composting until we finally could start to sow and plant.

We didn’t stay alone for long. Neighbors saw the overgrown school garden slowly change, gave notice to the janitor and each got a piece of land for cultivation as well. So we soon were a gardening community of people, who had been strangers to each other; but now we talked about lettuce varieties and types of cabbage, about safe garden pest removal and the weather, a never-ending source of conversation. We came together while watering the plants and helped each other out. All these people surely had their own war experiences. Some had lost family members, others also their house and belongings. They might have belonged to opposing political camps. One didn’t talk about that. The garden had a healing effect on all of us. The people didn’t appear to be so discouraged any more. My parents too were more relaxed, more balanced, and they even could bear their worries about my brother with more confidence.

The constant work with the soil and the plants, the attunement to the rhythm of the days and the seasons, the experience of growth and ripening after so much destruction—this all strengthened the human sensibilities in us and awaked hope. We sowed and planted: head lettuce, peas, and beans; we cultivated potatoes and kohlrabi, parsley and chives, onions, leeks, red beets, and Savoy cabbage. Our three chickens from the back yard of our apartment building and the rabbits that my father bred there, supplied the manure necessary for the garden. Besides, we had started a compost pile.

For the first time in my life, I experienced growing one's own food, instead of buying it at the grocery store: being part of the entire growth process from sowing and transplanting to harvesting; being involved in all these phases through our own work. These were "our" tomatoes and "our" potatoes. They tasted totally different from any bought ones. While eating them it was, as if I ate the fruit of our labors resulting from digging and watering, the wind and the rain, the sun rays which had ripened them, the root force of the earth and long, patient growth until they were ripe. Only now could I really understand, why my father had always talked with so much warmth of his home garden by the Rhine.

My father soon built a small garden house with a bench, grew pole beans up along three sides of this shed and soon they wound around the training wires up and up and formed a roof that gave us shade. The ugly rubble pile that had marred the garden, now nearly disappeared under pumpkin leaves and huge ripening pumpkins belonging to everyone.

In the middle of the school garden, we had cleared a small rock garden after removing a lot of weeds and shrubs. Lizards peeked from the cracks between the stones, scurried across the rocks or took a peaceful sunbath on top of them. Soon yellow and red stonedrops spread their flower cushions in between various types of grasses and a few poppies sprung up with bumblebees and honeybees humming about them. This colorful garden hub, completely void of any utilitarian purpose, brought sheer joy to all of us, who had by now cultivated each little piece of soil.

Sonja

Right at the start of our gardening time, my parents had given me a little piece of land on our plot to do with, as I liked, so-to-say, as recognition for me coming up with the garden idea. Although it was little more than three square feet, it was mine. "There is much space for upward growth," I considered, and stuck sunflower seeds into the soil.

In the following weeks I observed how the seedlings emerged from the dark soil covering the seeds, striving up towards the light, leaves unfurling, buds forming and already showing promises of future blossoms. I nurtured this small piece of land to the best of my knowledge; I fertilized it with rabbit manure, watered the small plants and talked to them encouragingly.

Soon I noticed that a very special sunflower developed in the center of the patch, taller than all the others. Something was afoot! I followed the impulse to trim always the lower ring of leaves, so that its whole power surged to the crown. The plant formed a huge bud. It took its time to unfold and grew higher and higher. Soon it was as tall as I was, it kept on growing, the bud gaining in

size and the rough stem felt strong and firm like a young tree trunk. It grew taller and taller throughout the entire summer and then one day the mighty bud started to open. It took its time. For days I observed every small change. It blossomed into a radiant flower, protected by the uppermost circle of leaves, and started to slowly bow down due to its own weight and finally looked down on me with its wreath of warmly radiant, yellow rays. By then it had gown way above my head!

This radiant flower being had developed from the small sunflower seed; I had witnessed it and yet had not been able to help much in this process. It was hard to believe! The other sunflowers surrounding it had also flowered, each just as lovely in its own way, but none matched the Queen of the Sunflowers, as I had secretly named her.

When the work of the day was done and the other people went home I liked to linger for a while and enjoyed the silence pervading the garden; it was only in that stillness that all things seemed to reveal their innermost essence to me. It happened quite naturally that I started talk to my sunflower. “You are so beautiful!” The big face of the flower above me moved gently in the evening wind. “A flower like you shall have a name, all to yourself, different from all others. I think your name is Sonja!” The flower seemed to be agreeable to that. “You have grown from a small seed. I have seen what great force was hidden in that small seed. People have built explosive bombs and nuclear bombs, which also contain a power, but only the power to kill and destroy. Actually, a sunflower seed is much stronger than a bomb, isn’t it? Something alive emerged from it.” Sonja, the sunflower answered me in her own way: she just bloomed! A bumblebee settled on the flower’s face and was looking for nectar. “I see you have a visitor! I think I would be glad to sometimes have a visitor. But our flat still looks like war. Who would want to visit us?” The bumblebee bade farewell and flew on. “I would like to know if there is anything that cannot be destroyed. It is very important. If that exists, I have to find it. But when it doesn’t exist, then I just wanted to say, ‘Then I don’t know why I should go on living.’ But then, in the very moment when I thought that, I couldn’t say it anymore (the flower seemed even to feel my thoughts) because she looked at me like life itself and it was as if she said: “Have you still not understood? For what did I grow here?”

Sometimes it was risky to talk with this flower. It caught me thinking thoughts that I had already left behind but which still trailed after me trying to cling to me like burrs, mostly when I least expected it.

Soldiers' Graves

One evening I didn't take the usual way home, but left the garden through the small gate that led to the neighboring cemetery of St. Luke's Church; I had never before gone that way. In a corner next to the school garden I discovered several soldiers' graves. They looked abandoned and were completely neglected. Rough, primitive wooden crosses marked them, as if stuck into the bare ground in great haste. On one or the other cross hung a steel helmet. On one of the crosses I read: "An unknown soldier." Some gave the name and rank of the soldier. Not all of them were German names. The date on the crosses of the dead showed that they all had died during the last days of the war.

I had to think of the far-away relatives of the fallen, who maybe still awaited their return home. The cruelty and meaninglessness of war touched me from these graves. From then on I visited them often, as if that could set things right again. The graves looked so neglected. At least I wanted to think of those who lay buried there. Their graves shouldn't look so abandoned anymore. So I went there again and again, secretly took flowers from the other graves in the cemetery that were adorned and cared for—the dead surely wouldn't object—and used them to embellish the soldiers' graves in the corner by the fence, in order to alleviate their desolation. I wanted to do it in lieu of their relatives. I didn't tell my parents about my frequent detours through the cemetery. I didn't want to touch upon the fear that we all carried in us without ever voicing the anxious question: if and when my brother might come back. We still had no news of him. The flower Sonja got an earful from me that summer, and the wind carried my words away. It also was very good to be silent with her.

