



Translated extract from

Uwe Timm
Am Beispiel meines Bruders
Verlag Kiepenheuer und Witsch
Köln 2003
ISBN 3-462-03320-4

pp. 9-28

Uwe Timm
My Brother's Example

Translated by Anthea Bell

© Bloomsbury Publishing, London 2006

above the battle's fury –
clouds and trees and grass –

William Carlos Williams

Lifted up into the air – laughter, jubilation, boisterous delight – that sensation accompanies my recollection of an experience, an image, the first to make a lasting impression on me, and with it begins my awareness of myself, my memory: I'm coming in from the garden, into the kitchen where the grown-ups are gathered, my mother, my father, my sister. There they stand, looking at me. They must have said something that I don't remember, perhaps: Do you see anything? And they'll have glanced at the white cupboard, which I was told later was a broom cupboard. I can see hair showing above the top of the cupboard, I remember that image very well, fair hair. Someone has been hiding behind the cupboard – and then he comes out, my brother, and lifts me up in the air. I can't remember his face or what he was wearing, probably his uniform, but the situation is perfectly clear in my mind: all of them looking at me, the moment when I spot the fair hair behind the cupboard, and then the feeling of being raised in the air – I'm floating.

That is my only memory of my brother, sixteen years my senior, who was severely wounded in Ukraine at the end of September, a few months later.

30.9.1943

Dear Papi

I'm sorry to say I was badly wounded on the 19th I got a rifle shot through both legs and now they have been amputated. They took the right leg off below the knee and the left leg was amputated at the thigh I don't have very bad pain any more please comfort Mutti it will all pass over I'll be back in Germany in a few weeks' time and then you can visit me I wasn't being reckless.

So much for now

Love to you and Mama, Uwe and everyone

from Kurdel

On 16 October 1943, at eight in the evening, he died in Field Hospital 623.

He accompanied me through my childhood, absent and yet present in my mother's grief, my father's doubts, the hints my parents dropped talking to each other. They told stories about him, little tales always of similar situations, showing how brave and decent he was. Even when he wasn't the subject of discussion he was still present, more present than other dead people, in anecdotes, photographs, and the comparisons my father drew with me, the younger son, the afterthought.

I have tried to write about my brother several times, but I never got beyond trying. I read his letters home from the front, and the diary he kept while he was serving in Russia: a small exercise book with a pale brown cover bearing the word *Notes*.

I meant to compare my brother's entries with the wartime records of his unit, the SS Death's Head division, to find out more details expanding on his brief references. But whenever I began looking at the diary or the letters I soon stopped reading again.

It was an apprehensive reluctance of the kind I knew as a child from a fairy-tale, the story of *Bluebeard*. My mother used to read me the tales of the Brothers Grimm in the evenings, many of them several times over, including *Bluebeard*, but that was the only story where I never wanted to hear the end. The moment when Bluebeard's wife decides to enter the locked room after he has gone away, in spite of the prohibition, was so sinister. When my mother reached that point I would ask her to stop reading. Only years later, when I was grown up, did I reach the end of the fairy-tale.

Then she turned the key in the lock. As the door opened, a torrent of blood flowed out to meet her, and she saw dead women hanging from the walls. Some of them were only skeletons. She was so frightened that she closed the door at once, but the key jumped out of the lock and fell in the blood. She quickly picked it up and tried to wash the blood away, but in vain, for when she had wiped it off one side of the key it appeared again on the other side.

Another reason was my mother herself. While she was alive it was impossible for me to write about my brother. I knew in advance what she would have said in answer to my questions. Let the dead rest in peace. Only when my sister, the last to have known him, had died too was I free to write about him, and by free I mean that I could ask any question and need not consider anyone or anything else.

Now and then I dream of my brother. Usually these are just fragmentary dreams, a few images, situations, words. But one of them has left a precise impression on me.

Someone wants to get into my home. A figure stands outside, dark, dirty, covered with mud. I want to close the door. The faceless figure is trying to force its way in. I brace myself against the door with all my might, forcing back the man who, although he is faceless, I know for certain is my brother. At last I manage to push the door shut and bolt it. But to my horror I am holding a rough, ragged jacket in my hands.

My brother and I.

In other dreams he has the same face as in his photographs. He wears uniform in only one of these pictures. There are many photos taken by my father showing him with and without his steel helmet, in a field cap, in his fatigues, in dress uniform, with a pistol, with a Luftwaffe dagger. But there is just this one picture of my brother in his day-to-day uniform, showing him at roll-call on the parade ground, holding his rifle. He can be seen only in the distance, and is so blurred that only my mother could claim to have recognized him at once.

