

Stille Post: Eine andere Familiengeschichte

(Whispers Down the Lane: A Different Family History)

Christina von Braun

Translated from the German by Allison Brown

Prologue

From my bed, in the dark, the two small lights on my laptop look like the lights of the mountain village that I can see through the window. The village is about four-and-a-half miles away as the crow flies. But we are in the Cévennes, and the electrician needs at least forty minutes to cover this distance. He has to drive down the winding serpentine road from his mountain, following the dried-up riverbed along a meandering valley, and then back up the hairpin curves on our side of the mountain. Something significant has to happen for him to make the trip. If the boiler is hit by lightning and blows a fuse, for example. Of course, it isn't that he doesn't enjoy coming. There is a sacred well on the mountain behind our house. It lies along one of the ancient pilgrimage routes to Santiago de Compostela. Sometimes, if drought persists, the people from the area make their way there and perform mysterious rituals. To get it to rain again, they have to circle the well three times while reciting prayers. Our electrician is a devout Christian—no repairs without a little missionizing, that's included in the price. But when it comes to water, he gladly abides by the customs of the ancients. He has respect for the drought, and for the powerful thunderstorms in the area. Go walk through the cemeteries, he says, and look at the gravestones. Every other one says *foudroyé!* Struck by lightning! Maybe that's why he became an electrician. These powerful bursts of electrical energy. They cannot be ignored; they must be harnessed and channeled into ordered pathways.

Tomorrow I want to start writing. I've unpacked my laptop. I want to tell about the incredible bursts of electrical energy and rage that sometimes issued forth from my mother. When we were children we all had unbelievable respect for these eruptions. And I want to tell about my grandmother, whom I never actually knew. She died three months after I was born—in Berlin, in prison.

This grandmother, Hildegard Margis, was the inspiration for writing this book. It was not easy finding out anything specific about her. Her house was bombed. After she died her furniture, files, and memorabilia made their way to my paternal grandparents in Silesia, where they were later plundered. Russian soldiers took the jewelry and the files that she had

deposited in a safe at the Dresdner Bank. My mother, who was named Hildegard like her mother, owned next to nothing of my grandmother's. But it might also be that she didn't save anything. I think she wanted to forget her mother. Still, she didn't let go of her throughout her entire life. I must have sensed that even as a child. My Uncle Hans, my mother's brother, was my grandmother's only son and he ended up in Australia. The few records he had of his mother were destroyed when his farm went up in flames. One of the giant bush fires that still occasionally rage in Australia. It is almost a miracle that I was able to learn anything at all about my grandmother. In the Berlin archives—state archives, publishing house archives, Siemens archives—I finally found a few tangible references. But I came to the conclusion that memories of certain people can also be manifested in the form of silence or puzzles.

The more I occupied myself with the life of my grandmother, the more I became interested in the “past lives” of other members of my family. I started poring through my mother's diary, which she kept during her years at the Vatican, from 1944 to 1949. My father was with her except for the last three years; then he had to leave her alone with the three young children. A young, attractive woman surrounded by men in long, black cassocks! The diaries do not only speak of red cardinals' hats and magnificent masses, but also of a sanctimonious administration that worried if women did not wear stockings at the height of summer. The Vatican Gardens and the Campo Santo Teutonico are treasured sights visited by tourists. They were playgrounds for us kids. The kids—at the time those were my older sister Carola, my younger brother Christoph, and myself, as well as some Japanese and Finnish children, the children of the “Axis diplomats.” That's what Hilde called them in her diaries. I was five when we left this paradise to move to Germany—that postwar Germany where we were always getting sick. “Homeland” was a term I associated with the sun in the Vatican Gardens, not with cold, dismal, bombed-out Germany. That feeling has somehow always stayed with me.

When I moved to Berlin (I had to reorganize my books and still can't find some of them), I discovered that the diary of my other grandmother, Emmy von Braun, was also in my possession. I no longer recall how I came to have it. It must have come to me without my realizing during the years I spent amassing materials. When we sold my parents' house, my siblings passed on everything that had to do with the “unofficial” memories of the family to me. The “official” memories, such as the family tree that my grandfather Magnus von Braun had researched and my grandmother had transformed into a magnificent watercolor painting—ended up with my brother, the heir. But the diaries, those oft neglected inheritances, came to me. Another, totally different world turned up in this diary of Emmy

von Braun. It contains a description, day by day, of the end of the war and the expulsion of my grandparents from their farm in Lower Silesia. Why did Emmy von Braun record these events, but nothing from the preceding years? I could only conclude that for her, the real “historic event” was not Nazism, but the large-scale population displacement toward the end of the war. In my grandfather’s memoirs there is a chapter entitled “Night Over Germany,” which referred not to Nazism or the Second World War, but rather to the expulsion of the Germans from Silesia. The subheading of the chapter is “The Russian Onslaught.” In these memories, the twelve years between 1933 and 1945 simply did not take place.

