RANDOM HOUSE eBOOKS

My Father's Country

Wibke Bruhns

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About the Book

In August 1944, Hans Georg Klamroth was executed for his part in the 20 July plot to assassinate Hitler. Wibke Bruhns, his youngest daughter, was six years old at the time. Decades later, watching a documentary about the events of 20 July, images of her father in the Third Reich People's Court appear on the screen – and she realises she never knew him.

In *My Father's Country*, Bruhns tells of her search for her father. Returning to her ancestral home in Halberstadt, Northern Germany, she retraces her family's story from Kaiser Wilhelm to the end of World War Two, discovering old photographs, letters and diaries, which she uses to piece together a unique and unforgettable family epic.

About the Author

Wibke Bruhns was born in 1938 in Halberstadt. She has worked in both TV and print journalism, and as a TV presenter and newsreader. She was a correspondent for *Stern* magazine in the US and Israel and headed the culture section at one of Germany's largest radio stations, ORB. She has two grown-up daughters and now lives and works as a freelance writer in Berlin.

My Father’s Country

The Story of a German Family

Wibke Bruhns

Translated by Shaun Whiteside

arrow books

For Annika and Meike

PROLOGUE

I'VE FOUND A photograph of my father. There are hundreds of them – in albums, in envelopes, scattered among diaries, reports, letters. Hans Georg as a child, as a serious-looking adolescent, in uniforms from the First and Second World Wars, as a father with us, his children. This one was hidden away inside one of the miniatures that used to stand on my mother's bedside table.

After she died I took the three little pictures away with me: my Danish grandmother Dagmar with her inevitable flowery hat, Hans Georg in hunting garb sitting on the terrace steps in Halberstadt with a dead deer in front of him, and my mother Else as a little girl in a white lace dress, with patent leather shoes and uneven stockings. All three – the enchanting old lady, the contented huntsman, the sceptical child – have smiled at me from my desk for fifteen years, a restrained smile, detached, really, from the precious little frames which, along with the fact that they had once belonged in Else's bedroom, were my reason for putting them there.

But when baby Else slipped in her frame, I opened it up to put her back in place, and Hans Georg appeared before me. Else had hidden him behind her childhood portrait, a grief-stricken man of about thirty – he doesn't look so forlorn in any of the other photographs, apart from the last ones, before the People's Court. I've hidden the child-Else behind him for now, but I'll not be able to endure that hopeless face for long. Perhaps that was why Else covered him with her early childhood memories. Her photograph must have been taken some time around 1900, she's barely two – nurtured,

cared for, loved. Anything seemed possible back then, none of the things that were to happen could have been foreseen.

So why did she cut the face of her husband, so young and so forlorn, to fit the oval of the formal little frame? At the time when this photograph of Hans Georg was taken they were still given to laughing a lot. They were famous among their circle of friends for their quick and ready wit. And when did she switch the photographs – after his death in Plötzensee? Or before that, when the years of separation during the war estranged them from one another, when each of them functioned alone, eroding away their sense of togetherness? Or was it when Hans Georg betrayed Else?

For months I have been searching through the lives of strangers, reading letters, diaries, pages written over a period of a hundred years, which I have assembled from the catacombs of the various branches of our tribe. The Klamroths have existed for so long, and they have always seen themselves as a clan, they still do today, even though the focus of their pride – the estate in Halberstadt – was lost to them in the war. What I read there isn't really alien to me. I know who these people are. And yet I don't know them. By the 1930s, Hans Georg had a 16mm movie camera and recorded the family's parties: hunting on horseback in the Harz mountains, bowls in the garden, and the elder children, still young at the time, playing on the swing. I recently received the digitalised version of the films, and was able to identify everyone in the pictures, although I'd never met many of them, or had done so only when I was a toddler.

I see evening dress – goodness, they liked their evening dress! – and the expensively styled ladies, and I wonder why Else dressed so badly, when she had Suli Woolnough as a dressmaker, whose elegant designs were considered quite exotic in Halberstadt at the time. They held extravagant fancy-dress parties on the eve of weddings, and for Grandmother Gertrud's sixtieth birthday there are performances by 'Benno Nachtigall', the family's own band

of balladeers. In my cupboard I store the songs they wrote – the *Bänkellieder* and *Schüttelverse*. Strange lives.

I find pictures of Hans Georg at the piano – he used to sing, everybody in this family sang, in harmony, all the time, and the whole clan played musical instruments. Cantatas, street ballads, the whole standard song-book from start to finish and back again, not to mention all the family songs. But I don't know his voice. I feel sure I've never heard it, although that can't be so – he must have said something to me when I was a little girl. He would surely have sung to me, too, on the rare occasions he came home from the war.