Since I started writing about him I have had a photograph of him on my bookshelves. It shows him in civilian clothing, probably at the time when he volunteered for the Waffen SS. His thin, smooth face is taken slightly from below. The hint of a vertical line between his eyebrows gives him a remarkably severe expression. His fair hair is parted on the left.

A story that my mother told over and over again was of how he went to volunteer for the Waffen SS but lost his way. She told it as if what happened afterwards could have been averted. It was a story I heard so early and so often that I see it all as if I had been there too.

In December 1942, late in the afternoon of an unusually cold day, he went out to Ochsenzoll, where the SS had their barracks. Snow had settled on the roads. There were no signposts, and he had lost his way in the gathering dusk, but he went on past the last houses towards the barracks. He had noted their position on the map. Not a soul in sight, and he sets out into open country. The sky is cloudless, with wispy mist only over hollows in the ground and the stream-beds. The moon has just risen above a spinney. My brother is about to turn back when he sees a man. A dark figure standing by the roadside, looking across the snow-covered field and up to the moon.

My brother hesitates for a moment, because the man stands there as if frozen, and does not move even when he must have heard the footsteps coming closer, crunching through the snow. My brother asks if he knows the way to the SS barracks. For a long time the man stands motionless, as if he hadn't heard, but then he turns slowly and says: There. The moon is laughing. And when my brother asks the way to the barracks again, the man tells him to follow him and sets off at once, walking fast, striding out vigorously; on he goes through the night without stopping, never turning round. It is far too late now to reach the recruiting centre. My brother asks the way to the railway station, but the man goes on without replying, past dark farmhouses, past cowsheds with cattle lowing hoarsely inside. The ice in the cartwheel ruts splinters underfoot. After a while my brother asks if they are going the right way. The man stops, turns and says: Yes, we're going to the moon, there, look, the moon is laughing, laughing because the dead lie so still.

That night, when he came home, my brother told them how he had been afraid for a moment, but later, after he had found his way to the railway station, he met two policemen looking for a madman who had escaped from the Alsterdorf asylum.

And then?

Next day he set off early in the morning, he found the barracks and the recruiting centre, and he was accepted at once: height 1.85, hair fair, eyes blue. So he became a sapper in the SS Death's Head Division. He was eighteen years old.

His was considered an elite unit among the SS divisions, like the Reich Division and the Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler Division. The Death's Head Division had been recruited in 1939 from the guards of Dachau concentration camp. As a special distinction, the men wore the death's head not just on their caps, like the other SS units, but on their lapels too.

A strange thing about the boy was the way he would disappear from time to time at home in the apartment. Not because he feared some punishment; he simply disappeared for no obvious reason. All of a sudden no one could find him. Then, equally abruptly, he would reappear. Our mother asked where he had been hiding, but he wouldn't say.

At this time he was physically very weak. Dr Morthorst had diagnosed anaemia and a heart flutter, and nothing would induce my brother to play out of doors. He would not leave home, or the shop to which a flight of stairs led, or the workshop described by our father as an *atelier*. He disappeared somewhere in the small apartment with its four rooms, kitchen, lavatory and lumber room. Mother, having just left the room, would come back a little later.

He wasn't there. She called for him, looked under the table, in the cupboard. No trace. He might have vanished into thin air. This was his secret, the only oddity about the boy.

Later, many years later, my mother told me how, when the windows of the apartment were being painted, she came upon the wooden box-like structure that looked like a window seat – our apartment was on the ground floor. This wooden structure could be moved aside, and behind it lay catapults, a torch, exercise books and some books about wild animals: lions, tigers, antelopes. My mother couldn't remember the other titles. He must have gone in there to read, listening, hearing his parents' footsteps and voices while he himself was invisible.

By the time our mother found the hiding-place my brother had joined the army, and when he came home on leave she forgot to ask him about it.

Apparently he was a pale child, positively transparent, so he could disappear, suddenly appear again, and be found sitting at the table as if nothing had happened. Asked where he had been hiding, he simply said underground, which was not entirely untrue. It was strange conduct, but our mother asked no more questions and did not spy on him, nor did she tell our father.

He was rather a timid boy, said our mother.

He didn't tell lies. He was well-behaved, and above all, said our father, he was brave even as a child. People described him as *that brave boy*, even distant relations. These were verbatim observations, and they will have been meant for him too.