These diaries, memoirs, and letters clearly show how differently “history” can be experienced within one and the same family. The only thing the various members of my family have in common is that each one of their lives was thrown off course by “history” and directed along new paths. When I was sitting on an airplane en route to Melbourne in early 2003, to visit my Uncle Hans and his children, I became suddenly aware of the fact that my closest cousins all live either in Australia or the United States. I have siblings in Germany, but all my parents’ siblings emigrated and their children were born as citizens of Australia or the United States. My parents’ brothers—there were no sisters—all emigrated for reasons that had to do with the Nazis: Hans, my mother’s brother, left Nazi Germany in 1936 and went to London. My father’s brothers—Wernher and Magnus—had supported the Third Reich so successfully that the United States wanted to be sure to have their services in the future.

I will discuss my Uncle Wernher, the rocket scientist, only peripherally. My grandmother Hildegard Margis knew him and, according to her housekeeper, occasionally argued with him. About the prospects of the war, I assume. Much has been written about Wernher and at most I could add a depiction of my encounters with him when I was a child and a young woman. I first met him in the mid-1950s and saw him quite often after that, in Germany and the United States. My siblings and I admired him. As children we were proud to have such a famous uncle. And he was also very charismatic and warmhearted in his dealings with people. I could recognize both of these qualities in the letters he wrote to his parents in 1946. Not until I was grown did I start thinking about the fact that during the Nazi period Wernher had not conquered space, but had developed a weapons transport system that was responsible for massive destruction in London and other cities in Europe. And that concentration camp prisoners were used to produce these weapons and many of them died in the process. The historian Mike Neufeld has spent many years working on a comprehensive biography of Wernher, including his responsibility as a scientist.¹ I am familiar with some previous works by Neufeld.² His biography can be expected to offer sophisticated findings

with which I cannot compete. It goes beyond the scope of my book anyway. I am recounting not the history of science, but the private histories of individuals. And I have chosen to concentrate—albeit not exclusively—on the lives of the women in my family.

Early on I was aware that I am part of a course of German history that is very hard to bear. When I was nine I went to school in England, where “history” was taught in a very different way than in Germany. My closest friend at that time in London was Linda. We were inseparable, but she never came home with me, though I often invited her. When I once asked her why, she said that she was Jewish and that her parents had forbidden her to set foot in a German home. At home that evening, I realized that I too was part of “history.” Nevertheless, it took many years before I asked what role my uncle Wernher had played. I naively believed I could keep them separate—my family history and German history.

The few sources that I have differ in almost stereotypical ways along gender lines. The men left memoirs to posterity; Magnus von Braun’s were published, my father’s and my Uncle Hans’s remained incomplete and unpublished. The women wrote diaries. Memoirs are written in retrospect, and they tempt authors to harmonize their own stories with “history.” In every sense of the word they assume control over the past. Diaries, on the other hand, are written in the here and now. The authors do not know what will transpire in the further course of “history.” They cannot yet put the events they experience into historical perspective. This is why the diaries written by the women in my family are well-suited for what I propose to do: I would like to slip back into their time. I would like to search out some of that which has not found its way into official historiography. There has always been a specifically “female” way of passing along the news that consisted of family secrets or the unspeakable. Presumably because for so long women had no access to the official channels of history. Thus the underground, a parallel system of news transmission, became a female specialty. Women have accomplished extraordinary feats in this area. Of course, the messages they heard were often encoded. The diaries of my relatives come to an end one or at most three years after the war. From this point on, their lives progressed in new, “ordered” pathways, and “history” no longer needed to resort to their chain-like transmission of messages by word of mouth, like “A Whisper Down the Lane,” the game also known as “Telephone” or “Chinese whispers.”

