Prologue

It is shocking that day after day naked acts of violence, breaches of the law, barbaric opinions appear quite undisguised as official decree.

—VICTOR KLEMPERER, MARCH 1933

The groundswell of support that made National Socialism possible surged out of ordinary homes. What was it that led ordinary, caring people to see Hitler as their savior, to embrace apocalyptic dreams of revenge and conquest which swept aside all sobriety, rationality, and morality? A treasure trove of more than a thousand letters and postcards, the conversation between one ordinary young couple, Liselotte (Lilo) and Ernst Sommer, together with their books, songs, and photos, throws a unique light on this question.

These letters, written in the obscure Sütterlin script, have been transcribed by their daughter, Heinke Sommer-Matheson, now living in New Zealand. In their intimacy, their frankness, and their innocence, the letters between the young lovers offer a unique window into the world of young people in Hitler's Germany. What was it like to grow up in the wake of the First World War? What drew Ernst and Lilo into the Hitler Youth and its female counterpart, and why did they throw themselves with such enthusiasm into Nazi programs such as the *Landjahr* (the Year on the Land)? We read of them working eighteen-hour days. We see them burning the candle at both ends. What songs did they sing, what films did they watch, and what dreams did they have for their personal future? We will get to know Ernst and Lilo as caring, loving, and thoughtful people. So how on earth did they miss the dark sides to the National Socialist program, how did they shrug aside its violence, its expansionist plans, its preparations

for war, its ethnocentrism, and its anti-Semitism? Why did the rhetoric of Goebbels and the Führer enthrall them as they and their families gathered around the radio?

As we read their letters, we will find ourselves walking into an alien world. The life that Ernst and Lilo lived in their little villages at opposite ends of North Germany was unimaginably different from the life of today. Life revolved around the seasons. It was simple, elemental, and could be raw and demanding. Women faced a weekly and yearly round of mending and washing, cooking and gardening, preserving fruit, and looking after the kids. Village life was basically a subsistence economy. There was of course no whiteware in the kitchen; there were no supermarkets and no flush toilets; one fired up the stove to keep warm. One walked, bicycled everywhere, or took the train. On occasion Ernst cycled right through the night to reach home. And into this traditional way of life stormed National Socialism, which was experienced by them both as a liberating revolution, but which also brought with it all manner of new obligations.

It takes us a huge leap of imagination to begin to enter this world. The Party controlled all the media outlets: radio, newspapers, magazines, films, and all the professional organizations. Ernst and Lilo had no contacts at all with differing views—with traditional conservatives, or with liberal, trade unionist, or socialist groups. On the contrary their early letters to one another brim with idealism and hope for the future. Lilo once saw Hitler face-to-face. She and her group of girls, standing by the roadside, were dressed in the uniform of the *Landjahr*. Hitler's eyes caught the pennant they carried. They had spent the night sewing it, and now it had been "honored by his glance." It was a "brief but unforgettable moment."[1] Hitler had this intuitive, magnetic ability to connect with the young.

Ernst bought his beloved violin[2] from a gypsy, and his expensive dress sword when he was promoted to lieutenant. He loved music and thrilled to the challenge of fighting for his country. Culture and National Socialist values were a seamless robe for him.

Lilo was in her element when dancing, swimming, camping, and singing. She was a keen gymnast. For her the "new Germany" of Hitler opened up a pathway to health and happiness for all; she threw herself into working with the Party's organizations for young women. She believed it would

1. Lilo to Ernst, May 30, 1935.
2. Ernst to Lilo, June 2, 1937.

equip girls to enjoy life, to develop their skills, to live for the good of the whole community.

Ernst, who was a young teacher in two village schools, joined the SA, and led the Hitler Youth movement in his area in its marches, camps, and overseas trips. With the benefit of tertiary education, he was more of a systematic thinker than Lilo. As he put it himself, he was a *Grübler* (worrier), pondering a whole host of issues, reading widely in history and psychology, and trying to make sense of his life and that of his nation. He had a deep religious faith that complemented his enthusiasm for National Socialism. He was committed to the building up of community life, to promoting the life of the spirit, and to the geopolitical strategies of the Party. He was also passionate about bringing out the best in his pupils, infecting them with his love for the region, for forest and field and bird life, and for music and traditional folk songs, as well as the three *r*'s. He was not at all what we expect when we think of a Nazi. Nor was Lilo.

More than seventy years later their daughter came across the asymmetric witness of their letters. It proved to be an epochal voyage of discovery for her:

While engaged in the sad business of clearing away and sorting out my mother's things after her death in 2005 I came across a big wooden box in the wardrobe. I had seen it before but didn't know what was in it. Now as I slid back the lid, I was flabbergasted to see that it contained countless letters, mountains of them.

Hartmut, my brother, had known more about the correspondence than me. But for him the letters were profoundly private artifacts, belonging only to our parents, Ernst and Lilo, letters of love and grief, and reassurance. No way should they be seen by others. For me, too, it has always been an ethical issue that I might be intruding on my parents' inner life.