Neither do I know how he spoke, the man who was my father. It would be a great help to me now, in understanding how he was. Does he wave his hands about like I do, is he noisy, impulsive? When he writes, and he writes a lot, he sounds measured and correct. He never makes mistakes, not even when typing, and doesn't need to correct his syntax, spelling, and least of all his thoughts. Very tidy, the whole thing. His handwriting – tiny, neat and legible whether in Sütterlin, the German style of the old days, or in Roman script. His writing is just like his father's – my grandfather. Was there anyone he respected as highly? Thinking of the way the two of them set out their photograph albums in the same way – white ink, frames drawn accurately around each picture, minute inscriptions . . .

And then there's Else: chaos in her head and her handwriting, spilling over the edges, extravagant, scatterbrained. Enormous letters, lines rising and falling, crossed out, written over. When she fills in forms by hand, her handwriting rages like a dog imprisoned in a cage. There's a big housekeeping book – household planning and accounts for the years between 1938 and 1943. The two of them kept the book alternately – Hans Georg in marshalled columns of numbers, no mistakes, never a moment's doubt. Else trots through the columns, wanders across the page, jots down rapid question marks and footnotes – she went on

battling with calculations like these long after the war. They never added up and left Else in despair, she would have so loved to be orderly.

In her letters – she wrote lots, too – she flits from one subject to the next, batters the grammar and punctuation, leaves the pages scattered with doubtful corrections. She laughs and cries without transition, moral advice for daughters living away from home is mixed up in with descriptions of her varied experiences managing a big house with lots of guests. The battle with 20 hundredweight of peas and unruly mason jars leads her directly to the observation that God's counsel is seldom convincing. Some idiot – damn them! – has mislaid the key to the silver cupboard, and incidentally, Else, 'would have liked to have had it out' with Hegel.

They laughed about their apparent mismatch, each about the other and both together. But in later life, when I came to perceive her as a human being and not just as a mother, Else seemed rather histrionic, highly sentimental, and above all sad. She would have liked to die much earlier, she was almost ninety in 1987 and had lost her enthusiasm for life twenty-five years previously, when she stopped having to care for her five children. In the past, long before my time or perhaps in my early childhood, both of them, Else and Hans Georg, must have been a delight. Friends from those days have raved to me about their wit, their devotion to one another, their ability to gather people around them and keep them there.

Children, I maintain, are interested in their parents only as a resource. Their relationship with them is essentially a selfish one: to what extent am I protected, nurtured, encouraged? The question of who their parents are, what they feel, whether they are happy, is one that passes children by. The child doesn't know the human being that friends have known and loved and spent time with. Until the death of those parents – perhaps – when inquiry is no longer

so indiscreet. Parents always keep their children at a distance, and the children in turn guard their distance from parents. And parents don’t put the burden of their own troubles on their children – so the idea of your parent’s helplessness is always difficult for children to deal with.

During the course of my psychoanalysis in the early 1990s, I couldn’t really reach my parents. I wasn’t prepared – I’m still not – to blame my mother for the problems in my childhood or even later – she was annoying sometimes, of course, she was overburdened and I was often rather lonely. But was there anything she could have done about it? I had assigned a relatively innocuous role to the father: I never knew him, and as a result he didn’t affect me. I never missed him – millions of daughters of my generation grew up fatherless. I kept him at arm’s length, not wanting to know anything about him. He was an open wound in my mother’s life, and I experienced him as her loss. She said nothing about him. Today I know that many of the widows of the July 20 conspiracy held things back from their children. It was a silence in which questions were forbidden.

In 1979 I prepared for my family’s move to Jerusalem. I drove down to Italy, then sailed from Ancona to Haifa, and even the entrance formalities in the harbour left no doubt: I’m in an oriental country now. I found a house on Mount Scopus, near the Hebrew University, with a wide view of the karstic desert, and an Arab village far below. A hundred years previously, the English school for the children had been an Anglican hospital. The first time I walked through the large garden, past oleander bushes and fig trees, it was clear to me that it didn’t matter in the slightest whether or not my daughters learned maths and grammar. The worn steps and crooked sandstone walls, the blooming geraniums, the milling crowd of children from forty different countries, their hair ranging from deep-black to straw-blond, would later give the kids vivid memories of their school days – and that was exactly how it was.