The entries in his diary begin in spring 1943, on 14 February, and end on 6 August 1943, six weeks before he was wounded, ten weeks before his death. Not a day goes by without an entry. Then, suddenly, the diary breaks off. Why? What happened on 7 August? After that there is just one entry, undated, but I shall come to that later.

Feb. 14th

We're expecting action any time now. On the alert from nine-thirty.

Feb. 15th

Danger over, waiting.

And so it goes on, day after day. Once again comes the word *waiting*, then *same old routine* or *parading for roll-call*.

Feb. 25th

We move to attack rising ground. The Russians retreat. Night, runway under fire.

Feb. 26th

Baptism of fire. Russians beaten back to strength of 1 battalion. In position at night with machine gun, no winter clothing.

Feb. 27th

Combing the terrain. Plenty of loot! Then back to usual.

Feb. 28th

1 day's rest, big louse hunt, on to Onelda.

This was one of those passages where I used to stop, hesitating to read on. Couldn't "louse hunt" mean not just delousing a uniform, but something very different? On the other hand, if so he would not have said *1 day's rest*. But then, that *Plenty of loot!*

What exactly do the words conceal? Armaments? Why the exclamation mark, which is otherwise rare in his notes?

March 14th

Airplanes. Ivans attacking. My looted Fahr machine gun, too heavy, shoots like a mad thing I can hardly hold it steady, couple of hits

March 15th

Making for Kharkov ahead of small remnant of Russians.

March 16th

In Kharkov

March 17th

Quiet day

March 18th

Constant bombardment by Russians 1 bomb in our quarters 3 wounded my Fahr MG not working I take my MG 42 and fire 40 H (?) shots sustained firing

And so it goes on, brief entries in pencil, in irregular handwriting, maybe written on a truck, in his quarters, before the next operation, day after day: *weapons inspection, rain and slush, MG sniper practice, flame-thrower 42 drill.*

March 21st

Donez

Bridgehead over the Denez. 75 m away Ivan smoking cigarettes, fodder for my MG.

This was the place where, when I came upon it earlier – and it positively leaped out at me from the top left-hand side of the page – I read no more, but closed the notebook. It was only with my decision to write about my brother, and thus myself too, to allow memory free rein, that I felt free to look further into what he had recorded there.

Fodder for my MG: a Russian soldier, perhaps his own age. A young man who had just lit a cigarette – drawing on it for the first time, breathing out, relishing the smoke rising from the burning cigarette before drawing on it again. What was he thinking of? The troops who must soon arrive to relieve them? Tea, a little bread, his girlfriend, his mother, his father? A small cloud of smoke dispersing in that moisture-drenched landscape, remnants of snow, melt-water lying where it had collected in the trenches, the tender green of the willow trees. What will he have been thinking, the Russian, the Ivan, at that moment? *Fodder for my MG.*

He was sickly for a long time as a child. He ran a high temperature that no one could explain. Scarlet fever. A photograph shows him in bed, his tousled fair hair. Our mother says that in spite of the pain he was astonishingly composed, a patient child. A child who spent a great of time with his father. Photographs show the father with his son, on his lap, on his motorbike, in the car. Our sister, two years older than my brother, stands disregarded beside them.

The pet names he gave himself as a child: Daddum, Kurdelbumbum.

My father thought that I, the afterthought, spent too much time with women. In a letter written to my brother in Russia my father, then serving with the Luftwaffe stationed in Frankfurt an der Oder, says: *Uwe is a nice little thing but a bit spoilt, ah well, once we're back home again all that will sort itself out.*

I was what they called then a Mummy's boy. I liked the scent of women, that mixture of soap and perfume, I liked and sought out – an early sensation, this – the softness of breasts and thighs. Whereas he, my big brother, was always devoted to our father even as a small child. And then there was our sister, two years older than my brother, eighteen years older than me, who received little attention and hardly any affection from our father, so that she developed a rather brittle, aloof manner which our father in his own turn described as surly, and which only removed her further from him.

But Karl-Heinz, the big boy, why did it have to be him? Then my father would fall silent, and you could feel the loss in him, you could see him wondering who could better have been spared.

My brother was the boy who told no lies, who was always upright, who shed no tears, who was brave and obedient. A fine example.

My brother and I.

Writing about my brother means writing about him too, my father. My likeness to him can be seen in my likeness to my brother. Approaching them in writing is an attempt to resolve what I had merely retained in my memory, to find myself again.

