



Translated extract from

**Friedrich Christian Delius  
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**Friedrich Christian Delius  
The Woman for Whom I Invented the Computer**

**Translated by Isabel Cole**

One hot July day in 1994 on the terrace of the “Burg Hauneck” inn on a remote hilltop in the Hessian mountains I spotted the old man I’d been trying to speak to for years. We had arranged to meet, but for a moment I took him for an apparition – his hair shone so white in the late afternoon sun. I walked up, turned on the recorder, greeted him, and later found the following words recorded on seven tapes:

*(Between Oberstoppel and Unterstoppel)*

Yes, that’s me. But don’t say my name in that awestruck tone, young man! I’m in my civilian clothes here and I hope you are too... Have a seat! No, next to me, that way you can enjoy the landscape too. Besides, I hear better with my left ear. I told you you’d find me right away, I don’t have that many twins, not on the hill between Oberstoppel and Unterstoppel, anyway... The pleasure is all mine. Good to see you again. Please, take the recorder out of your pocket, put it on the table, I’m not afraid of these gadgets... That’s one thing we’re still good for in our old age: feeding the microphones, the insatiable beasts... And yours is so tiny. I always thought the big ones way back when were much more stylish, right off you felt important somehow... Have you checked into your room? Is everything all right?... Yes, it’s simple, but respectable, I like these simple country inns. I could have done without the swimming pool in the basement, swimming on the Stoppelsberg, that doesn’t quite seem right, does it?... How’re you holding up in the heat?... I reserved my usual table, here in the corner, I come up here quite a bit. Beautiful, isn’t it, the sweeping view into the Rhön, looking right at the cone-shaped hills, the Hessisches Kegelspiel... Very good; I don’t see you wondering what that’s supposed to be, the Hessisches Kegelspiel. Even the Hessians from Frankfurt or Wiesbaden have no idea of the beauties of the Rhön foothills, the elegant basalt domes, extinct volcanoes all in a row. Almost as charming as the Tuscan hills, don’t you think?... I know, I haven’t forgotten that... Still, congratulations, you’ve passed the Kegelspiel test. Local lore, that always earns points with me. Not that anyone would believe that either... But don’t think I invited you here to the Stoppelsberg just because you know the area... I’ll tell you that later on – why you’re sitting beside me today, you and not someone else... Catch your breath first, we’ve got the whole evening and the whole night, if you hold out. Did you notice, I picked a full moon night, especially for us... Because I can’t sleep then anyway. How about you? After the hot day we’ll get a mild summer night, if the forecast holds. Let’s see how lucky we are with the moon and the clouds, it’s looking good...

*(The Ceremony)*

But I'm warning you, I'm in a fabulous mood today... Just the day before yesterday I canceled in Braunschweig and sent my daughter instead. Yes, just the day before yesterday, for health reasons, you need health reasons to pull out of a gala like that at such short notice... I admit it, when we agreed to meet three weeks ago, I already had it in the back of my mind to cancel. I didn't want to let the full moon go to waste. I wanted a date with you and not with Braunschweig. But don't let that go to your head! It's my pleasure and not your doing! Now I'm sitting here out in nature and not in the front row of the wood-paneled banquet hall, and there aren't any photographers to swarm around and bully me into grinning. And right about now, just after six, the ceremony is starting. It's like playing hooky, but even better. Because they can't punish me anymore. On the contrary, all they ever do is sing my praises, the mayors, the ministers, the presidents, the professors... It's my fourteenth honorary degree, I just counted them up again... Yes, for me too, and the menu please, Kathi... And in just a moment, after the music – there's always room for Mozart, there's always room for a grand piano in the corner – the mayor will speak. You know, all the handshaking, the flashbulbs, the smiles, the conversation about the weather and Bill Gates' latest escapade, and then Mozart, all that wouldn't be so bad if it weren't for the speeches, always the same speeches, always the same phrases. Believe me, I know the mayoral phrases, I know them all by heart, the ministerial phrases, the professorial phrases. The whole arsenal of accolades is fired at me and they don't mean a thing to me anymore and I'm tired of fighting them and I can't – except by pulling out for health reasons two days beforehand. And actually the worst, no, the funniest thing is that I can't listen to my own speeches anymore, or I don't want to. I can't say anything new, not in that setting, where everything is so artificial and formal and reverential, I can't say anything new at an award ceremony, though I still have things to say, or I would, things I haven't said before... No, but that's why I surrendered to your prodding, answered your request for an extensive interview, a long talk. Surrendered, that sounds risqué, doesn't it?... So be it, edit that out, I don't care. Cut whatever you like... As long as you understand that I want to, how shall I put it, talk in a different way for once. Not a tailcoat-speech, not a necktie-speech, more in a lab coat, understand? At least I want to try ... No! Anything but write! Never again! One memoir is punishment enough. The energy that takes, I tell you, never again. You have misgivings, you leave so much out, you bluff your way through; whether you want to or not, you put yourself on a pedestal, maybe you belong there, objectively speaking, but it's embarrassing anyway, and then again you play things down,

