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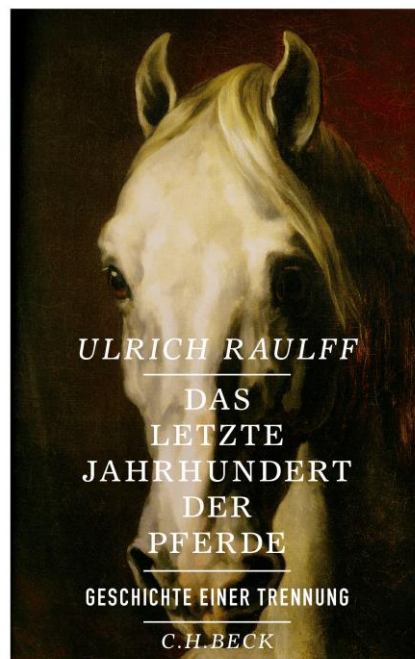
Ulrich Raulff
Das letzte Jahrhundert der Pferde. Geschichte einer Trennung

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Ulrich Raulff
The Last Century of the Horse. The History of a Separation

Translated by Jefferson Chase



Ulrich Raulff

The last century of the horse: the history of a separation

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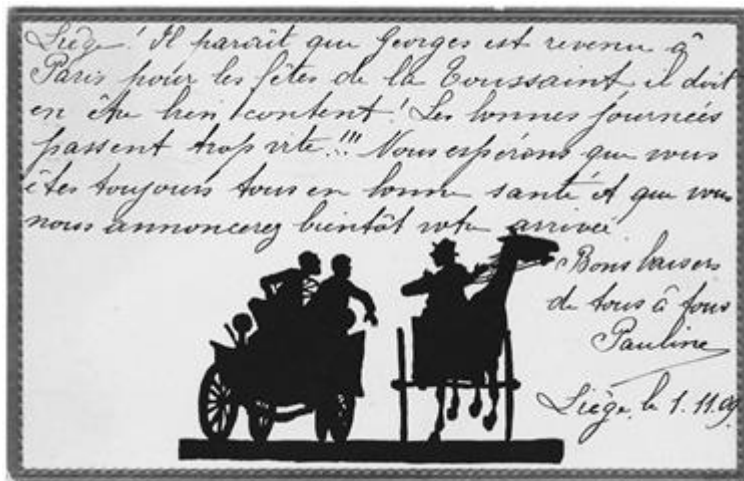
Anyone born in the countryside in the middle of the twentieth century grew up in a different world than today, one in which life deviated little from the way it had been in the preceding century. By their very nature, agrarian structures are languorous, and the country side moves to much slower rhythms than the city. The surrounding environment of city kids was completely different. It was dominated by machines - and ruins, which were the product of mechanical destruction. It took around a century longer for the provinces to make the leap into technological modernity. Naturally, country folk had an increasing amount of agricultural machines, starting with what were experimental rarities in the nineteenth century. Over the years, farm machinery became smaller, more practical and more prevalent, no longer resembling complicated medieval catapults or fantasy dinosaurs from *Jurassic Park*. It was increasingly common to see ploughs pulled by small tractors, which replaced the enormous steam-driven contraptions in the nineteenth century. Mid-twentieth-century tractors in Germany had between 15 and 20 horsepower and short, easy-to-remember brand names like Fendt, Deutz, Lanz and Faun. With very few exceptions they were painted entirely grey. In retrospect, compared with today's 200-horsepower, sound-proof mammoths, they looked like dainty crickets.

But aside from these precursors of modernity, whose jerky movements and noise didn't fit the idyllic atmosphere of the nineteenth century, not much had changed in the countryside. Horses - Belgian heavy drafts, powerful Trakehners and solid Haflingers - were still the most widespread and commonly used means of transport on narrow, winding streets, cliff-side paths and trails through forest gorges. One of my most vivid memories of winter is the steam of their breath and their hot flanks. I can still smell their brown hair and bright manes in summer. I can still feel the horror I once did when I saw square nails being hammered into what I assumed were the soles of their feet. Previously I had only ever seen scenes this drastic in church, in the depictions of the Passion of Christ.