At the same time I was researching the story of a Palestinian family in Hebron, West Jordan, and it was here that I learned what our everyday life would be like: profound hatred between the Arab population and the Jewish settlers from nearby Kiryat Arba. My hosts endured a curfew lasting several days, during which I was the only one allowed into the street to buy food for the numerous members of the family. The shops were barricaded, I got in through the back door, while outside the snotty youths of the settlement went strolling with their Kalashnikovs and their Uzis. In Jerusalem, where every stone is a piece of history, I immersed myself in the almost peaceful jumble of nationalities and religions, the deafening noise in the markets and the possessive attention of complete strangers. I battled with the authorities over our move, I fought for my accreditation, and spent hours upon hours in the bank doing something as simple as setting up two convertible accounts. They were six packed weeks, during which I was constantly worried about how my sheltered children were going to cope with the switch from their orderly life in Hamburg to this exotic confusion. They were twelve and eleven at the time, and they acclimatised astonishingly quickly.

In the course of one of my many phone calls home to Germany their nanny told me there was a documentary series about the July 20 conspiracy on television, and more or less in passing I asked her to put in a video tape next time. I flew back late, there had been a bomb alert at the airport – something else I would have to get used to. On the plane a group of Orthodox Jews held noisy prayers, standing in the aisle, with black hats and ringlets. Wondering what they were doing, I studied the equipment required for the process, the ‘tallit’, the prayer shawl, and the ‘tefillin’, the prayer straps wrapped around forehead and arm. I was amazed by the rocking movements of their bodies. I still had a lot to learn.

I arrived back in Hamburg late at night, kissed my dozing children, found out what life had been like while I had been away in this bewildering foreign country. At about three in the morning, dog-tired, I poured myself a whisky and tried to come to terms with the contrast between my own pristine surroundings in the Hamburg district of Rothenbaum and the wild, confused city, sacred for thousands of years, that was to be our home.

A video cassette lay on top of the television. I innocently put it into the VCR. There was my father, standing in front of the People's Court. Bolt upright, looking miserable in an over-sized suit, silent, he stands there in a short sequence as the voice of the chairman Roland Freisler jabs and rages. I can see myself sitting there, in a state of utter bafflement. This was thirty-five years in the past, the blink of an eye in historical terms. Thirty-five years ago – he was forty-five years old then, just five years older than me now, sitting here on my sofa in Hamburg. His life, his hopes, everything was past. Large parts of Germany lay in ruins. The war was lost, even though it was going to drag on for another tormented year. The world of that generation was over now. Never would the German people, it seemed, be able to overcome the curse, the shame of those years. They paid for their hubris with the loss of their future.

Thirty-five short years. And here am I, the youngest child of that man marked for death there on television – he's actually on television! On video! – and here am I, just back from a colourful trip to the Middle East, from a Jewish country, of all places! I'm drinking whisky – whisky! – from Bohemian crystal, I'm surrounded by books, paintings, beautiful furniture. Thirty-five years. I stare at this man with the lifeless expression – eleven days after this footage is taken he will be dead, hung on a meat-hook in Plötzensee. I don't know him, there isn't a shadow of a memory within me. I was just a year old when war broke out. From that point onwards my father barely came home. But I recognise

myself in him – his eyes are my eyes, I know that I look like him. I pinch my forearm. This skin wouldn't exist without him. I wouldn't be me without him. And what do I know about him? Nothing.

Why do I know nothing? What is the significance of the vague family pact of silence that prevailed throughout all those years, why did nobody ever try to track down my father? Children milk their parents, demanding food, warmth, fun, comfort, protection and above all love, and my father didn't supply any of these – was that it? That might apply to myself. But what about my older brother and the sisters, who were practically adults when he died – didn't he feature in their lives? He did, but as a legend. They armed themselves with unchanging anecdotes about our father's wit, about his pedantry. There was always that affectionate laughter reserved for my father.

But this man here before me, on television late at night, isn't a legend. He's a man of flesh and blood. There he stands in the big hall of the Berlin Supreme Court, surrounded by onlookers, and he knows he will soon die a terrible, pitifully lonely death. Composure was called for, and courage. They died 'like men', people said afterwards. Good God! That can't be. You need someone to take you by the hand, you need someone to go with you not just to the gallows in Plötzensee. Because until then you had lived – and who remembers that? What was your life like beyond the memorial tablets that now hang in the Berlin Supreme Court or the German Defence Ministry, in Plötzensee or in Halberstadt, what were you like outside of the books in which your name appears under K for Klamroth? Your death distorted my perception of reality. You weren't yourself – you were always your death. But at the same time you are more than the carefully avoided zone of pain within my mother's psyche. I don't want to travel the highways and byways to find you. I want you. I'm your child. That night, on my return from Jerusalem, I made a promise to myself: I'll care for you.