which isn't right either. It's a hellish kind of work. No, I don't trust autobiographies, not even my own. I'd much rather spend the whole night in front of a recorder, let myself be interrogated for seven, eight, ten, twelve hours. What's that compared with weeks, months, years of writing and rejecting and revising and only making it worse? I'll never torture myself like that again. One whole evening and one whole night, that's humane, don't you think? More humane than bending your memories into shape and squeezing them into lines on a page. Better to take a swing and capture it in one great arc, whatever I might have to say or add. I'll try not to repeat myself too often, I promise. But the great arc, the inner arc, the feelings... Exactly: think aloud, without misgivings, without too many misgivings. I owe that to myself at my age. And above all I owe it to a woman. The woman no one knows. The woman for whom I invented the computer.... No, more about that later, bear with me... I need *you* for this, that's what I decided, plain and simple. I need your microphone on the table and not the Braunschweig microphones on a flower-decked podium. I couldn't even talk about the woman in front of mayors, ministers and professors, much less about a secret love affair... That's right, we'll have our own ceremony here on the terrace at an altitude of five hundred meters. We'll celebrate my playing hooky, cheers!... I hope to have your full cooperation... But be careful – I warned you, I'm in a fabulous mood.

*(Nothing against epicures)*

Decide what you want to eat first, the menu's short, the food here is simple yet hearty, as they say. I'll get the pork steak with mushroom sauce and croquettes. I always order that here. The selection's not huge, the chef's not great, but that pork steak – always reliably mediocre... I don't know either, why *does* the pork steak have such a bad reputation with gourmets? It's probably the fault of that cooking guru from Hamburg who's been crusading against the pork steak for decades and won't hear of anything but French and Italian cuisine. The pork steak has been systematically neglected and maligned – and you know a bit about me, you've read my memoirs, at least you claimed to. Then you'll understand that someone who was neglected and maligned himself for a good thirty years, neglected as an inventor and maligned as a crank, that someone like me harbors a certain, shall we say, family bias toward the neglected and maligned pork steak... All joking aside, one thing's certain: if I go out to eat with business partners I want to impress, I can't possibly order pork steak, much less pork knuckle, otherwise I'm dead in the water, I've already blown it. One order of pork knuckle at dinner with fancy people, and you'll never live it down, that's the one sin they won't forgive or forget to the end of your life. You can be convicted of corruption, you can steal your

biggest competitor's wife, you can step on IBM's toes, all will be forgiven, but not the pork knuckle... They want to be epicures, all of them, especially the museum people I've had to do with lately. So here I enjoy eating pork steak with the most mediocre of mushroom sauces, plain and simple... You know, I have nothing against epicures really, I just believe, no, I'm firmly convinced that if I'd been an epicure, I would never have invented the computer. I would never have become an inventor... When you're used to putting every penny into your machines, when you spend years living off the savings of your family and friends, and – I'm exaggerating, I like to exaggerate when I'm in a good mood – when you live on pease porridge for months, my mother's was excellent, by the way, you couldn't be picky about your food under the Nazis anyway... And when you spent the whole fifties and sixties, once there was more to eat, thinking day and night about your computers, which had to work faster and faster and more and more perfectly, and about your responsibility for the rapidly growing staff, from five to five hundred people in twelve years, and about the flimsy capital base... Now I've lost my train of thought... Right, then you're not exactly the best candidate for that kind of decadence... What's that face you're making, don't tell me you're with the union, the union of epicures?... At my age I don't need to excuse my choice of words, I mean the decadence of this more and more epicurean epicureanism... I could go on about the ancient Romans, but I don't want to digress too much... Although I've decided not to talk according to plan this evening, not chronologically, not: introduction, body, conclusion, life isn't that organized, but just as the thoughts happen, happen to happen... Never mind the ancient Romans, they never got this far anyway, not into these forests, a hundred kilometers past the Limes. In any case, here at "Burg Hauneck" I can eat what I want – and I couldn't care less whether or not you make disparaging remarks about my eating habits when you write about me. You see, that's the great thing, once you've turned eighty, you don't give a damn about all that...