The horses' boxes always took up the smaller but fancier portion of the stall of those farmers who hadn't yet traded their modest income for a job in a factory and still lived from the fruits of the land. Cows, bulls, calves, pigs and chickens all commanded more space. They stank worse and made more noise - they were, in short, the *hoi polloi* of the stall. Horses were rarer, more valuable and better smelling. They ate with more decorum and suffered far more spectacularly when ill. We were particularly afraid when they got the colic. They stood in their boxes like living sculptures, nodding their well-formed heads and flattening their ears when they felt mistrustful or suspicious. The horses had their own area where cows - to say nothing of pigs or geese - weren't allowed. Farmers would

never have thought of enclosing horses' grazing land with barbed wire as they did with cows and above all sheep. All you needed for horses was a bit of wood or a slightly electrified fence. You don't imprison aristocrats. You remind them that they have given their word of honor not to flee.

I can still see us, my grandfather and me, standing one day in the mid-1950s on a rise from where we could see the surrounding area and even part of the leafy forest. There a narrow street wound its way up the mountain. For some time, the quiet had been disturbed by something that looked like a hunchbacked ant, which was slowly and loudly dragging itself forward. As it got nearer, the ant turned out to be an old-fashioned diesel Mercedes that belonged to one of my uncles. With Olympian gravity, the car approached us. My grandfather made a disparaging remark about the vehicle and watched with increasing skepticism as my cousin, manning the steering wheel, left the paved street and drove directly up to us over the pastures. He lost control after the first few meters of damp grass. The car skidded sidewise and crashed into the electrical fencing that enclosed the horses' grazing area before coming to a stop, enveloped in a dark-blue cloud of smoke, in front of tree stump. When the smoke cleared, you could see Olympians hurling thunderbolts. Trapped by the electrical fence, the car had turned into a kind of reverse Faraday's cage whose numerous metal parts directed the currents inward toward the vehicle's occupant.



A brief greeting and a long decoupling – horse and man go their separate ways.



Horsepower competition: The diesel tractor has 12. The more traditional means of transport only have 2, but they smell better.

After the driver tried numerous times to free himself, without success, a Belgian heavy draft came to the rescue. Spanned to the rear bumper of the diesel, it hauled the trapped automobile back onto solid ground with the strength of a jolly giant. Everyone knows the William Turner painting in which a smoky steamship drags a proud warship under shortened sails, the Fighting Temeraire, to its last docking station, where it will be broken up. In our case, the historical image had been ironically inverted. Here it was the historically outmoded steed that was dragging the automobile behind it. For one last time, the old world allowed itself to be harnessed to rescue the new.

In fact, the battle had been definitively decided by this point. Man and horse had gone their separate ways. Ever since human beings had elected to traverse theirs with motorized vehicles, they had leveled and paved roads. The horse was obsolete, consigned to what world former US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice called "the roadkill of history." For centuries, mankind had pictured the vanquished as someone trampled under the *hooves* of the victor. Now, on the eve of the twentieth century, it was the horse that was being trampled, or better still: run over. For the majority of human history, horses had helped people subdue their worst enemies: other people. Now horses were pushed to the side of the road where they watched victorious automobiles speed past. In six centuries, gunpowder had never been able to supplant the horse as human beings' most important weapon of war - one hundred years of mechanized warfare had relegated the horse to the history books. The horse is one of the great losers of modern history.

But the separation of man and horse, of mechanical and animal power, didn't happen as simply and smoothly as might be imagined. Human beings were not riders and carriage drivers one day and motorists and truck drivers the next. The separation took place in multiple phases spread over a century and a half, from nineteenth-century experiments by technicians with steam-powered vehicles and transmissions up to the point when combustion engine automobiles outnumbered horses in the mid-twentieth century. What is most immediately surprising is that for the longest stretch of this period, more horses, and not fewer, were used. It is only at the end of the period, in the years after the Second World War, that the numbers of horses begin to decrease, albeit with extreme rapidity. Thus the last century of the age of the horse marks not only the animal's exodus from human history, but also its apotheosis. Never was humanity as dependent on horses as the time when combustion engines were already at work in early industrial cities.