Of course I asked them – I asked Else, I asked other people who had known him. But it was far too late, the accepted terminology had been fixed long before. Those set phrases had something to do with the heroes of the resistance movement apostrophised in state memorial speeches; to belong to that movement, even as a child, was an honour. Privately, Else divided her life into ‘before’ and ‘after’: ‘before’ was glitter, ‘after’ was servitude. The loss of the one and the tribulation of the other were borne with composure, and mourning over both was taboo as far as the child was concerned. Only decades later, when the mother required daughterly care, did I understand that she had discharged all her misery on to my eldest sister, beginning with the fact that in 1944 Else had asked her twenty-one-year-old daughter, a chemistry student at the time, to get hold of poison for the whole family.

When Else was exasperated by my adolescent waywardness, she sometimes invoked Hans Georg as a kind of bogey-man. ‘You’d never have dared do that if your father was still alive,’ she would say, and I snorted with contempt as my weary mother resorted to arguments that couldn’t touch me. Sweet, captivating, ill-treated, exhausted mother – if only you’d told me what I know today: that your marriage was worn out, that the father betrayed you, that you both worshipped Hitler in the early years, you presumably for longer than he did. If only you’d told me that you were, for your part, unendingly brave – if not exactly ‘manly’ as people used to say in those days – and that with the composure required of everyone back then, you could never scream out your horror over his death, or the failure of your life together.

I’m grateful to Else for not telling me. I couldn’t have coped with it. I couldn’t have negotiated my way around the ruins of her soul, if I’d had to decide between the man whose death made him impregnable, and the woman I wanted to love, or at least rub myself against. The one thing

I didn’t want to do was pity her. Not then. When I was young, my mother was the standard against which I grew, against which I tested my own strength. I couldn’t have wrestled with the shadow of the past, and I think then I was content with the taboos that spared me that.

Hans Georg is executed on August 26, 1944, and presumably he walks, like everyone else, from the ‘house of death’ in Plötzensee in prisoner’s uniform, hands tied behind his back, his bare feet in wooden clogs. It is a bright summer day, ninety degrees, almost cloudless. The moment of death is established as 12.44, as recorded in the registry office in Berlin Charlottenburg ‘from the verbal statement of assistant guard Paul Dürrhauer, resident in Berlin, Number 10 Manteuffelstrasse’. This man, it is recorded, is ‘well known, and declared that he was informed about the death on the basis of his own knowledge’. I haven’t been able to ask Paul Dürrhauer, he died in 1976. I don’t need to question him. Herr Gluck, the registrar, signed ‘as a representative’ on August 28, 1944: ‘cause of death: hanging’.

Could it have been a mistake? And if so, whose mistake? Hans Georg and Else were both Party members. He had joined in 1933 and she in 1937, he had been a member of the SS, she was the district leader of the NS-Frauenschaft, the Nazi women’s organisation. In her application she confirmed that she was of ‘German-Aryan descent, and free of Jewish or coloured blood’, and her signature on the form is as expressive and confident as ever.

‘He that loveth danger shall perish therein.’ So it says in the Old Testament. Aside from my parents, millions of Germans had bitter experience of this truth. Did they grasp that the chief danger wasn’t their military opponents, but themselves? Certainly Else didn’t. As late as 1947, she writes in the diary that she kept for each of her children from birth to confirmation: ‘I was filled with horror at the sight of the senseless destruction and sacrifice of the

people, only because one man was too cowardly to admit that he had failed.' One man? Failed? Hadn't it been a dance of death from the very first?

Not for Else. In 1942 she writes jubilantly to a friend on the Eastern Front: 'Things are proceeding wonderfully well – 80 km from Stalingrad! Once we're there, the pincer is closed!' In the same year, in one of her Sunday letters: 'If we do make it to Alexandria, what will England do with its fleet? If they have to leave, the Mediterranean is ours!!' Ours? That's how it was. A question of *Lebensraum*. Hans Georg writes from the front in Russia in 1942 that the subjugated nations must be won over: 'Anyone who wants to lead a people must have a command of its language otherwise he will be unable to reach its soul, which must be conquered – it cannot be done with the enslavement of the body alone!' No doubt, however, about the legitimacy of the 'enslavement' and the claims to leadership.

When did he understand the extent of the mess he was in? When, if ever, did Hans Georg become aware of the terrible injustice of this 'Third Reich'? When did he recognise that he was being betrayed? In the verdict of the People's Court it states that Hans Georg learned of the conspiracy to assassinate Hitler on July 10, 1944, and that he did not report those involved. For that he had to hang. But the verdict also states that he and his son-in-law Bernhard Klamroth were, of the six accused, those who were 'directly the closest to the murderous attack' – how can those two things fit together?

