

Fühlung:
On a Cache of Family Photos

CHRISTOPH IRMSCHER

I HAVE NEVER seen myself as someone who would spend time on those sites that allow you, with a few mouse clicks, to find copies of the documents your ancestors kept in trunks or drawers or had long ago lost: a marriage certificate, an application for a passport, immigration forms. But my grandfather's old desk, which I now own, contained such documents galore, in the original, along with account books and wallets filled with coins in a currency no one remembers, combs with missing teeth, and a variety of pocketknives. When I cleared it out to get it ready for its transatlantic journey, I also found hundreds of photographs I had never seen before, stuffed into tattered envelopes or imperfectly glued into old, disintegrating albums, captions supplied in white pen, in my grandfather's careful, spidery script, the handwriting of an accountant, the first in his family to have made it beyond a tenth-grade education.

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I look at these old, black-and-white portraits of people I never knew and feel mystified by my connection to them: stiffly they sit, in their Sunday best, staring at the camera, their hands, not used to being idle, awkwardly folded in their laps, indicating, in body posture and facial expression, that this is something they are not used to doing, that they don't much enjoy being at the center of someone else's attention. The men wear their beards proudly, as if this were an area of principal achievement for them; the women sit and wait. I am descended from these people, and they seem stranger to me than the neighbor next door. There are some official photos, too, made for passports perhaps or, more plausibly (since my folks had no reason to travel far), for driver's licenses. One or two of the latter have survived

as well, so old that they are still handwritten, the fading faces of their owners, eyes wide open, hair moistened and combed back, frozen in a permanent grimace, the whole display distorted by the photographer's bright flash when they had suddenly remembered, almost too late, to sit straight for the camera.



They weren't writers, my people. Some scattered letters have been preserved—family news, requests for money, accounts of illnesses or death—a ramshackle archive that carries little of interest to outsiders. Theirs were no stories of heroism or hardships overcome, just the ordinary troubles and obstacles of life, worries about health, money, and children, the circle of life eventually ending, as it was meant to, where it began. Perhaps this is why my thoughts keep going back to someone who was a little different from the rest, my Onkel Fritz or “Fred” (as he would come to call himself) Klavehn, who in 1927 left the small village near Magdeburg in central Germany where he was born and, along with his wife Ilse (“Elsie,” in her American life), emigrated to the United States. A slight man with a puckish, memorably triangular face, Fred looms large, much larger than life, in my imagination. He was the one among my parental ancestors who went elsewhere, as I would too so many years later; he was the one who stayed there, as I did. But, it must be said, he left few tangible traces. His sister Käthe, my grandmother, saved a few of his letters, written with cheap ballpoint pen on small, lined sheets of thin airmail paper. A disintegrating album contains some pictures of him as a child, a boy with a bad haircut in a kind of sailor suit, his shoulders pulled up high so it seems as if he didn't have a neck, leaning against a brick wall in the small town where everything except the children seemed to be old. In one of the pictures, he is next to his older brother, a fair-haired boy who had no idea, of course, that not long after he would die on a battlefield in France, in a war he didn't understand and likely did not want to be in either. Men in my family aren't fighters; if there's anything they care about, it's being left to their own devices. Private Fritz Klavehn was drafted too; there's no record of how he

served, apart from some awkward shots of him wearing a uniform, in which he looks like an overgrown child playing dress-up.



Later in life, Fred would love having his picture taken. The snapshots from his American life are a relief from the grimmer family portraits of the past. Taken with a cheap Kodak, they are oases of color in a sea of black and white. Many of them feature Fred posing next to his stuff—a gramophone, a house (Fred's pointing proudly at the street number sign next to his door), his kitchen, a series of cars. In one of them he is sitting in a dry-docked motorboat—I doubt that it was his own, but one never knows.

Fred had always liked machines. It appears that he was a bit of a wild man, too. Early photographs show him riding a motorcycle or hanging out with the other members of his local motorcycle club. Elsie appears in at least some of them. For example, in a faded custom postcard (these were quite popular in the 1920s, when photographers had figured out how to develop a negative onto special paper with postcard backing), she's sitting behind Fred on his bike, wearing the classic leather cap with goggles, as he does, too. She looks sturdy, capable, and cheerful. You get a clear sense here—hidden in most other photographs, where Fred makes a point of kneeling or sitting—that Elsie was taller than Fred. The kickstand of Fred's bike is down, so they're not in motion, which is what Fred might have preferred, although such a shot would have been beyond the photographer's capabilities. Yet there's nothing fake about the emotion portrayed in that image. "Ilse & Fritz," my grandfather had written on the back, in pencil: this is how they had chosen to be viewed by their relatives.