They both go on journeys with me. When I come to borders and have to fill in immigration forms, I enter my father and brother too as part of my name, writing in block capitals in the appropriate box: Uwe Hans Heinz.

It was my brother's fervent wish to be my godfather, to give me his name in addition to my own, and my father wanted me to bear his name of Hans as well. He wanted to live on in someone else, at least in name, for by 1940 it was already clear that the war was not going to end very soon, and death became more probable.

Asked why my brother had volunteered for the SS, my mother gave several obvious reasons. *Out of idealism. He didn't want to lag behind. He didn't want to shirk his duty.* She, like my father, drew a clear distinction between the SS and the Waffen SS. By now, after the end of the war, when those terrible pictures had been shown, films of the liberation of the concentration camps, people knew what had gone on. *Bastards*, they called the SS, *criminals*. But the boy was with the Waffen SS. *The SS were a normal fighting unit. The criminals were the others, the Sicherheitsdienst, the intelligence and security service. The special actions groups. Especially the men at the top, the leaders. Abusing a boy's idealism.*

First a "Pimpf" (a "little squirt"), then a member of the Hitler Youth. Marching to the sound of trumpets, battle games, singing, a uniform with metal tags. But unlike you, your brother never wanted to play with soldiers.

I was against it, she said, I was against Karl-Heinz volunteering for the SS.

And what about my father?

My father, born in November 1899, had himself volunteered in the First World War and joined the field artillery. The strange thing is that I know almost nothing about him at this time. It seems that he was a cadet and wanted to be an officer, but once the war was lost that was out of the question, so like thousands of other men demobbed from the wartime army he joined a Freikorps volunteer unit and fought the Bolsheviks in the Baltic. But exactly where and for how long and why I don't know. And since almost all his documents and letters were burned when our house was bombed in 1943, there is no way of recovering the details.

A few photographs in an album show my father at that time. One of them, with the date 1919 written on the back, shows a group of young men in uniform. Some are wearing boots, others gaiters. They are sitting on a broad flight of stone steps which may be part of a monument. He and another young man are lounging on their sides in front of their seated companions, a popular way of posing group photographs at the time. His left arm is propped on the ground and he is laughing, a fair-haired, good-looking young man. The young soldiers, clean-shaven, hair carefully parted, could be students and probably were. One can be seen wearing rings on his little finger and ring finger, another has a signet ring. They sit there casually, laughing. It looks as if my father, lounging in front, has cracked a joke. Other photographs show him with comrades, snapshots from a soldier's life. In one he is standing among the remains of a collapsed wooden bed. There he is in his night-shirt, uniform cap tipped rakishly over his left ear. A soldier's life is the life for me, tralala, tralala, tralalee. Straw-thatched cottages, peasants in Russian smocks, soldiers eating, a horse-drawn cart hung about with steel helmets, those rather large German steel helmets of the First World War with the two wart-shaped air-holes at the sides. It was a life relished by many youths of eighteen or nineteen: adventure, comradeship, fresh air, liquor and women, and above all no regular work – the photos speak for themselves.

When people ask what my father did, I can give no single answer: he was a taxidermist, a soldier, a furrier.

He liked to tell me stories when I was a child, he took his time over it, interpreted the world to me. He used the historical paintings then in circulation on cigarette cards to illustrate his tales: Old Fritz, Frederick the Great, sitting under the bridge and holding his greyhound's muzzle shut as the enemy hussars ride by; Seydlitz at the battle of Rossbach throwing his clay pipe in the air as the signal to attack; the body of Charles XII of Sweden carried from the field of battle by his officers. Rumour had it that one of his own men shot him. My father had a very good knowledge of history, and most important all he could give a lively account of

these episodes. But by the time I might have begun inquiring further into them, we had quarrelled. When I was sixteen a dogged and increasingly bitter struggle began between us. His stance was narrow, opinionated and strict, my own stubborn silence was provoked by his odious regulation of everyday life: no jeans, no jazz, home by ten in the evening. Everything was forbidden, compulsory, subject to rules: a system of rules that meant nothing to me and was only too obviously inconsistent. It was not just that, now that I was older, I began to look at him critically; our circumstances had changed too. His demeanour was no longer that of the early fifties, when he had been doing really well, when he had *made it*, in around 1951 to 54. Those were the three or four years of his life when what he wanted to represent coincided with what he actually was. The economic miracle was in full swing in our home. He had made it, he had finally made it. He had furnished the apartment, he had a fine car, sea-green, a four-door Adler, the 1939 model with the first steering-column gear change. There were so few such cars in Hamburg at this time that the traffic police standing at the Dammtor in their white coats saluted as he drove past. At Christmas he gave them presents of packs of cigarettes which my mother had wrapped in gold paper, tying them up with a silver bow and adding a little sprig of fir. He drove through town to the junctions where a policeman directed the traffic from a little platform, stopped briefly beside the officer and handed the package out to him. *Happy Christmas*. In return the policemen waved him across the junctions all the year round, briefly touching the peaks of their caps.