My mother spoke little about my grandmother, and when she did it was often in negative terms. Only once, when we—now five children—had to take a long car trip with her, she suddenly said, “You all know a lot about your father’s family. Now I’ll tell you about mine.” I was ten or twelve at the time and everything she said seemed incredibly abstract and far removed from us. The people she talked about meant nothing to us. Her mother—our

grandmother—was a strange figure. Hans was nothing but a yellowed photograph on my mother's dressing table. So I didn't remember much of her account and later had to struggle to piece it all together. But today I know that my mother also kept some things to herself. That came out when I met Hans in 1996. Notwithstanding his eighty years, he had an excellent memory and evidently not the slightest need to repress anything. Hans gave me some important information about my grandmother and my mother, who wanted to keep certain things from us. Learning the story of his life, the course of which had been set by my grandmother, helped me understand more about the life of my family at the time. His stories also helped me grasp my mother's depression as part of the "whispers down the lane," as messages that had never found a clear-cut means of expression.

Not only do families pass down "unspoken messages," that is, family secrets that often reappear a generation later in a different form. There is also another form of legacy, which could be referred to as unfinished business. In the chain of whispers it doesn't matter what the truth is; whatever the receiver wants to hear gets passed on. This chain reaction transforms the news. And still, amazingly enough, I have come to the conclusion that society trusts a good deal of its memories to this message chain, perhaps even the most important ones of all: that which is not talked about, but cannot be lost.

Why do certain clearly pronounced messages never reach their intended ears, while others, whispered and indecipherable, become all the more audible? In order to understand how this kind of news chain works, I had a look at the "unfinished business" that was passed on many decades ago by various members of my family. I try to compare it with what I find inside myself: Delving into oneself as a means of discovering something about those who left their traces there. And what traces there are! In contrast to the generation of my grandparents and my parents, my generation has known almost nothing but times of peace. And even when dramatic historical events took place—like the end of the Cold War, the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989—none of them gave rise to any existential threat. Sometimes I have the impression that my generation feels an envy of sorts of the existential experiences that these older generations had to endure. And they in turn would have given anything to have been spared this nightmare.

I have included in this book some photographs of people whose history I am trying to remember. But it is nonetheless not *their* history, it is *mine*, and it tells how the message that they "whispered down the lane" finally reached me at the end of the chain. I will never know precisely what was whispered into ears at the other end. I can only share what has made its way to me. The cover of this book shows a detail of a photograph of my mother and myself

under the portrait of a woman. The entire photograph, to paraphrase Groucho Marx, is “the phoniest picture I ever saw.” It was posed—in 1963 in New York. I was eighteen and had just come from a boarding school in Germany after finishing my *Abitur*, the secondary school graduation exam. The photographer thought our faces looked old-fashioned and he arranged this picture of mother and daughter in front of a (fictional) ancestor with a similarly old-fashioned expression. He must have had a kind of female generational chain in mind. My “whisper down the lane” also examines a female generational chain, but in a different way than on this photograph. In place of the painting stands my grandmother, Hildegard Margis, whose messages have become increasingly clear in me (and my work) over the course of my life. This grandmother, I believe today—now that I have reached roughly the age at which she died—steered my life along pathways that were not necessarily predestined.

In contrast to many other families, almost all my family members of my grandparents’ and parents’ generations were able to complete their stories themselves. They died in old age. The life of Hildegard Margis, however, was broken off before she had a chance to take stock. I occasionally feel as if we—especially my older sister and myself, who were both already born before she died—are supposed to complete her interrupted story. Many years ago I suddenly realized (I recently found notes on it), that my mother had summarily passed this inheritance on to me, since she herself could not handle it. I refused this “gift” for a long time—going so far as refusing to eat. You were always the difficult one, my older sister said to me a few years ago. It is true that she was more cheerful and made life easier for herself and others. After the fact I understood that a good share of the conflicts I had with my mother were linked to the refusal to accept this message passed on as a “whisper down the lane.” At some point—when I felt able to cope with the task—I stopped resisting. But I only realized that in retrospect. In this book I try to engage in dialogue with my grandmother and finally to accept the inheritance that was intended for me.

¹ Translator’s note—The biography will be available in late September 2007: Michael J. Neufeld, *Von Braun: Dreamer of Space, Engineer of War* (New York: Knopf, 2007).

² Michael J. Neufeld, *The Rocket and the Reich: Peenemünde and the Coming of the Ballistic Missile Era*, New Ed edition (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996); —, “Wernher von Braun, the SS, and Concentration Camp Labor: Questions of Moral, Political, and Criminal Responsibility,” *German Studies Review* 25/1 (2002), 57–78.