Translated excerpt

Peter Schneider
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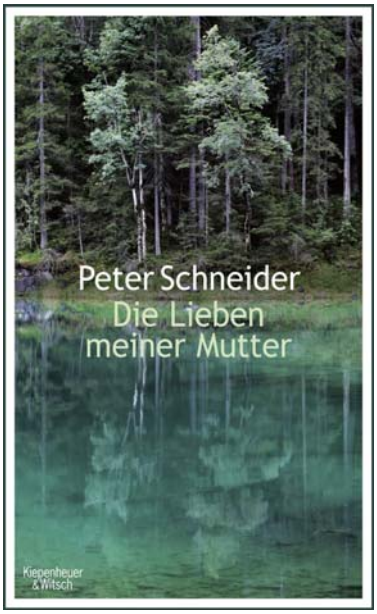
Peter Schneider
My mother's loves

Translated by Zaia Alexander



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In the photos, the black and white ones with the jagged edge, my mother is almost unrecognizable. At least not the mother I recall – a gentle and protective, sometimes doleful, at times uncontrollable elemental force. In the photos you see a young slender person in simple, mostly homemade dresses that emphasize the waist and breasts, the neck-length hair, dark blond, brushed away from her forehead, her thin lips are closed, at times slightly opened as if to take a breath; rarely does she show herself laughing, certainly not the forced laughter photographers demanded, and which the war generation believed they had to show, even under the worst circumstances, so that the photo albums of that era contain millions of family relatives laughing for no reason. In the photos, I see a young serious woman who seems as if she has nothing to feign* and nothing to conceal. The glow, which she emanated, according to her admirers, no photographer had found. If she really was something of a star among her circle of friends, a light, a radiant presence, then the representation of that role relied on other means than photography.

For decades a shoebox belonged to the few things I brought with me wherever I moved. It contained letters from my mother - letters she wrote in Sütterlin script with pencil or ink on white or yellow paper, often on pages in a DIN A5 format, which she might have torn from a notebook. Every so often, I started to miss the box because I had not seen it for years. Then I would have a sudden attack, this vague fear of loss that made me go search for it, but I couldn’t find it. When it surfaced again during the next move, I was overcome with a sense of relief, as if I had rediscovered something that was infinitely important to me, and I started reading one or two letters. But I was never able to decipher more than a few half sentences. I gave up again as I had so often before - hard to say whether my aversion to the strain of reading the script had elicited the reflex to procrastinate, or the fear of discovering something I’d rather not know. I liked Bob Dylan’s slogan: "Don’t look back!" Invent yourself! Get

rid of the ties you didn't choose, especially from that part of your past you had no control over - your childhood!

An old friend, who knew about the letters, had given me some advice that preoccupied me: the best thing you can do is take all your parents' letters, as long as they weren't written to you, and throw them into a bathtub full of water without reading them. The sentence perfectly fit the mistrust the "post-war-generation" had felt towards their parents, and it also fit well with my project of inventing myself. At the same time, such a gesture seemed to be too dramatic, and not particularly efficient. What do you do with letters in which the writing cannot be dissolved in water because they are written in pencil? Pencil is more durable than ink.

The circumstance that ultimately led me to decipher the letters came about when I left the family home after thirty years of marriage and after the children had moved out, and I was alone with the shoe box. I engaged in endless monologues with the addressee of my failed love, I searched for explanations and found a new one every day that didn't explain anything– suddenly, I needed to know what was written in my mother's letters.

I started by organizing the often undated letters according to the postmark date, provided the envelopes were available. I photocopied and enlarged them, hoping I'd be able to decipher the words flung on paper with a flying hand. I downloaded a conversion of the Sütterlin script from the Internet, but was only able to identify a few letters in my mother's handwriting from the sample script. I notated my translations beneath the words and half sentences I had deciphered. But now that I got started, the illegible passages between the words wouldn't leave me in peace, they seemed to be saying something that urgently demanded decipherment. My previous impatience and disinclination to deal with the letters suddenly seemed childish to me, as though I had been upholding an attitude of defiance for a lifetime. The letters gave me the chance to get closer to a mother I had so few clear memories of, or rather to get to know her at all.

But there was something else that compelled me: the hunch I might learn something about myself from these letters and find out about a fate that had affected my life much more than I cared to admit. The desire to make peace with my mother. Or was it rather my mother who should make peace with me? The last time I had seen her was when I was eight-years-old.