When I speak of the final *century* of the horse, I am not being intellectually lazy or trying to be pithy. The equestrian age corresponds almost exactly to what historians commonly refer to as the "long nineteenth century," which begins with Napoleon and ends with the First World War. By then almost all of the technical systems that once needed horse power - everything from transportation to the military - were converted to combustion or electrical energy. Practically speaking, this conversion took even longer. The two world wars dramatically and horrifically increased the need for horses. It is only since the mid-twentieth century that sufficient, affordable sources of mechanical traction energy caused the number of horses to plummet. Nowadays, the separation of man and horse is not just inevitable. It's been completed.

Viewed with the eyes of a historian, the separation of man and horses seems like the central chapter in the story of the end of the agrarian-dominated world. Before the mid-twentieth century, even the picture of the world's most technologically advanced civilizations was greatly influenced by rural structures: peasant villages, markets, herds of livestock, corn fields and the like. And if we go fifty years further back in time, mankind's departure from the pastoral world of nature appeared even more dramatic. "Around 1900, most people on the planet worked in agricultural and food production," writes philosopher Michel Serres. "Today in France and comparable countries, farmers only make up one percent of the population. We have to acknowledge, without doubt, that this was one of the most profound historical ruptures since the Neolithic era."

Mankind's farewell to horses is part of the radical reversal of traditional ways of life and labor in the industrialized countries. It's a phase of humanity's departure from the analogue world. One of the most unsettling experiences people in the nineteenth century went through, for which Nietzsche coined the phrase "God is dead," was the loss of a transcendental sphere that had previously been

considered absolutely certain. People sensed that they were losing the afterlife. People in the twenty-first century know a similar unease. They're in the process of losing the here-and-now.

A traditionally agrarian country like France, which never forgot that *culture*, in the old Latin sense, meant *cultivating* the land, would have taken the historical rupture particularly hard. The gods of fruit and wine were withdrawing, and with them, the old humanistic order disappeared. Humanity's divorce from horses became a historical cipher for the loss of the rural world. "I am part of a bygone people," art historian and writer Jean Clair lamented. "When I was born, farmers made up 60 percent of the French populace. Today, they account for no more than two percent. One day people will realize that the most important event of the twentieth century was not the rise of the proletariat, but the disappearance of the farming class." Those who cultivated the land have gone, and with them, sometimes before them, the animals disappeared too. "The horses were the first to go, in the late 50s," wrote one nostalgic observer. "They were no longer needed and disappeared forever."

Seen through the lens of historical philosophy, the separation of man and horse represents the dissolution of a unique working relationship. In their common effort, even if it was forced upon horses by men, the two species achieved what Hegel called the "purpose of history." By strange accident, one which fires the imagination, the dissolution of the man-horse labor relationship happened in almost exactly the same span of time separating Hegel's "Lectures of the Philosophy of World History" from the first theories positing the "end of history" in the mid-twentieth century. There are precisely fifteen decades between the first signs of the end of the equestrian age in the early nineteenth century to its definitive consummation in the middle of the twentieth. They extend from Hegel, who famously called Napoleon "the world's soul on horseback," to Arnold Gehlen, who developed his doctrine of *posthistoire* in the 1950s and '60s.

The philosopher and anthropologist Gehlen distinguished between three world ages. The long period of pre-history was followed by history per se, which was fundamentally agrarian. It was superseded in turn by industrialization and humanity's entry into the post-historical age. In 2003, as if tacitly adopting this structure, historian Reinhart Koselleck used the horse to delineate three global epochs. Koselleck divided human history into pre-equestrian, equestrian and post-equestrian ages. The historian was willing to accept the over-simplification of a three-stage chronological view of the past and present because he thought it would yield a new perspective on human history. "All too aware that all periodization...depends on which questions are asked and which structures of perspective are employed," wrote Koselleck, "I am searching for a criterion that runs underneath...all distinctions between ancient, middle and recent history."

In my attempt to analyze the *end* of the equestrian age, I share Kosseleck's ambitions. But unlike him, I direct my readers' attention to the relatively narrow transitional period in which the horse actually disappeared from human history. The story of *de-equestrianization*, as Isaac Babel termed the process, had its own duration and historical depth. It came about as the result of process of dissolution and transformation that stretched over more than a century and in some senses has yet to be completed today. The equestrian age still casts a long shadow – and not just upon Kosseleck's 2003 narrative. It falls on literature, everyday images and figures of speech. In fact, the end of the equestrian age encompasses not only a relatively long span of time but also an abundance of facts and observations from various areas of life. With the exception of human beings, no other historical and natural creature demands its own *histoire totale* more than the horse.