With his brother-in-law Fred started a small business involving horse-drawn wagons that delivered grain and animal feed, but his heart wasn't in it. In the spring of 1927, Fred and Elsie had had enough—what precisely triggered their decision to emigrate, I don't know, except that their reasons were likely very different from



mine. Had the beginning economic recession hit their small corner of the country? In August the Nazis held their third mass rally in Nuremberg; Hitler, addressing the crowds, vowed that under his leadership Germans would be reunited and all foreigners expelled. The political sympathies of my ancestors—tradesmen, workers, sharecroppers—gravitated toward the left of the political spectrum, and Fred was likely no exception. He wasn't taking any chances on the new Germany, and he seems to have had no regrets about leaving things behind. Besides, he simply wasn't cut out to be a *Gelehrter* (scholar) or *Kaufmann* (merchant), he wrote to his sister when he was already an old man, still blaming his parents for having tried to force him into a profession that wasn't for him. America, where he could work with his hands, had been good to him.

Fred probably was at best a lukewarm partner in the little company he had helped found. It still exists today, and ironically it still carries his name, next to that of his brother-in-law. On their homepage they mention owning twenty-five trucks—not a small feat given the volatility of the East German economy after unification.





Fred and Elsie settled in Chicago, where he first worked as an automobile painter in a Chrysler dealership and then, in a somewhat mystifying career shift for a guy who liked motorcycles, as a garment presser for Marshall Field's department store, where Elsie was already employed. When Fred and Elsie retired, they moved to Florida, not to anything grand but to life in an apartment co-op in Naples, where it seems they got washed out by Hurricane Donna in 1960 (he kept a large, commercial photograph documenting the devastation). Eventually, they purchased a mobile home in Sarasota, a retirement community so tidily organized that it appears to have come out of a catalogue. Why they moved to that place, I don't know. It cannot have been the fear of hurricanes that drove them there, because these had been a fact of life in Sarasota for as long as people in the area have kept records.

In a 3 x 5 snapshot taken in his little front yard (likely from his doorway, so he would be facing his home), Fred is posing next to a croton plant, radiating with pride of ownership. Had he grown that plant himself? When I first saw this picture, I was inexplicably moved by it. Fred is dressed the way old folks still like to dress today: comfortable, oversized pants pulled up way too high (curiously, he still looks like

the boy in the old photo), a neat, white, polyester short-sleeved shirt. His hair is shaved to a grey stubble. Fred's right hand has disappeared behind the plant, as if he were caressing its sharp, rough leaves, reaching deep into that outrageous yellow-green and flame-red jumble of leaves, as showy as he, in his department-store-bought clothes, is not. A man and his plant.



I didn't know yet that Fred was already alone when that picture was taken. What Fred and Elsie had planned to be a new phase in their life together ended before it began. The story, so ordinary that it reveals little of the terror they must have felt, is told in a few letters sent to Fred's sister. Elsie had been feeling out of sorts for a while. A dull back ache turned out to be something far worse. A surgical intervention failed: "They sewed me up again without doing anything," she complained to her sister-in-law. When the cancer spread, Fred and Elsie sought help from the local Christian Scientists. They were so convinced that this was the right way to go that they even found some Christian Science practitioners in Germany, near where my grandparents lived, and urged them to join, too. Elsie immediately reported feeling better. But then she didn't. Fred's next letter to Käthe was an account of her funeral. He included the printed program for the memorial service; it listed her date of birth but made no mention of her German birthplace. Fred (or the minister) had chosen words from Psalm 23 for the service: "thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over," words of gratitude for past happiness, no doubt. But Fred's cup was decidedly empty. She looked pretty in her coffin, he told his sister, in her good pink dress. In a rare moment of accidental poetry, he signed the letter, "Fritz der Einsame." Fred the Lonely One.



Fred's distress knew no bounds. Never much of a wordsmith, he struggled in his now-failing German and still less-than-perfect English to express what he felt. They had been everything to each

other, he wrote. We did everything “50-50,” he added, by which he presumably meant that they had always shared each other’s joys and burdens. His entire American life had been predicated on Elsie being there forever—their marriage, childless but not joyless, had helped both of them carry on. Now all seemed lost.