With help from Gisela Deus, who is barely older than I, and who had also never learned Sütterlin script, the letters became legible one by one. Already as a child she had tried to decipher her parent's letters which were also written in the foreign script. With increasing curiosity, Gisela Deus started reading up on both the handwriting and my mother's state of mind, but she also did not manage to decipher all the words. Over time she developed a kind of hunting instinct that drove her to search for a dubious word, to follow a half sentence, until the answer came to her. If she wasn't getting anywhere, she explained, she'd make a coffee, turned on the TV, or went shopping. But the entire time she was, without intending it, contemplating the passage in question. And suddenly the solution appeared in her mind's eye. Most of the time, sheer empathy for the wording and my mother's state of mind helped her further. She wondered why I had never made the same effort she had. If I only had wanted to, she said, I also could have read the letters.

The translator of my mother's letters became indispensable to me throughout the months and years. At first we puzzled together over one or the other illegible word. Later, it became more about the meaning of a whole sentence and locating it within the context of the passage and the author's personality. Gisela Deus increasingly got caught in the letters' wake; she lived with them and started to identify herself with the author. She was moved by the melancholic tenor of the letters and the beauty of the sentences that my mother had found for her moods. Sometimes as she stood in the wind at a cold tram station, she confessed to me, she'd recall a passage from one of the letters she had recently translated and it

gave her goose bumps. She turned into a lawyer for my mother and defended one or the other letter from my interpretation. Sometimes we'd get into an argument and I could hardly help feeling that I wasn't sitting across from the decoder of the letters, but rather the author.

A young woman emerged from the letters whom I did not know. A mother who tore herself to pieces for her children, and thanks to her daring and practical intelligence, landed us safely from a long escape route that took us from the furthest part of northeastern Germany to the southernmost tip of Bavaria. A wife, who between thousands of messages about the children's daily life and welfare, sent her husband Heinrich tender, but also at times bitchy signs of her love. And a dreamer, who was consumed by a passion for Andreas, a friend and colleague of her husband.

Above all, I got to know a writer at the mercy of mood swings that ranged from a lust for life to melancholy, yet in moments of utter despair possessed an amazing ability to express herself. Writing seems to have been a means of survival for my mother, a weapon she used to control the destructive forces that assailed her from without and from within. In her short life, her letters were the form she found for her writing. She was forty-one when she died.

I was seven and eight-years-old when she had lost all power over me. Helplessly, she had to watch as my older sister and I fell under the spell of a young magician, who barred her from gaining access to us. In bed at night, I transformed myself into another being. I flew, but it wasn't flying as I'd observed in birds circling high above me, in the narrow sky surrounded by massive rock faces. It was flying produced through running and racing, a leap and gliding over the steep cliffs, whereby after the foot pushed off, it grazed the crest of the next hill, and over the next one, as if by accident, until - you just had to trust! –making contact with the tip of the toe became superfluous, and only served as a reassurance I had not soared too high above the earth. Suddenly, there was this powerful hissing sound in my ears, and the entire wing and featherless body rushed

out into the open, while the hills below me abruptly fell away like a landslide I'd unleashed with the tips of my toes. For a brief eternity, I glided into a frightening and magnificent void, light, but not weightless, the body knew its destiny was to fall earthwards, and this would inevitably happen as soon as I thought of crashing. It depended on extending the moment before the fall, as long as possible, and to wake up before the collision.

Flying was not a wish I had read about in fairytales or sagas, rather it was a response to the hilly landscape I had landed in. It was the translation of a message the landscape had disclosed to me. The village in the valley below seemed to me like the bottom of a lake with shores that ascended to unattainably steep heights. Only in the village, at the bottom of the lake, was it easy to breath; the panting started as soon as you reached the shore and left the village. You could climb up the paths to where the forest cleared and stunted brushwood made way, and higher up to the foot of the ravine where the scree lay - the scree that always slightly seemed to be in motion, even if you did not hear any rolling, not even a trickle. All the paths ended at the rock face that rose to the left and right of the scree. Once I made it alone to the foot of the ravine that separated the Little and Big Waxenstein, I stood on loose rocks that broke away under my feet and which immediately triggered small landslides as I climbed further and further upwards. But suddenly, as if triggered by an invisible person ahead of me, the scree started moving, rushed towards me and would have swept me away had I not rescued myself by taking two, three leaps onto the rocky edge of the scree bed. Next time I was more cautious. I stood at the foot of the ravine, memorized every large and small rock in view and closed my eyes. When I opened them again, not only the small, but also the large rocks had changed locations without making a sound.

I never went back up there again. The world beyond the rock faces that glowed in the evening sun like an ephemeral magic fire remained unattainable.