Anyway I took them back with me to New Zealand when I returned there, crammed into that big, heavy box. For a long time I did nothing with them, because I was not at all sure what, if anything, I should be doing. The Sütterlin script in which they were written was alienating, quite foreign to me. I could not make head or tail of it. My mother had typed out one of the letters, though, which contained my father's reflections in 1939 when he heard that war had broken out. "Es ist Krieg," *he had written, "it's war, then." On leave from his army training course in Wrohm, the village in Schleswig-Holstein where he was the teacher, he had sat up late into the night and put*

his thoughts and feelings into words. Obviously it was a crucial letter for my mother so she had typed it out. I wondered why. For whom was it meant?

So this typed letter, grim and ominous as it was, offered me a way in. I began to be curious about the other letters. I had been profoundly moved by a visit to Russia, to see where my father had fallen. I had also been contacted by a Dutch oral historian who was interested in the reactions of the children of fallen German soldiers. Her work made me realize how little I knew of my father. I was ashamed, too, that I knew nothing of the Westerborg Sammellager*, where the Dutch Jews had been herded together prior to being taken to the East to their death, and had never heard about the Dutch people who had worked with Jewish survivors from the Third Reich. I was now reading more and more books about the course of the War, about anti-Semitism, and about the generation of folk in middle age, like me, who had lost their fathers in the War. Ulla Hahn's novel "Unscharfe Bilder" ("Hazy Images"), about the silences and misunderstandings between my father's generation and my own made a deep impression on me. My parents' songbooks and storybooks from their own childhood were on our bookshelves. My mother's photo albums conjured up a family history going right back to solemn great-grandparents, family celebrations, my own childhood, and my young, radiantly happy mother; above all the father I had never had the chance to talk to: Ernst as a boy, a student, a teacher, and in the uniform of the Wehrmacht, in that terrible Russian winter. Snapshots of reality, of a world I knew nothing about. All this was simmering away inside me. I had dragged the heavy box all the way with me to New Zealand. It sat there, and became a sort of challenge to me. The letters needed to be read, if only to satisfy my curiosity.*

Initially it was incredibly difficult, slow, slow work to decipher them. I had to sort the letters chronologically, and separate out Ernst's letters from Lilo's. Initially I could spend a whole hour on one sentence; lots of places and people's names I couldn't decipher at all. Until I began to get used to the script—my father's sloping handwriting was particularly difficult to read—I could spend hours poring over one or two paragraphs, and still there were countless gaps, names of places or people I could not decipher, questionable readings. I made some dreadful mistakes, guessing my way through difficult sections.

Yet from that very first typed letter all sorts of questions accompanied my attempts to transcribe them. What had motivated my father or mother to act as they did, to say this or that? Much of the content was emotionally disturbing. I remember saying to myself: "Don't do this! You'll just get deeper

and deeper into intimate, private realms Lilo and Ernst would never have wanted you to explore."

But I was hooked. I needed to unravel the mystery around their daily struggles, their commitment to National Socialism, and their passionate relationship to one another. I was stubborn and didn't want to be defeated. I began to realize how dependent Lilo was on Ernst, how he could mold her, stimulate her intellectually, and support her emotionally. I knew of course of her fierce loyalty to the memory of her dead husband. Now I could begin to put flesh on that skeleton.

My work with the letters went in fits and starts. It extended over years. Other priorities interrupted it. There were major health issues I had to cope with, including breast cancer; I had to move house. But the letters did not go away. I began sorting out the quite extensive collection of photos from my childhood, and from the War, for my children's sake as well. I wrote up my "pilgrimage" to Russia. My cousin Ernst Otto and his wife were busy writing their family chronicle, and sent me more letters between his mother, Leni, and Ernst. All this was quietly encouraging.

So I realized that the work had to be done and could be done. The letters would offer me a detailed and emotionally honest entrance into the life and thinking of my father and of my mother. It was not good enough just to dabble. I had to transcribe the lot, all these hundreds of letters, postcards, these traces of another world. I had lost my father as a three-year-old; now my mother had died, and these letters were all I had left of them both.

To my surprise I discovered a different mother. A completely new picture of her began to emerge. I was surprised at her fierce determination to bring to an end the long, long engagement to Ernst, her decisiveness in overcoming the resistance of Ernst's family to the marriage. I was startled to find how strongly she came to hate the war. I also felt immense pity for her. Mein Gott, *what had she gone through, suffered, mostly alone, without anyone to talk things through with, no one to lean on.*

Stubbornness kept me at the transcribing, though I often felt it was too demanding on me, emotionally and intellectually, and very time consuming. I certainly didn't see myself as a historian, but I was gradually building up a picture, for example, of their life in the village of Wrohm as the schoolteacher and his wife; a picture of the house, the vegetable garden, the community life there; and a picture of myself as a small child. Who was I, who was this child? It was extraordinary in how much detail Ernst wanted to know about everything when he was away in France or Russia; about his daughter, Heinke

(myself), and his little son, Hartmut; about the vocabulary and language skills I was accumulating; about my little adventures, and all the childhood illnesses. Here in the letters I could draw on and benefit from all this information about this lost world.