I don't know the truth. Many things suggest that Hans Georg, as an experienced member of the Abwehr, the German Intelligence Services, deceived his questioners in Ernst Kaltenbrunner's Reich Security Headquarters, that until just before his execution, like several other men involved in the conspiracy of July 20, he played for high stakes and lost. He was acquainted with too many people from the circle of conspirators to have known nothing about

the attack until ten days before it happened. Some of these men, such as Wolf-Heinrich Count Helldorf and Michael Count Matuschka, were contacts from his training as a cadet in the First World War, Hans Georg called Ewald von Kleist his ‘uncle’, he was a fatherly friend to Axel von dem Bussche – and Hans Georg nurtured friendships, connections and networks throughout his life.

More than twenty conspirators, when questioned by the Gestapo and the court, gave as reasons for their involvement in the conspiracy the persecution of the Jews, the ‘murders in Poland’, or the treatment of prisoners of war and the civilian population in the conquered territories. But there was also an element of military outrage. These officers wanted to avoid a second Versailles, and they attacked Hitler’s incompetence as Supreme Warlord. They were concerned with bringing the war to a bearable conclusion, not with achieving atonement for irredeemable guilt. The greatness of the nation and German honour were at stake, they fought for this goddamned flag which they thought had been besmirched.

As far as the military were concerned, the obscenities had been committed by other people. The German Wehrmacht was clean, wasn’t it? Even Helmut Kohl blustered about the injustice ‘perpetrated in the name of Germany’, as though the gremlins had come, waving black, white and red banners, and had murdered, looted, gassed, expropriated, laid waste, as if it had been extraterrestrials that had come up with the idea of German blood and German soil, unceremoniously sought to eradicate ‘inferior’ races, and bawled ‘One people, one Reich, one Führer’, and ‘today Germany, tomorrow the world’.

Not Hans Georg. He didn’t bawl. He sang. But he did everything he did for ‘a better future for our children’. Where should that take place? In that ‘lousy country’, as he called Russia? And why? The children were doing splendidly, and so was he. What more did he want? He had a decent

family, a decent firm, decent friends, he himself had travelled half-way around the world as a decent German. Was he watching from his cloud when, at the age of eleven, I was cut off from the other children in my school in Stockholm, because they weren't allowed to play with a German child? Did he understand my grief when we couldn't hang the chains of national paper-flags in our Christmas tree as they did in Denmark or Sweden, where flag and state are no reason to be ashamed? Was he with me when I became a foreign correspondent in Israel and struggled to take a stand against my own country?

'Come on, Wibke, we're going to see Father now, to ask his mercy,' my eldest sister demanded of me with ultimate decisiveness. That was just before her death in 1990. For four decades she had substituted for the late Hans Georg in Else's life, she had tidied up, straightened out, mended the storm damage in our mother's life and kept her brother and the younger sisters from going astray again and again. She herself and what she could have become were buried beneath the requirements of this family. Now she wanted the almighty Hans Georg, her murdered father, to grant her absolution.

Excuse me? Just to be on the safe side, I checked: did she mean the Lord God or did she really mean our father? Yes. He was the one she wanted. His mercy. God in heaven, or whoever, thank you for the fact that I don't have to do this. I can contemplate my father, I can try to understand him, perhaps I can love him, and I would like to comfort him. I've been lucky.

It was, after all, plain luck, that I didn't have to decide. I wasn't made to wear the Hitler Youth *Jungmädel* uniform. The only thing I had to put up with were those terrible Little-Red-Riding-Hood outfits sewn from swastika flags after the end of the war. I've never had to brave anything I've been opposed to. Would I have then? A whole generation set an example which must never be allowed to re-occur in my life.

The legacy of all those fathers was to be rejected. I escaped the fate of collective madness.

The eldest sister didn't. I'm filled with rage and compassion as I read her diaries. In November 1944, aged twenty-one, she writes: 'I cannot abandon him and my faith in him, whom I have served, whom I wanted to serve my whole life long. So fully do I belong to the man who murdered my father that no clear thought has so far dared rise against him.' And a little later: 'Mein Führer, I was one of the most faithful. I am still not free of you, Mein Führer – still I want to stand before you, captured by your gaze, then order me to do what you will, I will die for you.' And then: 'I believed and am betrayed. I have worked for the devil – I loved, mein Führer! For the first time I feel that I could hate . . . a wild hatred that was even wilder love. Hatred and destruction for the man who has destroyed us, and, if I should die, I want to die fighting you! My father's murderer!'