From Stuttgart statistics from 1945:

- 80,000 Stuttgart men were drafted to serve in the German army
- 14,000 of them were killed and 7,000 were reported missing
- 4,500 Stuttgart residents had died in bomb raids. Alone in 1944 during 25 air raids, 2,750 people perished.
- 1,500 Stuttgart residents died in the resistance movement.
- 1,000 Stuttgart Jews had been murdered
- 40,000 school children were undernourished
- 5 million cubic meters of rubble had to be removed
- A new beginning: Arnulf Klett becomes governing mayor of Stuttgart
- Dr. Reinhold Maier is appointed prime minister of the German Provinces North Baden and North-Württemberg

Not Everyone Who Returns Truly Comes Home

Fall approached. In the garden we harvested peas, beans, potatoes, and tomatoes. The sunflowers stood in full bloom and their seeds were turning dark brown. Some had already been visited by the titmice.

At the beginning of November, our doorbell rang, and when I opened it, Dieter, a friend of my brother's was standing there. He said right away: "Günther will soon come too. He will follow in a few days." My parents had come to the door with me and just heard the last sentence, before they could even be frightened by the fact that Dieter was standing there alone; he and my brother had been inseparable.

The uncertainty was over. But we first had to get used to the good news, carefully, as if it could dissolve into smoke if we would dare to be too happy. Then we sat in the living room. Dieter told us only little. He looked skinny and seemed to me to come from a different world, burdened by experiences that we could not share and he didn't want to talk about. We only came to know that they had been captured in April as POWs, before having been involved in any actual war activities; they were stationed first for six weeks in Ludwigshafen, and then, until the beginning of October, in France.

Only many years later I learned the details: that they had been stationed with 10,000 POWs under open sky in Ludwigshafen, in groups of 1500 behind the barbed wire fences. There had been a number of barely fourteen-year-olds among them, who had been captured together with them. After about six weeks they were transferred to France, first a few weeks to a camp in LeMans, and then moved to the peninsula of Cotenin, south of Cherbourg, where they became inmates of an American prison camp. There they had at least tents for quarters, but they slept upon the bare sandy soil. During their captivity they couldn't know whether they would ever see their families again. So many had died in the bombing raids, and many of the POWs, when they returned after their release, only found a pile of rubble in the place of their former homes.

During the following days a welcome bouquet of three sunflowers appeared to decorate the windowsill by the entry door. I had grown them on my own garden plot for his return. Now their time had come. When Günther entered through that door, it all came full circle. He finally was back.

I remember the first time after his return only like a movie with fuzzy pictures. On one hand it seemed natural that we were all four together again and at first tried to slip into our old roles, because we hadn't had the time to grow into any new ones yet. On the other hand we were no longer the same people as before, even if we were in the habit of trying to conceal that. In the course of time it would become apparent that the former roles could no longer fit.

The Red Cross delivered his postcard a week after the arrival of my brother, he had written it to us from France, trying to inform us of his pending release from the prison camp.

Not everyone who returns, comes home. But at first this isn't apparent. Also, those of us who had stayed home were no longer the same people that we had been before. So much had happened in us and around us, since we had last seen my brother. He didn't talk about the time of his captivity, and we didn't share our various experiences during the end of the war and the collapse of the Reich. It was easier to talk about the garden, about work that needed to get done, about the rabbits and the three hens that we still kept in the back yard. We didn't tell him about the young rooster, who had so far slept in the basket with the cat and her three kittens: that rooster had already been designated to turn into a strengthening meal for Günther. None of us would have been able to eat it, after it had practically become a family member for several weeks and had lived in our apartment. It was part of the same hatch as our chickens, but was somewhat of a runt and the other chickens didn't tolerate him in their cage. By now the young rooster had visibly improved. If a cat doesn't object to a young rooster making his nest in the basket with her kittens, then you are not talking about an ordinary cat nor was it an ordinary rooster either. A special reason was necessary to sacrifice that animal, so that an emaciated and starved homecomer could regain his health and strength. Since my brother did not know the story of the young rooster, he was the only one who could eat it with a good appetite.

Since Jacob Magier still lived with us, we were now five people in that small apartment. Günther and I slept in the living room, he in the bed (which he first had to get used to again) and I across from him on the old sofa in an old army sleeping bag—an unusual but in my eyes quite adventurous way to sleep. My father had brought the sleeping bag one day when he had helped with unloading a truck that had transported a load of them. They were lined with sheep fur and the outer shell was made from sailcloth. With such a sleeping bag one would have been able to camp out in the open even in winter. I sometimes imagined going on expeditions to other countries, and this would be a preparation for such endeavors.

A Farewell

Fall was nearly over. At some point it was time for my brother and his class to go back to school and prepare for the final exams (*Abitur*). The garden had been mostly harvested. I also was preparing for a good-bye. One afternoon I stayed alone in the garden and looked up to the great sunflower. There was no denying that it had undergone a change. The formerly yellow petals had taken on

a brown hue. Its green leaves had turned yellow and hung wilted from the stem. The heavy crown bowed ever deeper down to me and here and there the ripe seeds were already spilling out.

Then, as so often, I looked at her and understood what she told me, without audible words. The thoughts just emerged in me. A conversation sprung up between us. I sensed this would be the last time. But she didn't seem to be sad. She started out: "You see my yellow petals turn brown and wilt. Soon I will lose them all. It doesn't matter! I don't need them anymore. I don't have to invite bumblebees and honeybees anymore. My seeds are ripe. Now the titmice visit me."

I said, "The time in the garden is coming to an end, and in the next spring you won't be there anymore." (I didn't want to say what I had just thought: and you also are coming to an end and I don't want to realize that) when she interrupted my thoughts, "In every ending there is a beginning."

"How can that be," I queried?

"Think about it, how did I come here?"

"I put sunflower seeds into the soil, the biggest one in the center, watered and fertilized them, loosened the soil around them and you have grown from that center seed. You have grown tall, so strong and so beautiful."

"And where did you get the seeds?"

"From the garden shop—no, of course they came from another sunflower."

"Ripe seeds like mine. A seed was the beginning. Look at me—what do you see in my flower crown?"

"Many ripe seeds"

"How many?" "I don't know. I am not good in math, but I believe there are hundreds, maybe even thousands of them."

"And in each seed is a beginning, the power to become a sunflower. Even if I give many as presents to titmice, many will stay leftover that will become sunflowers. The titmice are important too and they need me. Now look again at my crown. What do you see now?"