So much was new to me, including the remarkable depth of love between Lilo and Ernst. This was obvious from the frequency of their letters and parcels, the passionate language they used, and their deep practical concern for each other. New to me also were the fierce conflicts that sometimes broke out between them. I became sharply aware of the cruelty and waste of the War and how it wreaked havoc on this little family.

I am inclined to say that the letters brought me closer to Ernst than to Lilo. Apart from his photo on the piano my father had been unknown to me, a remote, iconic figure. But now I could see that as a husband he remained an ardent lover; he was so proud of Lilo, his thoughts constantly circling around her. He was contemptuous of other officers who were disloyal to their wives, though the long separation was very difficult for him. He was supportive of her, and insisted on being there at my birth, pretty unusual at the time. He constantly gave her advice about the children's development, their occasional tantrums, explaining that this was all natural. He seems to have thought day and night about me and Hartmut.

I felt cheated, quite angry, really, that as a teacher myself I never had the chance to experience his pedagogic skills. Obviously he was a natural, a brilliant teacher, with his love of music and nature, of poetry, and of the history and traditions, the lore and language of Schleswig-Holstein where he grew up.

I could never identify, however, with his fierce loyalty to the "New Germany," to the Führer, with his profound sense of duty, and with his unquestioning patriotism. All this left me cold, though I didn't feel anger about this soldier father of mine. I never saw him as "a Nazi." In a sense he had a wider framework of concern than Lilo, not only for his own career and family, but this overweening sense of duty and responsibility for Germany.

The letters prompted a quest for my own identity. What had this War done to me, robbing me of my father, of all that inner security? Again and again, too, I felt remorse that I hadn't done more for my mother, knowing as I did now all she had been through.

At times working on the letters was too much for me emotionally, especially the last letters before his death, around Christmas 1941 and early in the New Year, and Lilo's last letters to him, sent off to a husband already cold in the ground. For a month I shied away from them. My mother's loneliness

got to me, her sleeplessness, and her despair. Worst of all were the death announcements in the newspapers, lauding his heroic death for the Fatherland, and the warm but terrible letters of consolation from his erstwhile fellow officers and comrades.

I have spent thousands of hours on these letters. It has been a labor of love. I am now not only infinitely better informed, but much prouder of my parents, aware of their integrity, their determination to do their best for us children, their fierce fight for what they believed to be right. Torn apart by war, deceived by their betters, they were ordinary people in extraordinary times.

It is not easy for me to disentangle what I have learned from the letters about life during the Third Reich from what I have learned from countless, books, films, other people's accounts, my own Jewish friends, and my visit to Israel. All these have shaped my thinking. I suppose, though, that the letters and postcards, the photos, and the descriptions of the parcels they sent to one another brought things down to earth for me, rooted them in individual and family reality. I could now identify through the letters with Lilo's anxiety and fear, especially for her two little children, as bombs rained down on her little village. Previously I had only a sketchy idea of what the bombing was like. As woman to woman I could now feel for my mother. I could identify with my father's accounts of the forced marches through the night to reach the Russian border, the comradeship with his men as they built the block house in the forest, and the incredible incident when he and his brother, Hans, met in East Prussia, grabbed bikes, frolicked naked together in the little river, sang and hallooed together. It made him real. As Ernst Otto, my cousin, commented: "Only the Sommers could do that." All this was so new to me.

I began, too, to realize how limited their knowledge and insight into events were, dependent as everyone was on the official propaganda. I noted, though, how soon Lilo's early elation at the victories in Poland and France gave way to stress, tension, fear, and drastic loss of weight as she heard that Ernst was off to Russia. She was a worrier, but in many ways this made her judgement on the course of the War more realistic than the sanguine pronouncements of my father. Her letters, with their heartfelt concern for his health, his dental care, his protection from a ferocious winter, and above all his survival brought the reality of life at the Front home to me. Many of my questions, however, still remain unanswered.

Uncertain about what was actually happening in Russia, my mother learned from other soldiers' wives about the terrible scenes in the field

hospitals, and the growing list of fatalities. Here were other women who understood her anxiety about Ernst. It was not enough for her to accept what was said in the papers or the radio. So, personal exchanges and experiences crisscrossed the official propaganda. She could not understand, for example, the Army's failure to clothe the men at the Front. Surely the Army should have known about the Russian winter. Everyone knew about Napoleon! Like so many women called upon by Goebbels to knit socks and to provide warm clothing, she began to question the competence of the army planning.

It's clear from the letters that Ernst took her anxieties seriously, but his basic attitude was that of a false protectiveness. In the end his glossing over the difficulties and dangers infuriated Lilo, although in part of her mind the maturity, thoughtfulness and wisdom of Ernst remained unquestioned. He was more than a little concerned, too, at Lilo's flouting of military censorship and secrecy and her desire to know exactly where he was.

In conclusion I continue to be overwhelmed by the quantity, the realistic detail, and the profound affection displayed in the letters. For different reasons, both partners needed to be reaffirmed about their love for one another. These letters kept this love alive for me as well.