*(Pork steak test)*

But we'd better order now... So you'll stick with the pork steak? Great, excellent choice. I'll have the braised venison, yes, with boiled potatoes and salad, yes, and a beer... Don't look at me like that, everything's fine! And I'm fine too, nothing to worry about. You think, I can tell by looking at you, however politely you avoid my eyes, you think the old man might be soft in the head. No, quite the contrary. You see, you're not the first journalist I've spoken to... Yes, I know, you're not a journalist, you're a cut above or you think you're a cut above with your books. I don't care about that, I won't get into that, I don't understand a thing

about it. At any rate, you're not the first layman with no engineering talent and probably no mathematical background whatsoever I've ever talked to about my computer and my life... I don't even need to show you the math problems from your school-leaving exams, you're a mathematical washout, I can smell it a mile off... And every time I meet with people like you, here on the Stoppelsberg or in the cafeteria of the German Museum, I rhapsodize about a mediocre pork steak or an honest chop. When I start singing the ballad of the neglected and maligned pork steak and the neglected and ridiculed inventor, it's not long before my companion's all set to order the pork steak or the chop, even if he'd rather have had the Rhön trout. Same with you, go ahead, admit it, you're the perfect candidate for Rhön trout... The experiment works every time, of course it does, the people want to curry favor with me by taking my recommendation. They mean well; they feel bad that I was neglected and that I still am here and there, just like the pork steak. They want to deliver me at last from my neglect and so they start off with the neglected pork steak. That's how simple-minded people are. They let themselves be manipulated because they want something out of me, a few good stories, a few new anecdotes, a few yarns from the pioneer days. Even you let yourself be manipulated, you, the true skeptic, or so you think, who doesn't like to fall for things. And you fell for it right away. So why do I do this test? To show that you'd never have made it as an inventor! If you conform, if you let your boss's expectations guide you, if you take the middle road, the mind-numbing golden middle road, you may, may, make a good bureaucrat, a stuffed shirt at the patent office, all right, maybe a good craftsman, but not an inventor. That's why my motto has always been: Be hard!... Don't look so shocked, cheers! I know the motto doesn't fly these days, when people want things cozier and cozier and cushier and cushier, but that's exactly why I'm giving it to you. And if I tell you I got the line from a lieutenant at our paramilitary training camp back in the Nazi days, you'll be even more shocked. But I don't care if it shocks you and raises your eyebrows or if it agrees with the zeitgeist of our golden nineties or not. The motto has always helped me stay level-headed and focused on my goals. And you want to hear a couple of interesting things from me and not what the zeitgeist dictates. Maybe the motto will vanish from the scene when I do, I'll be glad to take it to the grave, not to mention the other one, my motto number two: ultimately you're always alone. A motto that reveals its full truth in the cemetery at the latest, quite a consolation, isn't it? Tell me your mottoes and I'll tell you who you are. Just so you don't get the wrong idea about me – I'm not some cuddly old coot... Anyway, the pork steak test... I do that to get even more respect from you. I don't just mean the kind of respect that the laymen have for mathematicians because of all the fiddly formulas, or that the technical

illiterates have for the TV repairman once the tube's working again. I mean a very practical respect for how tough inventing is, because... In retrospect everything gets romanticized, everything gets twisted into a story. Especially chatting with you journalistic storytellers. The dawn of computing with jigsaws and pease porridge, the living room story, the heroic rescue of the A4 in the last chaotic days of the war. As if everything had always had the taste of anecdote. Tell us, what were you feeling as you wrestled the world's first computer southward through mud and bomb craters, under fire from low-flying planes? With questions like that, on that level all you get is hot air, profane drivel. If I were being strict I'd say: it was brutal, it was hard, it was bitter, it was disappointing, thank you, have a nice day... If I were sentimental and had a podium to hold on to, I might say it was bought with blood and tears. But you're lucky, I'm not sentimental... And I'm not strict either. If you'll excuse the digression, that's exactly why I need the pork steak test. So that you from the guild of the freeloaders – please take that sportingly, it's a sign of my fabulous mood that I'm speaking so openly – so that you understand how much character and obstinacy it takes, what am I saying, obstinacy to the tenth degree. As an inventor you need a temperament like a great artist, a Leonardo, a Michelangelo, a Goethe. In reality artists usually have an easier time of it than we do, they have to tighten their belts too, but they don't get asked about the practical use from dawn till dusk. They get the famous gun held to their head maybe once a week, not once a minute by clueless bankers or by their own CFO... In short, that's what I want respect for, in a very existential sense, if you take my meaning. The pork steak test helps me, at least I hope it helps me be taken seriously by you and not just seen as the crotchety old man, the coot with the anecdotes. I want you to listen to me more carefully, even if I'm just rambling on clumsily. And I want you to give me credit for more than my simple words can say. I'm not a man of words, after all, for me a word was always the result of bits... Never mind that. But tonight you should keep in mind that I have a few more files in my memory than I'll spit out on your tape...