"I see—I see hundreds, thousands of beginnings! Oh, now I understand!"

"I have to tell you something else. I learned it from you, better said, it sprung up in me (like you have sprung up, opened into a flower and unfolded your blossoming crown). There is more power in a sunflower seed than in an explosive bomb or an aerial mine. They can only destroy, kill; they cannot create life but only destroy it." The flower waited.

"There is something else that I still have to tell you. I can't talk about it with anyone else, because there are words that are just like bombs or aerial mines. When my brother returned home from captivity, my mother didn't know how to

welcome him other than by saying, 'How could you do that to us!' And her entire face was one big accusation. I felt sorry for him but, as usual, I was tongue-tied. But I would have liked to call to her 'Stop! Don't get going like that again! Leave him in peace, finally!' But then I also feel sorry for her and I can't get angry at her, I see both sides at the same time and that she is like a prisoner of her own offended feelings. Then I was angry or sad about myself, because I cannot help them. And what will I do next year when I no longer can talk to you?"

The flower seemed to deliberate. "You know now that an ending is full with beginnings. You will take a handful of my seeds and next spring you will plant them in the soil. They will grow and unfold and will remind you of me. You will see many more sunflowers in your life, and they will all remind you of the flower Sonja, with whom you could speak and who conversed with you in her own way, by flowering and ripening. Think of the many beginnings in that which seems like my end. Listen, do not hesitate any longer. Cut off my stem and pull the roots from the soil. I do not need them any more. Do not wait till all my seeds fall out. Do not forget: I have only blossomed in order to become ripe."

I thought about that. She was right, even if it hurt.

"We always make a feeding spot for birds on our kitchen porch. We stick evergreen branches into the empty flower boxes like a hedge as a protection against the wind. And within that hedge there is the feeding spot."

"My stem will make a good perch for the birds. Don't be sad if I am no longer recognizable. I live on in each sunflower seed. Remember, each ending is full of beginnings."

"I will do as you say. And I will plant sunflowers again. But I will give them no more names. It is better like that. You remain the One, you are like none other, you are . . . mother Sonja. Maybe I will write your story one day. Then I will tell the people: One day I knew a very special sunflower, who helped me discover that there is more power in a sunflower than in explosive bombs and aerial mines, that one blossoms in order to ripen and that all endings are full of beginnings."

So I cut off the sunflower and carried it home carefully. Its strong stem made a great perch for the birds. I fed them part of the ripe seeds, but kept enough for the planting in spring. The flower Sonja proved to be right: All the sunflowers I see remind me of her and of our conversations in the "temporary garden."

Christmas 1945

We had gotten a small spruce tree. Because we couldn't buy any, I tried to make candles by pouring a brown, stearin-like substance from tin cans into glass test tubes serving as molds.

When lit, these candles didn't smell that good, but they fulfilled their purpose, even though they burned down much faster than real candles. We hand-made many little gifts. There was very little that one could buy. Our imagination was challenged to create something out of nearly nothing. While we were all immersed in these preparations, we felt connected and full of anticipation. It was as if we were celebrating the fact that we were all reunited, having survived the war safe and sound. On Christmas Eve, we lit the candles on the tree, the gifts were spread out underneath and we wished each other a merry Christmas. But someone was still missing. "Where is Mr. Magier?" My brother went to look for him and found him sitting alone in his room. He invited him to celebrate with us. "I didn't want to bother anyone," Mr. Magier said to him. "You know, you give gifts to each other for Christmas, but I don't have any. That is embarrassing to me. I can't come without gifts." Finally my brother succeeded to convince him that we would be happy to have him join our celebration with or without any gifts, because that wasn't the point at all. And so he joined us in the living room, where the table had already been set. But it must have bothered him nevertheless—he had found a gift after all and produced a little package that he handed to me with a friendly, somewhat shy smile. When I unwrapped it, I found a new pair of knee socks, beautifully red and white striped, and exactly my size. I admired them appropriately and thanked him. I had to think back to the evening when Mr. Magier had moved in with us and I had opened the door. He was the first Jew I ever met and I was very timid. My parents were not home when he arrived. It all flashed again before my inner eye, how I showed him to his room, and he pulled a roll of cookies from his pocket and offered them to me; how I was fighting an inner battle, and didn't want to accept anything from him, still swayed by the propaganda slogans of the BDM . . . until all the sudden I realized that there was a human being standing in front of me who didn't fit into any of the enemy stereotypes that they had instilled in us. I accepted the biscuit, because I didn't want to hurt his feelings. That had broken the ice. Months had passed since then, and now he was celebrating Christmas with us and gave me knee socks as a gift.

In the course of the evening he said: "You really have very little space here. Now that your son has returned, you do need a room for him. You know, I have an idea, I will go to the authorities that have referred me here and will say that this apartment is so damaged that nobody should have to live in it, and ask them to procure a new place for me to live. Then they have to withdraw the confiscation of your apartment and will never again place anyone here. Then you have your space and the authorities will leave you in peace." As much as we needed the space, we nevertheless were very sorry to lose Jakob Magier. We

would miss him. When he saw our shocked faces, he remarked: "Oh well, I can always come back here for a game of chess."

That is how it came about that Jakob Magier moved out the week after Christmas and the confiscation of our apartment was withdrawn. We owed him thanks for more than that: The encounter with a human being who helped us understand what it meant to "be human" more than all de-nazification programs.

My brother's bed disappeared from the living room. He now could move into the small room that we formerly had shared, while I continued to unroll my sleeping bag in the living room, retreating to the sofa corner in the evening. Jakob Magier still visited us a few times, then we never heard from him again.

I remember Christmas 1945 for yet another reason. It left me asking, Why do we celebrate Christmas? I realized that we actually didn't know why and were just following the general customs. When we were children, the light of the Christmas tree and the gifts illuminated that season—and the fact that we were allowed to play with special toys during that time which were brought down from the attic, where they usually were stored: my brother's toy train set and my doll's house, whose rooms looked more like those of a castle—it was a valuable heirloom.

But we both were far too old to celebrate Christmas in that fashion. Also, both the train set and the doll's house had been destroyed during the last bomb raid. Nothing remained to fill that gap. It started already with the Christmas songs in the radio, which were unacceptable to us due to their Christian content. "High night of clear stars" was the only Christmas carol that I could honestly sing and without second thoughts. But no one joined in with me, it was not a family custom. Even with that song I had an uneasy feeling at times, which I never fully admitted to myself. Otherwise there wouldn't have been even one song left to sing "honestly" and with conviction. I loved the melody, but the text seemed to stem from an awkward attempt of the author to consciously avoid all Christian notions and yet couldn't quite do without them.