There are countless stories of all sorts in which the horse plays a lead role: stories of technology, transport, agriculture, war, cities and energy. But alongside these "real" stories of the material world, other narratives also insist on being told: stories of knowledge, symbols, art, ideas and conceptions. Even for newer genres like sound history, which traces the acoustics of the past, the horse is a particularly important subject. All these narratives deserve to be taken seriously. The horses of which they tell all actually existed at some time, be they creations of breeding, products of research or creatures of art. None of these beings is more real or pertinent than the others. A piece of graffiti on the wall, a metaphor or the shadow of a dream is no less real than a being made of flesh and blood. History – and not just the history of the horse – lives from both. Nineteenth-century French historian Jules Michelet once said that in its early days, history seemed to be both insufficiently material and insufficiently spiritual. This is the challenge we must take up. The task is to write a history of the horse that is equally material/sensual and spiritual. Or, as we would say today, intellectual.

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At the beginning of the equestrian age is a paradox, the ur-paradox of all of history. An intelligent mammal, homo sapiens, subordinated another mammal, the horse. He tames and breeds it, makes friend with and uses it to his own ends. What's astonishing is that this worked, even though human ends ran contrary to horse's instincts. In contrary to homo sapiens, the horse is a flight animal that flees perceived danger. If it's not competing with fellow members of the species for a mate, it shies away from battles and quarrels. As a vegetarian, it knows no prey. Its primary defense against predators and enemies is the speed with which it runs away. That, however, is precisely the quality that attracted the interest of the other mammal, homo sapiens. When the horse first entered into

human history, it was not as a source of protein or a beast of burden. In the latter function, the horse – together with the ox and the ass – languishes so to speak at the back door of history. It was the horse's speed that elevated it to the forefront of the symbiosis of human history and nature. Despite the minor triumphs of the camel and elephant, the horse occupied this privileged for six thousand years.

German philosopher and historian Oswald Spengler also recognized that the horse's greatest contribution to history was *speed*. For almost six millennia, humans' individual experiences of acceleration and velocity were inseparable from horses. (In Arabia, this was true of the camel.) To be fast you had to be mounted – a historical state too easily forgotten five generations after the invention of the automobile and four after the rise of mechanized flight. The horse was the speed machine par excellence, and as such it allowed people not only to conquer, but to secure and control stretches of territory previously unimaginable. Following Nietzsche, Spengler calls this power politics. With the horse, it became possible to enforce one's political will on a grand scale. As a speed machine, the horse was a weapon of war of the highest order. As a means of eradicating distance, it allowed for the exponential expansion of communication. As a tamable, breedable, steerable beast of velocity – as an animalistic vector – the horse became both a political animal and homo sapiens' most important companion.

With that, the initial paradox returned. In its function as a vector, civilian riding or pull horses were often called upon to serve as warhorses. Frequently, the peaceful, grass-loving vegetarian would have to deny its own instincts to carry human beings into battle and trod their enemies' into the dust. Contrary to its nature, this nervous flight animal would transform into an incarnation of terror that would force hordes of men to flee. No one wanted to fall under a horse's hooves or the wheels of a horse-drawn wagon. The flight animal, deployed as a physically superior weapon in the battle of the predator man against members of his own species, is the original dialectic of the equestrian age, the basis of what I will call the centaurian pact.

Compared with this epochal alliance, all other partnerships concluded by mankind seem fragile and ephemeral. Not even man's relationships to his gods were comparably stable. That made the end all the more remarkable. At the very moment the alliance reached its climax in terms of concentration and virulence, it began to disintegrate irrevocably. Almost without a sound, unnoticed by most contemporaries, it began to dissolve into its constituent elements. The great dramatic figure unraveled, and six millennia of centaurian cooperation ended with no further ado. What came thereafter was less than a satyr play. While the human half of the former allegiance formed short-lived bonds with machines of all kinds, automobiles, aircraft and portable computers, the equestrian half entered historical retirement as a sport and therapy device, a symbol of prestige and an assistant

to female puberty. Only on rare occasions, when labor demonstrations or protestors in a pedestrian shopping zone needed dispersing, was the hose allowed to assume once more its former imperious function.