(An unknown world celebrity)

Yes, I like coming here, I've known the innkeeper and his family for ages, Rudi at the bar, Magda in the kitchen, and you've met Kathi, the waitress, she's the daughter-in-law. I like coming here, where the guests don't recognize me, much less the respectable hikers, the herds of retirees... Don't give me that critical look, I'm allowed! I'm allowed a few helpings of sarcasm, the way other people indulge in whipped cream. When I look at these youngsters, so sprightly, so full of senior pride, sitting tight on their financial cushions instead of doing

something with the money, no concerns but traveling and hiking – no one will ever convince me that hiking and traveling are such incredibly active things to do. I've never liked passive people, and just because someone's a measly sixty or seventy, that's no reason for this sprightly sort of laziness... Just to show you what a reactionary guy I am: I advocate moving the retirement age to seventy-five, seventy in some fields, all right, sixty-five for bricklayers and roofers. Did you get that?... No, I'm not going to say it any louder, I don't want to get lynched, not today, anyway... The very idea of being "put out to pasture"! Sometimes I think of them chewing their cuds, the way they quietly, dutifully munch away at their cakes and red wine. Without any genuine interests. Not in the sciences, any way, not in intellectual feats, no interests except to go on living with their bouncy fitness groups, just go on living out in pasture. For most of them the major inventions of their time don't even mean a thing, computers mean monsters to them... Yes, maybe that'll change, maybe the old people will take to the keyboards one day. But it never ceases to amaze me, the ignorance people can grow old with, old and more or less solvent and proud of their ignorance, no less... And now we're reunited, in the fifth year of reunification there's even more traveling and hiking to do, Mecklenburg, Brandenburg, Thuringia are waiting and they've got free rooms, and pork steaks are two or three marks cheaper. Nowadays Dresden's a must-see, Potsdam's a must-see, but you don't have to know a thing about the most important machine of our time, you still don't... In a nutshell, none of these stalwart hikers would expect to find the inventor of the computer up here in the Rhön foothills, and that's why I like it here, where I can hold forth about everything under the sun and... No, the people from the villages, Steinbach, Buchenau, Eiterfeld and Ditlofrod, now and then they drink a beer here or treat themselves to a meal, but they don't know me either, though I've lived in the area for decades and I've kept these people in work, or rather their parents thirty or forty years ago. I'm world famous, but no one knows me. An unknown world celebrity, a fabulous state of affairs, believe me. Up here you're the only one besides the innkeepers... Rudi's known me since he can walk, but I insist that he treat me like any other elderly gentleman... Of course, I've been trekking up here since the early fifties, when we lived in Neukirchen, whenever I wanted to have some peace and quiet to think... What I want to say is, that's exactly what I like, that no one here takes the slightest notice of me, and in the meantime hymns of praise are resounding in Braunschweig and in Berlin and Munich professors are arguing about whether I'm the greatest German inventor of the century. Me or Braun with his tube or von Braun with the missiles or that guy Fischer with his wall plugs, or maybe Otto Hahn, but strictly speaking he wasn't an inventor... Yes, the venison's for me. Thank you. You know, that's the kind of

thing I like: the experts with their assessments are bashing each other's heads in about how to classify me and rank me on their silly lists, the mayor of Braunschweig is stumbling through his speech and can't figure out how to end, I'm sitting peacefully here with you, gazing across the Rhön, meditating on the Hessisches Kegelspiel and lifting my beer glass... Right, he must be finishing up, so now the state secretary XY will give his welcoming speech, one bigmouth outdoes the next, cheers!...