A Change of Schools

After New Year's of 1946, the schools started up again and one day I was surprisingly asked to come to the principal's office. I hadn't done anything wrong, so I calmly anticipated the meeting with the principal. In Freudenstadt, he had been able to take over the nearly fully furnished home of my host mother, when she moved back to her parents farm with her three children after her husband had been reported missing in Russia. Because of that, this principal and his wife no longer had to stay at a hotel. At the time he was really glad about that.

The Mörike High School now was re-named “Evangelical Daughters’ Institute,” the same name it had had before 1937. It had been spared shutdown by the Nazis only because the city of Stuttgart had taken it over. The other private schools, like the Free Waldorf School and the Catholic Girl’s High School St. Agnes, had been shut down in 1938. I didn’t understand that at the time. I also was little concerned that I was now a student of the Evangelical Daughters’ Institute. It was my school, even though it now had a different name. I noticed only one change, when the principal held morning prayer meetings. That’s when I discovered that he was a Protestant minister. I didn’t care. I like to attend this school, knew the teachers and after the evacuation I had reconnected with my classmates there. When I didn’t attend religious studies class, I thought that a matter of course, since I did not belong to any church. I just had an hour of study hall during that time. But it had attracted attention. The principal let me know that I had to attend religious studies class.

I told him that I did not belong to a church and also hadn’t been confirmed. He insisted on my attendance in that class, because after all I was in a private denominational school. I didn’t see any validity in his reasoning and tried to explain to him that I couldn’t attend a religious study class without believing in anything, certainly not just to conform to some rules. He remarked that I would then have to leave the school and transfer to a public school. So I said good-bye to him and enrolled at the Katharinenstift, a reputable public high school for girls. My parents only needed to confirm this surprising change of schools from their side! They had no objections. My way to school didn’t change, because both schools shared the same building. The facilities of the Katharinenstift had been destroyed by bombs and hadn’t been rebuilt yet. The schedules of the two schools interfaced in shifts. So I continued to head the same way, most of the time clinging to the outer platform of a crowded tramway. There was some change: I had to get used to the new teachers and classmates and catch up by learning pages and pages of English vocabulary. But while the other girls attended their religious studies class, I had study hall. That was the key difference. At that time I basically was still afraid to once more be deceived and disillusioned by adults. The shock and the confusion at the discovery of having followed a criminal regime had inflicted deep wounds. I had come to the resolution: “If there is any certainty anywhere, it would have to come from the inside.” Sometimes, when I was all alone, I quietly said to myself: “God, if you should exist, then please let me know.”

The Waldorf Years

When I heard that the Free Waldorf School Uhlandshöhe had been re-opened in fall of 1945, I told my parents that I was convinced I was meant to go to that school. They agreed on condition that they would not have to pay more than the fee in the government school, as my father's salary was not sufficient. We were poor after he had lost his former job. Neighbors who were influential in the Waldorf School and whom I had asked for advice, found a sponsor for me and so my parents had nothing against my wish to attend the Waldorf School. But what had given me the idea to become a student in the Waldorf School? Two important events paved the way for this decision—and both times books were involved:

One day I had discovered in my mother's bookcase a book whose foreign sounding name *Phaidon* attracted my attention, especially as I found the name "Socrates" while leafing through it. I had heard of him and knew that he was a wise man, a great Greek philosopher.

I began to read and was fascinated: for the first time I was able to read and understand a book that didn't just tell a story but developed trails of thought. I could follow these thoughts and this experience exhilarated me; yes, I took my place so-to-say among the students of Socrates and opened myself to his questions which led me further and further, soliciting knowledge from deep within myself—a knowledge I hadn't formerly been aware of. At that time I was about 13 years old.

These talks between Socrates and his students happened in prison, shortly before he was executed, and he helps them to realize that there is an immortal soul—that fact in particular deeply impressed me. I sensed that no man would deceive another in the face of death. I followed with mounting excitement the entire thought sequence of his argument—and at the end I was convinced that I had made an overwhelming discovery: there is an immortal soul; there is something in me, in all of us, that cannot be destroyed—by no worldly power! That was the key discovery, like a first breakthrough into the reality of a spiritual world. There was something in me that didn't come from my parents, something that could not be destroyed. I felt that I should keep this secret and shouldn't talk about it with anyone.

Around that same time I chanced upon a second book; it also stood in my mother's bookcase. It was written by an author, Gertrud Prellwitz, who is forgotten nowadays; she did have a certain readership though in the time after World War I in the circles of the Youth Movement of the twenties. The book was called *Drude* and its protagonist was a young girl, the daughter of an artist. She had died in Berlin in 1918—being barely 18 years of age. This girl *Drude* had

attended a “Wald School,” a school for both girls and boys that didn’t have regular classes but lesson blocks (modeled after the Odenwaldschule, a private school of the reform school movement of that time). I knew that Drude had lived. And now it happened that in my solitary quest for meaning, for a spiritual reality, I met Drude like a companion on the way. I talked with her in my mind, I dreamt of her, she became close to me like a friend. If there was a school like that I wanted to find it! The step from *Wald Schule* (forest school) to *Waldorfschule* was a small one, especially when I heard that they were also giving lesson blocks there, that it was a co-ed school, and that the curriculum included music, drama, painting, modeling with clay, and horticulture. In my imagination I sensed Drude guiding me on a spiritual plane towards this school, since I had no one else anymore to lead me.

When the Waldorf school opened the parallel B classes in fall of 1946 I was accepted: I was assigned to class 8b, with Herr Kōgel as our classroom teacher. My parents had reasons of their own to agree to this change of schools. I would no longer have to spend nearly an hour driving across town hanging onto the outer steps of overcrowded tramways, a common occurrence in those days. Since many trams had been destroyed in the war, one often had to get to school in this rather unsafe way. Sometimes a policeman ordered those hanging on to the outer platforms to get off, but that only meant one would take the next tram in the same way and keep going. Sometimes cars and trucks would pass dangerously close to us. That was exciting, but since we all were careful it was rare that anything happened. We students made a sport of this way of catching a tram ride. But now I could walk to my new school in ten minutes.

A New World Opens for Me

A new world opened up for me. In September of 1946, a healing impulse started to permeate my broken world. New horizons opened up in history class: I learned of ancient India with texts from the Vedas, then Persia with Zarathustra and Mesopotamia with the Epic of Gilgamesch, which particularly fascinated me. Eurhythmy was equally new for me. It felt good and revealed to me the connection between speech, music, and movement. I felt in these classes like a “whole person.” I experienced Eurythmy as a healing and harmonizing influence.