My terrain was the hilly, steep slopes below the rock faces. But the word slope does not describe the pull they had over me. Because these steep hills were not elevations you'd stop on and hold your hand over your forehead to marvel at the mountain top across the way. These hills always seemed to be moving like the stones in the scree ravine - waves of a river rushing down into the valley that froze mid-motion during the crash. They told me: Don't be afraid, break free, spread your arms and jump!

Willy was seven years older than me and lived diagonally across from us in the architect's house. I met him during a battle between gangs of children in the Zigeuenerwald Forest, where we fought each other with spears, bows and arrows that we had carved from willow and hazel branches. Under pines as high as church steeples, we crept forward over paths strewn ankle-deep in needles, hid behind thick tree trunks and boulders that foxes and martens lived under. Willy hit me so hard in the back with his spear that I fell down. I saw him standing over me in a halo of light, one foot on my chest. He turned me over on my belly, pulled my shirt up, examined the hole in my back, spat on it and said a spell that instantly relieved the pain. He pulled me up and carried me home piggyback.

On the way, he told me about the Archangel Michael who gave him the power to heal my wounds. By virtue of his connection to the angel, he'd teach me things that I only dared dream of. Flying, for example. Yes, he knew of my desire to fly and he would teach me this art. By flying, he did not mean hopping from hill to hill, nor leaping sparrow-like from rooftop to rooftop, but flying like an eagle up to the top of the alps, hovering sky-high above the clouds like the angels. However, there would be a probationary period and I was not allowed to speak of our alliance to anybody. If I betrayed even a single word of our pact, he could no longer

protect me from the devils lurking in the attics and barns that would grab me and lash my bare behind with burning whips and then rub salt into the wounds afterwards.

Willy dropped me off fifty meters away from the fence of our house. Not a word, you understand, or your wound will burst open and never heal. Mother wanted to know where I had stayed so long after school. I told her about our war games in the Zigeuenerwald Forest, but not a word about Willy or my wound. It was the first time I had concealed anything from her.

A few days later, I ran into Willy again on my way home from school. With his schoolbag, he suddenly looked unassuming and smaller than I had remembered him-a dark-haired fifteen-year-old with his hair parted in the middle. I pretended I didn't know him and walked by without greeting him. Then he slapped the sore spot on my back with his hand and I stopped. He told me my probationary period had started a long time ago and St. Michael wanted to test my loyalty. The archangel needed food and especially money because they had no money in heaven and sometimes, when he took on a human form and stood in line at the grocery store, he had to put money on the counter so as not to betray his identity.

It made sense that the archangel needed a few Marks in his pocket to disguise himself. But food? I had never heard that angels eat and possibly also digest.

In the following days, I stole radishes, carrots and tomatoes that my mother grew in the vegetable garden behind the house – as did everybody who owned a piece of land in the postwar years. Willy praised me, but wasn't satisfied with the proceeds of my thievery; the archangel doesn't need vegetables, he needs money and food. I started stealing money and food stamps out of my mother's wallet. I 'm not sure if I was aware of any wrongdoing; after all, I was acting on behalf of a higher power. Yet I couldn't help but feel that my theft was going against the rules. And it was

hard for me to understand that the angel was getting so impatient and ever more ravenous. Not only did he want food and money, but also luxury goods: meat, chocolate, cigarettes. The more of these items I could get for him, said Willy, the sooner I would learn to fly. Gradually, without my noticing it, I would grow wings. Every Sunday I should check my arms and legs and tell him when I noticed a change.

Meat and butter were impossible for me to procure, but I could get cigarettes. I knew a couple of boys from the neighborhood who used to steal from the American supply tent and traded them. The sum of money and food stamps that I stole at home were soon so considerable that my mother couldn't figure out where all the gaps came from. Desperately, she started interrogating me and my sister; I survived it unscathed because, in her opinion, I was too small to be considered a thief. How could she ever suspect her seven -year-old son was supporting the leader of the heavenly hosts from her wallet? Her suspicions turned to the household help.

After school, I met Willy at the toolshed behind our house, where we had a swing attached to the porch. Night after night we practiced flying there. My task was to gain so much momentum, so much momentum, that I nearly bumped my head on the rafters of the porch, and then jump off the swing at the highest point. Willy instructed me to fling both my arms forward and to bend my legs shortly before landing, so that I could extend the flight a few centimeters further. If I reached the line that Willy drew in the ground, or even jumped past it, I would be included in the circle of Archangel Michael's apprentices.