My father liked to be given a military salute. He came on leave from the front to Coburg, where my mother and I had been evacuated, and took me to his barracks with him. My mother had sewn silver epaulettes to my child-sized coat. Just before reaching the barracks he told me to go first. The sentries presented arms and grinned. I learned to click my heels and make a little bow. It was an amusing sight, so friends and relations told me later when I was grown up; I had clicked my heels in the correct, brisk way.

So there was I aged five in my little grey coat, clicking my heels and bowing. The smell of sweaty leather meant my father. A strange man in uniform lying in my mother's bed one day: that is my first memory of him. His tall boots stand on the floor, their leather tops turned over. On the bedside table – a very clear memory – lies a pistol attached to a belt. Open-mouthed, I watched him lying there snoring. He had come on leave. If I smell the strap of my watch I catch that smell of sweaty leather again, and he, my father, is closer to me than in any of my pictorial memories.

And then one day the grown-ups were talking earnestly to me, telling me not to do something I'd only just learned: click my heels. And whatever you do, don't say Heil Hitler, understand? The child was told all this in soft and urgent tones.

It was 23 April 1945, and the American soldiers had come into town.

Who taught me to click my heels? Not my mother, with whom I was living in Coburg at the time. My mother had a profound aversion to anything to do with the army – drill, war games, the war itself – and not just since her son's death. Yet the images, the uniforms, held a certain fascination for her. But she won't have taught me to click my heels. It was probably my father, home on leave, or the other military men, the Nazi functionaries who went in and out of Frau Schmidt's house, where we were staying; she was the local Kreisleiter's widow.

If the Russians come, said Frau Schmidt, I shall get myself a rope.

My brother's letter to my father of 11 August 1943:

*If only Russia were done for soon. We need ten times as many SS divisions as we have now. I think that would finish the Russians, but we won't do it this year
Everything is still the same here, I'm in good health, I have enough to eat too, but I'm worried about everyone at home, we hear reports of air raids by the English every day. If only they'd stop that filthy business. It's not war, it's the murder of women and children – and that's inhumane. I hope to hear from you and Mutti soon, but tell Mutti not to send any more parcels, it would be a pity for anything to get lost and I have enough. Let dear little Uwe eat the things instead. Now, dear Papi, best regards and very good wishes –
Your comrade Karl-Heinz*

Other photographs in my father's album show not hanged Russians or the execution of civilians, but ruined buildings, streets, towns: scenes of everyday life. Are they of Kharkov? My brother took part in the recapture of Kharkov in 1943. Even if we assume that he did not participate in the SS murders of civilians, women and children because he was serving with a tank unit, yet he must have seen the civilian victims, the starving and the homeless, people exiled, frozen, killed in the course of the war. He does not speak of them; presumably their suffering, the destruction and the killing, seemed to him normal and was thus *humane*.

General Heinrici, commanding a corps in the central section in 1941, writes in a letter to his wife:

You feel the destructive force of war only when you think of details or individual human fates. I expect people will write a lot of books about it later. The population of the towns has disappeared almost without trace. Only women, children and the old are left in the villages. Everyone else, uprooted from home, is drifting around the huge land of Russia. According to accounts given by prisoners, they lie huddled together into a human mass on railway stations, begging the soldiers for a crust of bread. I believe the victims claimed by the war from among these displaced people who die of illness or stress are as many as those lost to bloodshed.

Diary entry by General Heinrici:

I tell Beutelsbacher not to hang partisans only 100 metres from my window. Not a nice sight in the morning.

Gryasnovo 23 November 1941

After the situation report, a service of memorial for our fallen, for this is Remembrance of the Dead Day [...]

Then a walk to the "dead Russian". An unusual destination for a stroll; a Russian has been lying frozen and unburied in the snow for weeks. I must get the locals to inter him.