I fully immersed myself in the colorful world of the school and absorbed everything like a drink after a drought. I think that was characteristic for my whole generation. We were starving for spiritual values.

Another new thing was the choral recitation before the classes started. I was not used to learning a poem only through listening and speaking and I found it

difficult at first. Later I noticed that even after many years I still could remember the texts that I had learned that way while things that I had learned by heart from books had long been forgotten. Reciting in chorus with others awakened in me a joy for the spoken word. The sounding body of a speaking choir was a new, strong experience. I could feel safe in it, carried by the entire class; I could forget my own shyness and myself and fully open up to the poetry.

I absorbed everything that was helpful in my solitary quest, but at the same time I clammed up when Rudolf Steiner was mentioned. I saw his picture in many of the rooms and regarded it with a mixture of awe and discomfort: I was very much afraid to be once more disillusioned. I thought to myself: He may have been a very good and wise person, but who can give me a guarantee that he didn't err? Hadn't I been horribly deceived once before? I still hadn't gotten over that and feared it could happen again. But since—as I learned later—Rudolf Steiner had well nigh forbidden his teachers to teach anthroposophy in class, and since our teachers abided by that wish, it was easy to live with these ambiguous feelings of wanting to keep a certain distance. They were not very important either. There was too much that was new and that I could fully and completely engage in.

For example, there were the horticulture classes. Working in the school garden I experienced the seasons much more intensely than ever before. I learned how to start a compost pile, and many other things that came in handy when I worked in Africa many years later. Weeding was not popular, especially when dealing with quack grass whose extensive root system had to be completely dug out, or it would keep proliferating. Mr. Ebert, our horticulture teacher, had assigned me a garden plot that was particularly infested with quack grass, and I struggled with getting this weed under control. It seemed to me that all the others had simpler tasks to do. But just when I wanted to feel sorry for myself because of my laborious task, Mr. Ebert suddenly stepped beside me and said quietly: "That will turn out good! I entrusted this lot to you in particular, because you are conscientious and I can rely on you. Here only a responsible person can make a difference!" Then he went back to the others. But I saw my work all the sudden in a different light and tackled the task with renewed fervor. I could have gone on weeding like that for hours, because his recognition inspired me so much.

One day a professional shoemaker was invited to the school, who taught us how to perform simple shoe repairs. On many an afternoon he would show us how to put new soles or heels on shoes, and I then proudly repaired the shoes of my family. That was a big help. At that time there was a lack of shoemakers and other craftsmen. Many had been killed in the war and others were still in the Allied prison camps.

There was a rhythm pulsing through the life of our school, that I gladly joined: the lesson blocks, monthly celebrations, school festivities, concerts, the final theater performances of the senior classes, the school Mardi Gras, the surveying class on the Suabian Alb in the ninth grade (which made mathematics palatable to even a weak mathematician like myself) and many other events. There was also something more: I learned—very timidly at first—as if stepping on unknown ground, unsure if it will carry me—for the first time in my life how to celebrate Christmas! There were the Christmas celebrations in the classes, especially also the Oberufer Christmas plays whose language was strange to me at first; but later I was able to understand them on a deeper level, in part because of the reverence with which the teachers performed them. That reverence took hold of me too and I sensed a spiritual world hidden behind the odd language and its content—a world that had been closed to me so far. The same thing occurred in the senior choir under Friedrich Wickenhauser, when we sang Motets by Bruckner, or Palestrina, Haydn, and Bach. I lived in this music; it opened for me the gates to a different reality, which I slowly started to approach. We performed the Final Fugue with Choir and Orchestra of Anton Bruckner's TeDeum; we also sang his Motets in choir, which resonated with my innermost search and my questions.

When Mr. Wickenhauser lent me a violin one day and arranged for me to take violin lessons from Gerhard Labudde, a music major at the University and former Waldorf student, he fulfilled an old dream of mine. My father was unemployed, and we would have never been able to buy a violin. From that time on I repeatedly worked in a manufacturing plant during summer vacations to earn money for the violin lessons and the reduced tuition. Gerhard Labudde had a special pedagogic talent. He managed to strengthen my self-esteem and to overcome my insecurity through music, so that I finally felt confident enough to play in front of other people during a home concert.

Tension at Home

At home the tensions between my parents grew, and the difficulties with my brother in particular increased as well. He had come back from the POW camp towards the end of 1945. My parents couldn't deal with him becoming an adult, and the fact that the war had practically catapulted him prematurely into adulthood left them helpless. He was unable to speak about his experiences during the war and in the POW camp. Neither did we ever talk about how we experienced the crash of the Hitler Regime. But our long-repressed conflicts broke open now, no longer glossed over by the illusion of a shared ideology, which had hidden these differences.

Every day there was trouble. I suffered with him, but I also felt for our parents, who didn't know how to deal with these conflicts.

More and more I lived in two different, nearly opposing worlds, whose invisible borders I had to cross every day. I tried to separate these worlds as well as I could, trying to shield my school world from that of our family. I for example succeeded in nearly never telling my parents about parent-teacher conferences. If it had been possible, I would even have liked to stay at school overnight. I couldn't speak with anyone about what was happening at home. It would have seemed disloyal to me. Even though I loved and revered my teachers, it would have been unthinkable for me to draw them into my confidence and to burden them with the troubles of my family. I didn't want the shadows of my family life to intrude on the world of my school, where I lived, breathed, and where I could unfold, where I was free of the oppressive scenes that took place at home. I also was not at all used to sharing my thoughts and expressing myself. I had gotten used to having to do everything by myself. Even in class I could for years express myself practically only in writing, except for short answers stating facts. To recite a poem or give a presentation was completely impossible for me. I felt strangled by fear: "If you said something, a dam would break and you would tell more than you want to tell; you would let on what's really happening and the shadows of the other world would permeate the world of the school."

Dr. Herbert Hahn

So I rather let the teachers believe that I hadn't learned a particular poem, than overcoming my fears and reciting the poem in front of the class. But then something happened, and it happened in the German block with Dr. Herbert Hahn.

We had to memorize the poem: *Urworte Orphisch* (Primal Words Orphic) by Goethe. It must have been in 12th grade. I had been touched by the poem, knew it by heart, but when one morning Dr. Hahn suddenly asked me to recite it, I once again stood there and couldn't utter a sound. I was allowed to sit down again, no fuss, and a classmate recited the poem instead of me. At that point I really got mad at myself. I was not at all satisfied with the intonation that I heard others give the poem. I felt within me how it should sound.