Parallel to its rise and fall in the nineteenth century, the horse enjoyed an enormous literary and iconographic career. Insofar as they are set on land and not on the high seas, most of the great novels of the final full century of the equestrian age are horse novels, shot through with horse motifs and horse stories like sinews and veins. That is true even of the most urbane writers of the period: Stendhal, Balzac, Flaubert, Tolstoy and Stevenson. All the great ideas which the nineteenth century transformed into engines of history (freedom, human greatness, sympathy) as well as historical sub-currents like the libido, the unconsciousness and the uncanny ultimately lead back to the horse. Of course, the horse is not the sphinx. But the horse is the nineteenth century's great bearer of ideas and images, its intellectual helper, its speech therapist. Whenever nineteenth-century people reached an intellectual or emotional impasse, they called upon the horse. The flight animal bore their ideas and their suffering.

Running through the background of the story of separation I will be telling on the pages to come is a process of sublimation. To the same extent that the solid old world of horses, carriages and cavalrymen was beginning to dissolve, horses acquired an imaginary, chimeric dimension. They became ghosts of modernity, and the more they lost in real-world presence, the more intensely they haunted the heads of a humanity that had turned its backs on them. Perhaps that was the price we had to pay for "enormous loss of naive historical tradition," which Hermann Heimpel lamented at Historian's Day in the German city of Ulm in 1956. "With every disappeared horse," Heimpel said, "a condition that connects our age to that of Charlemagne disappears."

To paraphrase Marx's paraphrase of Hegel, every time a historical age ends, the drama of history recurs as comedy. Thus, as the embers of the equestrian age were glowing, it experienced a final comic renaissance in the form of a reddish ponytail seductively bouncing up and down while to the rear history's door snapped closed in its lock. The year was 1957, and the Swiss author Max Frisch's novel *Homo faber* had just been published. The venerable age of the Centaurs was over; the youthful one of schoolgirl Amazons in riding pants had begun. The author sketched the latter's contours, writing of a girl's "reddish ponytail swaying over her back, the two shoulder blades under his black sweater, the indentation of her taut, slender back, then her hips, her youthful hips in her black pants, willowed at the thighs, her ankles." All these secondary details – the girl's back, hips, thighs and ankles – become tertiary in relation to the signs of an approaching storm in which innocence merges with animalism. It would be seven years until the appearance of the right sort of

motor vehicle, the Ford Mustang, to take a ride out west. But the signs of one historical epoch ending and another beginning were already bouncing and beckoning.



The good old days save the brave new world. Horses drag an automobile out of the ocean on a Baltic Sea beach.



History in a rear-view mirror: Robert Doisneau, Les Embarras des Petits Champs, Paris 1968.

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The great feats the horse performed as long as the centaurian pact held are quickly being forgotten in the post-equestrian age. Horses are not a defamed or rejected, but rather a forgotten, part of history - albeit a voluminous and complex part. It's very tempting to try to relate all the aspects of the history of horses in a single breath, to dive in and drift among the facts and ideas,

novels and destinies, bridles and books. That may be appealing aesthetically, but it's not practical. In the interest of being systematic, I will tell stories that might have happened simultaneously one after another. This will take place in four major chapters.

In the first chapter I will treat real-life stories of cities, streets and accidents, country doctors and cavalrymen, spaces, paths and energy, The second chapter will deal with stories of knowledge, knowledge about *equidae* acquired over the past centuries by connoisseurs, breeders, painters and researchers, which has been partially or entirely forgotten today. The third chapter presents stories of metaphors and images, representations with which the nineteenth century developed its ideas of power, freedom, greatness, sympathy and terror. This section will reflect the *three economies* in which the horse played its age-old role as a means of motion and the great transformer of energy, knowledge and pathos. In the fourth and final chapter, I compile and relate stories of horses and men that I myself have read, heard or experienced. I will systematize them as well as I am able, show how other historians have depicted the horse and its history and offer some suggestions for further narratives.