If I strip those words of their pathos and their crack-brained devotion, in which my sister wasn't alone, I can't see anything that could possibly have kept this young woman from succumbing. Here she is, at the age of eleven, standing around the grand piano with friends and family in October 1933. The father is hammering away at the keys, the children are stretching their arms radiantly into the air in the Hitler salute. Their mother, too. 'We are singing Hitler songs with Father,' Else writes in the children's diary – she of all people! She couldn't sing at all, for heaven's sake. She was the crow in a family of larks, the only one who couldn't hold a tune.

These diaries constantly evoke 'highly political and uplifting times', Hitler's 'brilliant sense' of timing for whatever. In his Sunday letters from the Eastern Front, Hans Georg describes how the Führer's radio broadcasts bring together 'officers, NCOs and men', even when 'the heavy chunks of an enemy air attack are raining down on us'. Outside, the world is being blown apart, but 'everything is

drowned out by the Führer's voice, which all the men listen to devotedly and with intense concentration.'

Letters such as these also reach the children – his typewriter makes nine carbon copies, and each child receives their weekly reinforcement that everything's just all right. Even my next-eldest sister – just eleven when Hans Georg dies – is involved. Compassion is still being expressed in 1947, when Else describes for her the period after the assassination attempt on Hitler: 'It was worst for you, having grown up to love and admire Hitler, and you loved your father so very much. How can those two things go together?' How indeed? Else explains it by using the image of a packed train rushing towards an abyss. The men of July 20 had seen the attack as a way of halting the train. To outsiders, it looked as though they wanted to hasten the accident, which was why they had to die a dishonourable death. But the true honour lay in the attempt to prevent the catastrophe, and no one could take that away from her father. The child was comforted – writes Else.

Honour. A dishonourable death. The catastrophe. Only we, the younger generation, were to deal with the catastrophe that our country had wrought on others. For our parents the catastrophe was the loss of the war, the crushing of Germany and everything it stood for. My sister told me how Else learned of the extermination camps after the war. White in the face, she stood in the doorway and said, 'We Germans will never be forgiven that.' We Germans. Auschwitz – a mortgage. Not a word, not a single word in all those years about the victims.

This is getting me nowhere. Who am I to judge today, when I want to understand the past? Hans Georg and Else have paid, each in their turn. I have no scores to settle, and I must rein in my arrogance. 'You, who will rise from the flood that has submerged us, remember too, when you speak of our weaknesses, the dark time that you have escaped,' Bertolt Brecht urges those born later. Sixty years

on I cannot sit here ruthlessly ‘being right’. My luck was the caesura – I began when everything had stopped. What of those who lived before and during Nazi Germany? Should they declare the first forty years of their lives invalid, as citizens of East Germany are often required to do? Eternal penance?

That can’t be it. I want to understand what it was that did such damage to my generation – to those born later. For this I must return to the history of those who have written my history – my family’s forefathers. I must go to Halberstadt.

ONE

Father Kurt and son Hans Georg on their morning ride

I CAN IMMERSE myself in the early photographs – the half-timbering, the baroque, ramshackle stables, the courtyards. Halberstadt had 43,000 inhabitants in 1900, the pictures suggest affluence, and above all industry. Shops everywhere, markets, awnings outside the shops. The Kaiserhof patisserie by the fish market served its customers under parasols on a second-floor terrace. From 1887 there was a horse tram, replaced in 1903 by the electric one. From 1888 the people of Halberstadt were able to use the telephone. Charlemagne himself had established the diocese in 804, and even today when I drive across the

incredibly flat North German landscape I see churches in the distance, many, many churches.

For me Halberstadt is a metaphor. Halberstadt is ‘before’. My memory of the town where I was born, the town of my early childhood, begins on April 8, 1945, the Sunday after Easter, at 11.25 in the morning. Allied bombers, supposedly 215 of them, reduced 82 per cent of the old town to rubble. I was six at the time. All my memories prior to that are buried under ruins, consumed in the conflagration that raged for days. After that I remember a difficult post-war time everywhere and nowhere – that was the beginning of what became my life. Halberstadt isn’t part of it. Whenever I have driven there later on, what I found was grey, decaying everyday life in East Germany, brightened by family friends, but still strange to me. Today Halberstadt is a pleasure. The town always picks itself up, as it did after the destruction wrought by Henry the Lion, the medieval duke of Saxony, the Peasant War and the Reformation, the Thirty Years War, French rule and its storming by the Cossacks.