In photographs of Fred and Elsie together—on the beach, in their apartment in Chicago, in parks, or on the road, they look relaxed, comfortable with each other. There’s a snapshot from Christmas 1947, in which Elsie is sitting on the armrest of his chair, gently leaning into Fred. They weren’t particularly handsome people, and they weren’t young anymore either, but this is still an emotionally compelling portrait. It is obvious that they liked and depended on each other’s company: Fred’s open shirt, the tie draped loosely around his collar, holds the promise of gentle intimacy that Elsie’s demure apron still conceals. If they are posing here, they’re not putting a lot of effort into it. In fact, neither of them is even looking at the camera. I would like to think that, born and raised in the same small corner of Germany, they never had to struggle through the same trivial misunderstandings or make the effort to find their way through fraught and pathetically unfamiliar terrain that I, because I am married to an American and because I am the father of two American kids, have had to make for so long. It is the small, mundane, daily things that remind you of your persistent strangeness in another country—and, in my case, this isn’t, as it was for Fred and Elsie, a shared experience. After almost three decades of living here, I am still not used to having a top sheet under my duvet—it’s there because my wife prefers it, as she has every right to do, and because that’s the way most Americans seem to like it. I have no idea if Fred or Elsie had such a sheet—if they did, it would have been a joint decision to embrace a habit that would have seemed attractively different to both of them, at least initially: something that would have moved both of them just one little step closer to that elusive goal of becoming credible Americans.





Perhaps because he was alone now, Fred finally gave in to his sister's pleas to come and visit her in Europe for a week or two, a trip he could barely afford. Käthe thought he should move back permanently, now that Elsie was dead, but he was adamant that he couldn't: this would have been as bad as leaving her when she was still alive. "I hope you understand my *Fühlung*," he wrote to her, mixing the two languages. "We both loved each other very much." *Fühlung* is Fred's coinage—it's a mix of the German (*Gefühl*) and English words for feeling, a perfect summary of where he was in life: whatever was still German in him needed to be expressed within the structures of the American language that had by now become more familiar to him than his own native tongue.



Twice a year, on my grandmother's birthday and Christmas Eve, I would hear Fred on the phone, struggling to remember the words. Having an uncle in America did not mean much to me at that time. My parents had once taken me to a comedy, *Mein Onkel aus Amerika* (My Uncle from America), a wretched little affair that I didn't find very funny even then. The way I remember it now, it consisted of little



else but a string of jokes directed at the vulgarity of Americans. The main character chewed gum, put his feet on people's coffee tables, spoke too much and too loudly and with a horrific accent, interspersing German words with phrases such as "by golly" and "geez." Mark Twain without the irony. Such interpretations of American culture didn't appeal to me. But I was interested in their cars, which I imagined to be as big as boats, rocking slightly as they made their way west on impossibly wide and long multilane highways. I know many of them from a card game I owned as a child. Uncle Fred, old enough to remember the heyday of German car production, harbored a similar obsession with American mechanical ingenuity. There are almost more cars in his pictures than people, or more different ones at least, from a 1928 Star to a 1966 Plymouth Valiant, the belated American answer to the German Volkswagen. In one photograph, Fred is outside his home, which, come to think of it, is really a kind of vehicle too, albeit a stalled one, a structure that was once on wheels now made stationary. Standing in his small driveway, wearing an awful pair of vertically striped shorts, a yellow polo shirt, and white tennis shoes, he has positioned himself next to his Valiant, or is, rather, leaning against it, and he is reaching inside the car—it almost seems as if the man

and his car were holding hands. Yet, as Fred would have known too, his possessions, as proud as he was of them, were ephemeral ones; like him, they were not meant to endure. The letters he sent to his sister often contained requests for money—the lawnmower had broken and needed to be repaired, his dentures needed to be fixed, and so forth.



Last year, in my quest to find out more about Uncle Fred, I visited his retirement community in Sarasota. After we parked outside what had been his house—I had taken the address from one of the stickers on the airmail envelopes my grandmother had saved—the drapes on the window in the house next to his moved ever so slightly. We were being watched. When the current owner arrived and we showed him a photograph of Fred sitting at his table, in front of his store-bought ninetieth-birthday cake, he said that the table was still there. But he did not invite us in.