In the evening of that day when I was alone at home I went into my room and looked a long time at the Goethe picture that stood on my table; I fully opened myself to the meaning that Goethe himself would have wanted to express in this poem. After that I began to recite it out loud; I first had to get used to my own voice which I never before had heard like that. I realized for the first time

what I could express with my voice. I was fascinated and repeated the verses, in order to express with utmost purity the meaning and the changing moods of the different parts of the poem; in this striving I forgot myself and felt as if released. A breakthrough had happened. I now knew that I could give form and expression through the word and through my voice! I had the gift of imbuing a text with life.

The next morning something unprecedented happened. Dr. Hahn asked me again—right at the beginning of the class—to be the first one to recite *Urworte Orphisch*. I rose and was filled by the thought, “I will show them how Goethe had meant it to sound. It just has to come alive for them!” I began and spoke the poem from beginning to end, forgetting myself, as if I had broken free. When I had ended, the class was completely quiet. I sat down, and was suddenly attacked again by my fears; I would have liked to crawl into a mouse hole. I wasn’t even able to look up anymore. But Dr. Hahn, after a short, appreciative “thank you” quite naturally went on to call up the next student. If he had made any gesture, said a word about the unusual thing that had happened with me—I would have retreated again into terrified silence. But his behavior allowed me to recollect myself during the class.

Sophocles and Ernst Weissert

Some time later we were supposed to think about the senior class play. We decided on *Oedipus Rex* by Sophocles. The auditions began. I had counted on being cast as one of the members of the Choir of Thebes, since there was only one female lead role, that of Jocasta, and we had several good actresses in the class, whose talent was known. When Ernst Weissert asked me to read the part of Jocasta I didn’t think anything but: “Now I have the opportunity to let this monologue come to life, and I want to make good use of that opportunity.”

After several others had read the same monologue, Mr. Weissert asked the class who should play the role of Jocasta? The answer was unanimous: Margarethe! I could hardly believe it! Only now did I realize the ramifications: memorizing the part, being on stage, a hall full of spectators, I should do all this, I, who tended to still stumble over her own feet when someone as much as looked at me intently? Did Mr. Weissert know what had happened in the block with Dr. Hahn? Did he trust me to succeed? Then I mustn’t disappoint him or the class! And it happened again: I opened myself fully and entered the role of Jocasta; I forgot my fears and myself. There was a completely new certainty within me: I would succeed. And that’s what happened: I was Jocasta throughout the entire time of rehearsals and performances, and I played the role without any stage fright, as if set free. I moved on stage with certainty as if I had never done

anything else. My partner in the drama, Bernhard Rund, gave a great performance as Oedipus, and we mutually inspired each other to achieve ever higher excellence in the play.

After the last performance, Mr. Weissert asked me what I wanted to do after graduation. “First I need to make some money to finance my university studies, and then I would like perhaps to study German or Art.” Mr. Weissert: “Have you thought of studying to be an actress? You have the talent for it.” I was at first just speechless. After a while I replied with that strange clairvoyance one sometimes has at that age: “I don’t believe I could do this all the time. I have been Jocasta for weeks now. I would immerse myself into any other role just as intensely. I am afraid after sometime I wouldn’t know anymore who I really am.”

At that point I wouldn’t have been strong enough yet to withstand such a strain. But I have never forgotten how my teachers have waited patiently throughout the years for the right moment to come, and when the time for my breakthrough arrived, how they reacted immediately by entrusting me with the lead role in the senior play. The support of the entire class was a great encouragement for me as well. These experiences and others like it have been key influences on my later pedagogic work as a teacher.

After the Waldorf School

After the 12th grade I had to say good-bye to the Waldorf school with a heavy heart, because I had to transfer over into the matriculation class at the Königin-Olga-Stift. There was an agreement between the two schools that students who were weak in mathematics would go to the Königin-Olga-Stift during the final year of school to prepare there for the extensive final state exams (matriculation exam: Abitur). A few students from the Waldorf School Reutlingen joined us as well. The demands in math were not as high in the public school as they had been at the Waldorf School, where the students had to pass an external state exam after the 13th grade. It was a short school year when we were transferred, due to changing the begin of a school year from winter to fall. So we had to cover a lot of material in a short time; but we succeeded without difficulties. We were well received by the faculty and the students. In some subjects we were ahead of the others, in others we had to study up on some things.

I had learned at the Waldorf school to keep inquiring about the respective subjects guided by my own interest and to look for cross-references and connections. I was not concerned with the grade I received in math and physics, because I could gain a good grade point average by excelling in other classes; I also knew I wouldn’t want to pursue a study of these subjects. It was not until

many years later that I got interested in questions of modern physics. I think it is a strength of Waldorf education, as I experienced it, that one learns to think independently and approaches new situations creatively. It also awakens in us the realization that learning is a lifelong process.

Becoming a Christian

In March 1952 I graduated from Königin-Olga-Stift. While preparing for the matriculation exams, I had simultaneously undergone a deep-reaching inner development, which finally led to the decision to seek acceptance into the Catholic Church. This had been building up in me for several years. At the Waldorf school I got in touch with Christianity while I already was a seeker. In those years I had a profound experience of the Christ. When least expecting it, one day while reading the gospels (which had remained inaccessible to me during several previous attempts) Christ became such a living presence for me that I was struck as if by lightning by the realization: He lives, He speaks these words to me personally, He knows about me, He is present! I did not hear or see anything. I had no vision. But his presence filled the whole room; He was more real than all I could hear, see or touch. This experience was not influenced by concepts of those who had been raised in the church tradition. It was a direct encounter; even the words of the gospel were only the point of contact. This experience repeated itself—ever new and fresh—throughout the next weeks and months, whenever I read the New Testament. I hid this experience from the people surrounding me. I trusted my inner guidance, which finally allowed me to recognize that one cannot be a Christian on one's own, but needs a community.

So the next phase of my quest began, during which the figure of Francis of Assisi was my constant companion; I had come to know about him through the frescos of Giotto during art class, and I was familiar with his Canticle to the Sun through my Waldorf education.

In this search for a church community, the painful question emerged: Why can't I just become a Christian? Why did one have to be catholic, protestant, orthodox or reformed or anything with a label? When I reviewed the entire burden of Christendom, the dark chapters of church history and the schism into a variety of churches and communities of various faiths, I found it difficult to make a decision. The phrase of "salvation is only within the Church"—so often misused and torn out of context—was horrendous to me and contradicted the spirit of the gospels. Only when I saw it in its proper time constraints and gave it relative validity within that matrix, it no longer posed an insurmountable obstacle to me. But the problem remained. Could it be true that whatever church I would choose, that step would forever separate me from the others? In

addition, the Catholic Church had always been deeply rejected by my family. This all was very burdensome to me. Later these were the very experiences that prompted me to become involved in ecumenism and opened many doors for me.