But no matter how quickly I gained momentum, or how bravely I jumped into the dark from the highest point of the swing, I could never reach the line. I quarreled with Willy, quarreled with the archangel, and wanted to know why, despite the lavish gifts I gave him, I never once got to meet him. Hadn't I just robbed half the pantry for him? Willy comforted me: hadn't I noticed how, since starting the flying lessons, I had just flown

almost a meter further? The archangel forgave many things except for one sin: doubting his power and doubting the validity of his promise.

Hadn't mother sensed I was under a strange spell? Or did she not want to know because she was so overwhelmed by the daily worry of feeding her children and needlework? From her letters, it appears she liked Willy quite a bit at first. He had won her favor by occasionally carrying her shopping bags and by hauling heavy pieces of wood to the tool shed that the supplier dumped on the street. And he was useful to her in other ways as well. Whenever mother had visitors from the city- and there were often visitors - he was always there for her. From the balcony of his home across the way, he could easily observe who came and left our house. Mostly it was Linda, mother's best friend, who would stay for a few days or a few weeks. But sometimes men came, who were introduced to us as friends of our parents - men in suits with delicate fingers, theater people, who traveled long distances. They brought mother and us gifts that you couldn't buy in the village, patted us on the head and patiently repeated the name mother prompted them to say. In the end, they mistook the bearer of the name and we forgot their names too. We knew that mother had no time for us when guests arrived from the city and Willy knew it too. Then he waited at the gate and shouted to Hanna or me. He had quickly realized that my mother wasn't opposed to him taking her children off her hands for a while.

Willy and I once climbed the roof of the woodshed to gain a better takeoff for our flight exercises. Just as I was about to push off, Willy held me back and pointed towards my mother's bedroom. He claimed he had just seen my mother behind the window embracing the strange man from Berlin. He was sure the two had kissed. I glared at the dark windows, but could neither discover my mother nor the guest. I was furious at Willy and told him to stop bothering me with his stupid jokes.

Jump already, said Willy, or are you scared? He pushed off from the roof. I did the same and wondered. Unlike birds, flapping my arms didn't help

me fly at all. I was glad I could get up again after my fall. Willy pulled me up and told me to follow him. He shouted he would prove to me, then and there, that he wasn't making things up. He had an instrument at home that could help me see through closed windows, through curtains, and even through walls. We ran down the steep path through the garden gate to his house. Once there, holding his index finger to his lips, he crept up the stairs to the second floor. From a hiding place in his room, he pulled out a device that I had never seen before - an instrument with small round lenses tucked into a movable mount. Willy impressed upon me that I must not tell anybody about this device, he had traded an old pair of his father's pants in the last days of the war for it. Then he led me to the balcony outside his room, handed me the thing, and instructed me to turn the knob to adjust the focus.

I pointed the device towards our house. It took a while until I got the bay window with the six-part frames into terrifyingly close focus. But even the slightest movement of the knob caused the image to disappear again, and I saw only a ribbed white surface with enormous black spots.

Now you can see the birch tree in front of your house, explained Willy.

Suddenly, he pushed my head down. There they are! he whispered. I put the device down because I couldn't see anything anymore, and peered through the heart-shaped notches in the balcony railing. Mother had just left the house with the visitor from Berlin. The two walked right under us towards the church. We followed their path, until they disappeared behind the curve. They would reappear again, said Willy, and he also knew where.

We passed the time by finding other distant targets with Willy's device: the dial on the church tower clock, a barn high up in the hills where Willy said mountain troopers were hiding, the ravine between the snow-covered Waxensteins that ran in a white S down the green hills. Willy suddenly whistled. There, now I've caught them! He told me he had found my

mother and her guest on the steep mountain path that led from behind the church up to Neuneralm and then further to the Bärenwald Forest. He reported when they stopped, when they sat down on a bench to catch some air, when they got up again and climbed higher. And now they are hugging each other! I yanked the device out of his hand. But as I spun the knob wildly, I could only locate the hill and fir treetop. Willy showed me once again how to adjust the focus and instructed me not to touch the little knob, no matter what. At first I only saw scary deep cracks in the gray cliff of the small Waxensteins, which I used to think was indestructible. The wall was suddenly so close, I thought I could touch it with my hand. Further below, at the foot of the fire red cliff face, I discovered two moving dots illuminated by the setting sun that seemed to melt together. It was as if the sun was delaying its decline so that the sin of the two would be burned forever into the wall. And in this moment I feared, no, I wished that a rock slide would put an end to their activities.