The irony of the term *mobile home* had never been so clear to me as it was here: these semipermanent houses were owned by people who probably knew that they would soon lose some of their own mobility, who depended on their cars or golf carts to take them to the grocery store or to visit friends at the other end of the “park.” What kind of a name was that anyway, “park,” applied to this universe of manmade things? Fred’s trailer was on Old Elm Street—but there were no elm trees in sight anywhere, and nothing was, of course, very old. But the street name might have conjured memories of the tree-lined streets in Althaldensleben, that small German village where Fred was born. I imagine that he must have found something weirdly appealing about living in a world that is so emphatically small, so carefully regulated, so purposely limited, a world in which the accidents of birth and nationality were normalized by the uniform structures of metal and cheap plastic people inhabited.

Fred had not expected to find himself alone, or to continue to live alone for as long as he actually did, but the community of strangers in which he found himself here would have allowed him to forget

that fact—no one had known Elsie for long enough to think of Fred mostly in association with her.



Looking around the park, I was struck by how low everything was. Even most of the palm trees seem to have consented to a general agreement to keep things to modest dimensions. So easily mimicked in plastic, these palms have something of an artificial quality anyway, partaking of the unreality of the trailers—houses that, to the ungenerous European observer at least, barely house anyone, houses that seem to be just one small step up from the campground. But the more time I spent here, the more I could see why Fred had liked it. Here he was the undisputed king of his small domain. His satisfaction with his life permeates the many snapshots neighbors took of him eating cake, bowling, or simply grinning at the camera. This was a good place to be for that last phase of one's life—no reminders here of the high-flying dreams of youth, a solid routine of activities (shuffleboard at 10 a.m., followed by pickleball, aquabells, community lunches and dinners, and, of course, church services) lending structure to each day, the difference between past, present, and future shrunk to the interval between the pool walk at 4:00 p.m. and a game of bingo at 6:00 p.m. The large outdoor pool, featured in a picture postcard Fritz had sent his sister, is still hopping today, and the people—women with big hair holding plastic martini glasses; men carrying their exposed bronzed bellies with misplaced pride—still look the way I think Fred's neighbors would have looked so many years ago.

I am not sure when the current miniature golf course was added, but I can picture Fred putt-putting there too, at ease in this artificial landscape decorated with exaggerated creatures that were intended to be funny allusions to the ocean nearby: a sea horse, a whale, an octopus, a sea monster of sorts. While the ocean theme made some sense at least, the campy castle that was also included didn't: a mix of Disney and crazy King Ludwig's Neuschwanstein palace, it would have suggested to Fred a fantasy version of a Germany that had never been *his*.



People die hard in my family, and they usually die worrying about what's going to happen to their things, to which they hold on (as I certainly try to do) for as long as they can. Illness often comes late to them, but when it does, it comes with a vengeance. My grandfather died when I was ten, sitting in his favorite green armchair at home. When I heard where he had died, I could think only of how uncomfortable I had always found that chair, the rough fabric taut over the horsehair that had been stuffed into it. The day before, he had told me never to look at the sun directly, because it would make me blind. The morning after, something in his chest exploded; blood was coming out of his mouth and nose, I heard, and he was dead in an instant. The next time I was in their apartment, I looked for stains on the floor but there weren't any. My beloved grandmother, a short, dumpy, energetic woman with an impressively crooked nose, surprisingly agile despite constant and constantly increasing claims of bad health, survived her husband by more than two decades before she surrendered at last. I watched my father fade over a period of years, his knees giving out before Parkinson's got him and then, at the end, cancer. He, too, held on for a long time, becoming quieter as the months passed. The weaker he became, the more he resembled his mother. Fred was the only one I know of who had to face his end entirely alone, when he was nearly a century old. Surely he must have noticed when his urine had turned the color of Coca-Cola. But he didn't tell anyone until he was so sick that his neighbors (who called us to share the details) took him to a hospital. It was too late. After he had slipped away, the same neighbors sold his trailer. They did save a few of Fred's personal things, among them an Iron Cross Second Class from World War I, blackened with age, without the ribbon it would have come with. For all I know, it might have been his brother's. Over five million of these crosses were given out, for a variety of reasons, including bravery in battle. Hitler got one, too. Fred had wrapped his in a piece of toilet paper.