In spite of all reservations and the knowledge about the dark chapters in church history, I decided to join the Catholic Church, fully knowing that I would find not only Christ and people trying to walk in his steps, but also the burden of a nearly two thousand year history with all its light and also its deep shadows.

Already years before Vatican Council II, I had experienced the renewed liturgy of the Holy Week, in particular the celebration of the Easter Vigil night which goes back to the early time of the church and that had been forgotten for a long time; the impression remained: a church that possesses such a liturgy and is able to re-awaken it after such long hibernation, will also find the strength to renew itself. Through the liturgy and the sacraments—even in their pre-council form—I was touched by a Mystery that had become a living reality for the early Christians—it touched me beyond all the historical overlays and beyond all human failures. I felt met and taken serious in my entire being—spirit, soul and body—in particular by the symbolic language of the liturgy.

From the beginning, my approach to the church was following in the footsteps of St. Francis of Assisi. My decision was made in an ancient Franciscan monastery from the 13th century, San Francesco in Fiesole near Florence, which I had visited during an art excursion of the Waldorf school. The vision of St. Francis was that of the church as a community of brothers and sisters with no higher or lower ranks, no positions of power, and no possessions at the expense of others, where faith is a shared and personal, responsive listening to the will of God, transposing the gospels into a lived reality; this never attained and yet ever newly inspiring ideal determined my choice.

Being Received in the Catholic Church

In April 1952, just after my matriculation, I was received into the Catholic Church. It was a peculiar synchronicity that the priest, who prepared me for this step, had taught catholic religious studies at the Stuttgart Waldorf School for years, and he held that school in high esteem. I only came to know about that later. I had never met him at the Waldorf school, since I had taken part in the non-denominational religious studies course.

In spite of all my efforts to bring about a peaceful solution, my joining the Catholic Church caused a rift between my parents and me. They gave me the choice to either leave the church or to leave the house. With a heavy heart I decided to do the latter and traveled to Switzerland where I worked until I came of legal age. Since I had no work permit, I could only work for food and lodging,

and was not allowed to earn money. I worked as a household helper in various places. After a few weeks my parents had the police search for me to bring me back to Germany, and so I was forced to frequently move from job to job and town to town. Finally the German consul in Zürich took up my cause, after having learned the true reason for my Swiss exile. He had followed me to the St. Gallen Highlands, where I was just working at House Margess near Flums, a vacation facility for children in need of recuperation.

When the consul heard my story, he told me I could call him day or night if I should get into any difficulties. He could hardly believe that such a case of persecution due to membership in a church could actually happen in 20th century Germany.

According to the law at that time, I came of age when turning 21. Now I could return to Germany.

In the Footsteps of St Francis of Assisi

In 1954 I joined the Franciscan Sisters of Siessen, an educational Order that had over time also taken on other tasks, such as in the fields of nursing, pastoral care, and social work. After my novitiate year, I took my first temporal vows and then was sent to the University of Freiburg where I studied German and English literature and linguistics and also did my teachers' training course. I wrote my pedagogic thesis on "Waldorf Pedagogy and Private Church Schools: A Comparison."

During that time I often attended as a Sister, the Open Summer Courses on Education, organized by the Waldorf school at Umlandshöhe. Our Superior General fully agreed with my attendance and encouraged me to participate; she still knew and valued the Waldorf school from the time when she had been the Principal (Headmistress) of our St Agnes Girls' High School in Stuttgart. She repeatedly said that she liked me keeping in contact with my former school. There was much good there, she said, and she had the impression that this school had given me much of value. She told me that there had been good contacts with Waldorf teachers during private school conferences. After the war one had together looked for common ways of starting over and led joint negotiations with government agencies. She felt that there were good impulses coming from the Waldorf schools.

Only now did I come to know the theories that informed the practical education I had experienced as a student. I read the humanistic and pedagogic writings of Rudolf Steiner and studied the lesson plans. Much of what I had witnessed as a student became alive again for me. Now I could reflect upon it.

After finishing my assistant teacher years, and after passing the pedagogic state exams I taught for seven years at the *Aufbaugymnasium* (Integrated High School) of our Convent Siessen near Saulgau. Shortly after starting there, I founded a school theater, with the male roles being played by the students of the Public High School (*Aufbaugymnasium*) Saulgau. That was an innovative thing to do at that time, which soon became part of the school activities. Our school director gave me free reign. I wanted to enable the students to experience some of what I had learned at the Waldorf school: this great common involvement in performing a theater play, where everyone can contribute their talents. We performed *Our Town* by Thornton Wilder. It was a great success. Here, as on many other occasions, my educational creativity was inspired by Waldorf pedagogy, in spite of the constraints of a state-imposed curriculum.

Africa

In 1973 I volunteered to go to South Africa, where our sisters were teaching more than 400 girls and boys of the Basotho and Tswana tribes at a high school with boarding facilities; they didn't have enough teachers there for that many students. The school was situated in a rural area, with its own water supply from drill wells and its own system of trash removal. Much had to be improvised. I stayed and taught there for 19 years. The challenge was to immerse oneself into another culture and language, and my African sisters helped me greatly in that endeavor.

There were barely any teaching materials when I started. I had to start from the very beginning, improvise, learning to understand a different way of thinking and feeling—and all of this happened in the context of an apartheid society which poisoned human relations and sowed mistrust. But there were also a lot of positive possibilities: An ecumenical movement within which the various churches cooperated in common concern for the African people, a movement which sought to undercut apartheid policy. We were free to teach ecumenical religion in school, and we had access to ecumenical learning materials in the framework of the GABA Program that had been produced cooperatively by all the main line churches in East Africa; it was a sensitive and creative program and had been given full support by the East African Catholic Bishops Conference. This program includes the values of African cultures and fosters the mutual understanding of cultures, races, and religions. Since our students belonged to different churches, the ecumenical GABA Program was doing them the most justice.

In class and in church service, drama and dance were natural means of expression. Danced prayers, accompanied by Marimba instruments, and here and

there, instead of a sermon, a skit with a scene from the gospels performed by the students in church—this all was part of our church services, not only on holidays. As far as possible in the framework of a public school, I could make use of the natural talent of the Africans for drama and expression, for dance and rhythm, while I sought to counterbalance the much too one-sided curriculum of the African schools.

How did my Waldorf school experience help me to meet all the challenges in South Africa? I believe it made it easier for me to meet a new situation creatively. I had changed locations and I learned to see Europe for the first time from the African perspective. From there, it all looks very different.