At some point in the meantime the Klamroths arrived. ‘For when our forefather came out of the woods near Börnecke in the Harz – schrumm schrumm . . .’ they sang later at their family reunions. The forefather appeared some time around 1500. Thereafter there were Klamroths living in the villages of the Harz mountains as foresters and saddlers to the court of Saxony, master brewers and even one town councillor in Ermsleben. Things really got intriguing with Johann Gottlieb. He was a trained businessman, he travelled with the certificate of the ‘Honourable Guild of Grocers and Canvas Tailors’ from Quedlinburg to Halberstadt, ‘at which place’ he founded the company I.G. Klamroth in 1790. He was twenty-two; in 1788 he first sealed his letters with the family crest that we still use today.

There was one infallible way for me to put Else in a fury. Like everyone who marries into a family of stature she was a convinced convert: the honour of the Klamroth family was

sacred to her. Whenever I compared this family – not inaccurately – with the Buddenbrooks, Else foamed at the mouth. Whenever I described the company – that company! – as a shop selling hop-poles and jute bags, there was serious trouble. Yet it's not a completely inaccurate description.

Johann Gottlieb ran a business selling 'fabric and victuals'. That was how it started. He wore his hair in the style of Napoleon – how did they do that in those days, before hairspray was invented? When he got up in the morning, did he look as handsome as he does in his oil painting? How often were the lace ruffs under his velvet collar washed? And did he wear them at the counter? We don't really know anything for sure.

In 1802 he married sensibly into a flourishing leather company. His wife's father had passed away, and Johann Gottlieb moved his business into his late father-in-law's residence at No. 3 An der Woort – 'house fit for a brewery, with 5 large rooms, 8 smaller rooms, 2 alcoves, 1 plaster and 2 tiled floors and 2 vaulted cellars, valued at a total of 2011 thaler 14 groschen'. It was in the ruins of this glorious building, frequently rebuilt and finally flattened, that the company withered slowly away after the Second World War.

For Johann Gottlieb and his vivacious wife Frau Johanne, things went from strength to strength. There were no paralysing guild regulations; instead there was freedom of trade. The peasants were liberated in 1807 by Friedrich Wilhelm III and his Baron von Stein. Somehow, herring barrels and dibbles were no longer of the moment. The trade now moved to peas and wheat, poppy-seeds and hemp, far beyond the boundaries of Halberstadt. Industry! It's a joy to follow the traces of these early family entrepreneurs, who efficiently absorbed each economic change, spotted each innovation on the horizon just in time and converted it into profit.

In 1828, at the age of twenty-five, Johann Gottlieb's son Louis joined the company. He was as ugly as sin and a gifted businessman. With various partners and a complex network of companies, he sold seeds imported from all over Europe, agricultural implements, grains and fertiliser. In his own factories he produced beet sugar, spirits and vinegar, he traded in cement, wine, and even money. His flourishing pawnbroker's firm bought its customers' family jewels for good cash and gave them credit at favourable terms.

Louis bought farmland that he leased out to his own factories for the planting of sugar beet. He owned houses, properties, farms and a manor. His transport company carried goods from the new railway to the buyer; agricultural products were stacked up in warehouses for sale even beyond the boundaries of Prussia. He was one of the first to equip his factories and farms with new steam-operated machinery, sowing machines and harvesters – Louis was heavily into the new technology. By 1840 he had in his private office a desk with a built-in copying press – of which he was particularly proud, because it meant that he didn't need his letters copied out by apprentices.

Louis Klamroth advised the region's farmers about the advantages of 'Victoria' or giant yield peas '(a yield of 16–18 "Berliner Scheffel" – about fifty-five litres – per Magdeburg acre, the softer, longer straw is very healthy feed for cattle)', and 'Hungarian seed maize (has proven in our last harvest to be ideal for our climatic conditions)'. He included 'red clover, green fescue and timothy grass' in his assortment and sold 'English riddles', coarse-meshed sieves for separating wheat and chaff.

In his youth Louis travelled on horseback to visit his business colleagues in Leipzig and Frankfurt am Main, finding the express post-chaise too slow. On these journeys he carried large sums of money in a belt wrapped around his body. It hasn't been recorded whether he carried a weapon as well, but horse riding has stayed in the family. In

1861 Louis Klamroth – his actual name was Wilhelm Ludwig – was appointed to the Royal Prussian Chamber of Commerce, and when he died twenty years later he left a princely fortune. Holding in my hands the will that he drew up together with his wife Bertha, I was impressed. Even their young granddaughter Martha Löbbecke, whose mother had died in childbirth was given 330,000 marks, a vast sum of money at that time – and their son Gustav, Louis' successor in the company, paid the sum in a single instalment. Gustav was also able to perform a similar service for his three living brothers and sisters, and nowhere is there any suggestion that these disbursements brought the company to its knees.