What sort of a spin should one put on this whole story? Should it be told as a tragedy or a comedy? As a critique of culture or as a cool structural analysis? Because this is a story of separation, it makes sense to present it as a farewell. Does that not also entail bidding farewell to a humane life, a nature-bound civilization, a refined culture and an analogue world? On the other hand, the farewell in question has long been bid, the story definitely over for a half-century. Does that not speak for the dramatic form of the *epilogue*? Both forms are appealing, and there's no denying their effectiveness. Still, as much as they address our emotions, how much do they enhance our understanding? When in doubt, those who want to know what course history took and what it still has to tell us are better off sticking to more open, fragmented forms. More comparisons and fewer final words on the subject.

In any case, history isn't constructed so as to deliver the last word on the history of the horse. The subject at hands calls for a *histoire totale*, as I wrote above, reflecting a conclusion I came to early in my deliberations. Little did I know what spirits I was conjuring up! The horse has caused rivers of ink to be spilled and produced an ocean of literature. A synthesis of the sort I am attempting with this book will never escape the labyrinth. The horse wasn't born in Troy, but rather in Alexandria. It's a phantom of the library, and anyone who starts investigating the various manifestations in image and text it has assumed, to the point of obsession, in the minds of artists, writers and scholars will have trouble finding his way back to the rough-hewn world of stalls, pens and pastures.

That's not all. The epistemic problems run deeper, calling into question the very possibility of representation. Someone writing about two or three hundred years of horse history is confronted by dense layers of literature about the role of the horse in differing, highly differentiated cultural contexts. With every step taken, he traverses chasms of research controversies he can hardly see in their totality, let alone summarize. Hundreds of years of research on Native Americans in North American anthropology, for instance, cannot be reduced to a handful of pages. Many are those who begin as Franz Boas and end up as Karl May. All authors of historical syntheses, in particular global historians, know the feeling of losing the ground beneath their feet. The plethora of footnotes I have included in my text put – insofar as this is possible – my cards on the table. But they tend to skirt rather than answer the question of evaluation. Instead of yielding results, they highlight what still needs to be done. And the more verbose the discourses of researchers and specialists are, the more deafening the silence of the actual protagonists becomes. The horse itself remains mute.

The horse knows no fatherland, Marshal Ney once remarked, but is the time not ripe to give the creature a permanent place in our tales of the past? It's almost two decades since I hit upon the idea of writing a history of the long nineteenth century focusing not on the usual protagonists, from Napoleon to Metternich to Bismarck, but rather on the unsung hero and protagonist of this period – the horse. At the start, I dreamt of helping this historical actor find its voice. That dream has died, not because of the obscurity of the subject matter or the lack of facts, but because of the overloaded multiplicity of discourses. You write books in libraries, not in stalls, and even the ranks of those sensitive authors who focused on horses or even wrote about them in the first person – from Théodore Sidari (*Mémoires d'un cheval d'escadron, dictées par lui-même*, Paris 1864), John Mills (*Life of a Racehorse*, 1865), Anna Sewell (*Black Beauty*, 1877) to Tolstoy (*Kholstormer* 1886), Mark Twain (*A Horse's Tale*, 1905), D. H. Lawrence (*St Mawr*, 1925) and Michael Mopurgo (*War Horse*, 1982) – never departed from their stacks of books. This is not to say that we cannot get closer to the special intelligence and emotional life of horses. With a few brief remarks at the end of the book, I try to suggest how we can do precisely that. But my initial hopes for this work have been disappointed. My first genuine horse book will have to wait until I am reincarnated as a horse. What readers are holding in their hands is not a horse book, but a book by a historian about the end of the age in which men and horses together made history. Not *wrote* history, mind you. *Made* history. History was written exclusively by one half of the partnership, and no human life is long enough to read everything mankind has had to say about the partnership's other half.

For a long time, I believed I was writing this book for other historians – as if the point was to show my colleagues what sort of historical protagonists they had overlooked and what sort of insights they had missed out on. I would still be very happy if some of them read my book and found it interesting. But ultimately, to cite Nietzsche's wonderful, immodest dedication, I wrote this book

for everyone and no one, and even that is only partially true. I wrote this book for my mother, who loved and understood horses. I have no way of knowing any more whether she liked it. Ten years have passed since I could have asked her.