I quickly adapted to working under basic conditions, to achieve something with few means and I was glad to be able to perform smaller repairs myself when the need arose. I also continued to need artistic expression of some sort. When the opportunity presented itself, I dared to start sculpting and made two stone sculptures. The intense light of Africa actually challenged one to do a sculpture. Hopefully my students benefited from the patience I had to develop while working with stone!

I was well aware that there were a number of traumatized children sitting in my class, who had been exposed to awful experiences in their settlements during the riots. Some had been witnesses of “necklacing” (a person who was accused of being a sellout, an informer to the white government, would be forced to have a car tyre pulled over his body, around his neck, have paraffin poured over him and was then given matches he had to light and set himself on fire). There was often an atmosphere of fear and panic. All I could do was to be with them in their struggle and pain. Sometimes I saw healing taking place in the midst of the unrest and violence. At times when I found it difficult to understand a student’s behavior it often helped me to meditate on him or her and then I could see that student in a new light. But much remained patchwork, because with a workload of up to 39 classroom lessons (of 35 minutes each) per week and the additional work in the boarding facilities requiring a lot of energy, I reached my limits again and again.

In South Africa I began to read the major works of Rudolf Steiner. Only now was the time ripe for me to handle them. I had anthroposophical friends, where I could borrow books and many questions were raised and answered in my conversations with them.

Africa gave me the encounter with people of other cultures and other religions. My own quest had been a preparation for meeting people not through preconceived notions and rigid concepts, but through respect for their own path and by knowing that “God always was there before”; I had learned that every

person—consciously or unconsciously—is carrying that which—in the language of the bible—is called “formed in His image”; other religions may name it differently but it always encircles the same mystery, which human speech and imagination can only approximate and express but insufficiently.

My involvement in various other churches, where I gave meditation classes and retreats, encounters with Sufis, with Buddhism and Islam and the meditation courses in an ashram in South Africa—this all helped my understanding of Ecumene to expand beyond the various Christian denominations to include other religions. I often thought about the words Dr. Herbert Hahn had spoken to us while reading with us the confessions of St. Augustine in non-denominational religious study class: “We must have reverence for the religious destiny of each human being.”

Rudolf Steiner said, teachers should meditate in preparation for their classes, so that they can present living concepts to the students which can then develop further, because only such concepts can continue to be meaningful in one’s life—I certainly experienced the truth of that in my own life. I could build upon the foundation that Waldorf education had provided. Most of all I have experienced my time at the Waldorf school as a healing influence, which like deep groundwater gave rise to life even in a time of drought.

It has nothing to do with glorifying the past when I say that my experiences at the Waldorf school were predominantly positive; it reflects my experiences and my personal situation at that time.

Looking back I would wish that there would have been some help available to us adolescents for integrating our sexuality; not necessarily as a separate class of sexual education, but integrated into the overall curriculum. As far as I know this is being offered now, as also problems of our times are addressed in general. I also would welcome a practice of conflict identification, peaceful conflict resolution, and of methods of active nonviolence. I had to learn all that in the conflict-loaded atmosphere of South Africa in the midst of political unrests.

Return to Germany

After working in South Africa for twenty-one years, I was called to Bonn in 1994 to the mission center of the Franciscans to take over the general secretariat of an international program of Franciscan spirituality that I had already worked with in South Africa. It is a course in Franciscan spirituality, which has become instrumental in the renewal of Franciscan communities worldwide. The authors come from different cultures and Franciscan communities. The course explores how the life testimonies of Francis and Clara can be fruitful for our existence and work today. The course does not attempt to imitate the past, but to find new

paths nowadays in that same spirit. The course is ecumenical and includes Franciscan orders and groups in the other churches.

The work with this course program and its new edition, which has been translated into seventeen languages, brought me many new challenges. For example, I also participated in teaching introductory courses in Africa and Asia. Among others, I traveled to Kenya, Malawi, Cameroon, the Philippines, and to China (Hong Kong, Macau and to the southern mainland). My service to the international Franciscan family extended across five continents, from Canada to Papua New Guinea. My own order gave me leave for this task and I lived for eight years in the Bad Godesberg mission center, a small international Franciscan community of two sisters and six brothers (of German, Indian, and Brazilian nationality). We had fifteen employees in the project departments for Africa, Asia, and Latin America and in the bureau for human rights and education.

This course program has challenged us and has given so much to me and many brothers and sisters: the advocacy for justice, peace, and the stewardship of creation, engagement on behalf of the poor and disadvantaged; the prophetic criticism of systems such as capitalism and Marxism and a continued critical questioning of the power structures in church and society, always guided by the spirit of the gospels. How must we change our lives, how must grown structures and institutions change in order to accompany men and women of our times on their own quest and to make the world a better place to live in? The course provides inspiration for this quest.

My service for this project ended in August 2002. A successor took over my work and I have returned to the motherhouse of the Franciscan Sisters. My former office has been relocated to Würzburg—with a new set of employees—where the work continues on a wider scale. I now have the time to write a long-planned book.

My understanding of church, religion, and God, of being human, and being in the world in which we live today—this understanding has undergone crucial changes in the course of the years through these encounters with people and ideas. I am still on the path, still in the process of learning. I still have contact with many of my former schoolmates. I thank all those who have given their support, so that in the midst of danger also the saving force could grow and overcome all obstacles.

Epilogue

They shall once
Be able to say
About me:
She loved bridges
And sunrises
And refused
To have enemies.

Afterword

For clarification I should like to point out that two independent texts, written at different times and for different purposes, have been merged here by the editor to make one consecutive story. The first text, “A Waldorf Biography,” was written as part of a project of the Waldorf School in Stuttgart, Germany. In 1998 former students were invited to write a short biography with the emphasis on our experience of Waldorf pedagogy and its influence on our life: what had proved to be helpful and also what had been a hindrance or had even caused damage. We were encouraged to take a critical look at our experiences and give an honest account. The ensuing short biographies were intended to be a help for present and future teachers.

The second text “The Twelfth Year” is a chapter taken from the book I am presently writing. Both texts I had sent to Trauger Groh, who, between 1946 and 1952 was a classmate of mine at the Stuttgart Waldorf School. He shared them with others who took an interest in them. So it happened that the two texts were made into one and translated into English with the intention to have them printed. Certain repetitions are therefore unavoidable.

Following a visit to U.S.A. I had the opportunity to read and to correct the combined texts. May the outcome, “Memories of a former Waldorf School Student,” serve to inspire and affirm teachers, parents and students in their effort of creating a school community in which healing can happen and young people can discover and develop all their gifts and talents.

I thank Karin Di Giacomo for the great work of translation, and the editor, David Mitchell, for his initiative and dedication to have these texts published.

– Margarethe Mehren

The following is the previous article in the native German language for use by upper grade language classes.

– Editor