Gustav is educated like a crown prince – a year at the renowned Beyerisches Trade Institute in Braunschweig, a four-year apprenticeship with the import/export-business of the von Fischers in Bremen, and extended internships with companies in London and Paris. Finally in 1861, at the age of twenty-four, he becomes a partner in the firm. New brooms sweep clean, and like his father before him, Gustav now seeks to ensure that an already impressive business grows even bigger.

Gustav admires the chemist Justus von Liebig, who revolutionised agriculture with his artificial fertiliser. After less than three years with the company, and much earlier than his hesitant competitors, Klamroth junior begins manufacturing super-phosphates, which swiftly leads to the establishment of an extremely profitable fertiliser factory in Nienburg an der Weser. The Liebig label was still a presence in my childhood: in my parents' library there were imposing albums of pictures collected from Liebig's meat extract packages, and everything I know about the legend of King Arthur or the Battle of Königgrätz I have gleaned from these trading cards.

The 1866 war – Prussia versus the rest of the German-speaking world – was resolved in Königgrätz after just four

weeks. In those days wars tended not to last very long. With two or three big battles – I imagine them as being something like a football final with brightly coloured uniforms, foaming horses, banners, flags. And on the commanders' mound, Wilhelm I and his leather-faced General Helmuth von Moltke. 'March apart, strike together,' was his credo: three Prussian armies came from different directions, to the bafflement of the Austrians and the Saxons.

Things got going on July 3, 1866. The different sides lined up in the open field – the town of Königgrätz was a long way from the tumult – a trumpet sounded, and a murderous clanging of weaponry began and lasted till evening, when messengers on horseback appeared with white flags and the horrors were over. A single day. That was it. At least that was how 'the greatest battle of the century', as it has since come to be known (the Prussians won), was told in Liebig's meat extract pictures.

There was great agitation at I.G. Klamroths. The kingdom of Hanover had sided with Austria against Prussia, and relations between Prussian Halberstadt and Nienburg in Hanover were bad. Banks had stopped credit, imports from England were being held on the River Weser, trains weren't allowed to cross the border, which was guarded with great suspicion by the Cuirassiers of Halberstadt. Louis and young Gustav walked about with concerned expressions, while packages for Bohemia were assembled at the company's headquarters, and the family picked rags for lint. But then Hanover was swallowed up by Prussia, and soon everyone was friends again.

Bismarck's North German Alliance was formed, trade barriers fell – a blessing for business. Gustav made use of whatever could be used: steam-driven ploughs were brought in, there was a steam-thresher, Gustav's wife Anna was given – long before it turned into an industry – a mechanical sewing machine. But Gustav was useful to

others, too: in 1867 he became a town councillor, and remained so until 1904. He oversaw the foundation of the Halberstadt Chamber of Commerce, and became its second chairman. He represented the interests of Halberstadt in the provincial parliament and the provincial council, and he was an active member of the National Liberal Party, for many years one of Bismarck's chief parliamentary supports.

Gustav donated stained-glass windows to the reformed Liebfrauenkirche in Halberstadt, and a magnificent banner to the local grammar school, the Königliches Domgymnasium. He bought a large plot of land for a new imperial post office, donated a convalescent home to what would later become St Cecilia's convent, and financed the building of the infant school. He was on the committee of the 'Fatherland Women's Association' – what was he doing there? – the 'Shelter to Home' Association – whatever that was – and the Halberstadt Art Society. For the company's 100th anniversary in 1890, the town was given 30,000 marks to establish a 'Klamroth Memorial Foundation' for distressed businessfolk, and Gustav was awarded the title of 'Königlicher Kommerzienrath', or 'Councillor of Commerce'.

He was a very kind man. Even the late photographs showing him as a patriarch, taken around the turn of the century, give a sense of the warmth that he radiated around his wife and the five surviving children. In Gustav's accounts you constantly come across special gifts, presents and rewards for the company employees and the family's domestic staff. There was always some member of the extended family who was ill, and Frau Anna describes her husband wandering comfortingly around the house at night with babies in his arms. Two of the couple's sons died very young, and in Gustav's household accounts book I found an entry for 1868, under the heading 'miscellaneous', mentioning 2 thaler 15 silver groschen for a child's coffin. The cross for Johannes Gottfried's grave cost 25 thaler.