VINTAGE

THE BONFIRE OF BERLIN

HELGA SCHNEIDER

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About the Book

Abandoned by her mother, who left to pursue a career as a camp guard at Auschwitz-Birkenau, loathed by her step-mother, cooped up in a cellar, starved, parched, lonely amidst the fetid crush of her neighbours, Helga Schneider endured the horrors of wartime Berlin. *The Bonfire of Berlin* is a searing account of her survival. The grinding misery of hunger, combined with the terror of air-raids, the absence of fresh water and the constant threat of death and disease served not to unite the tenants and neighbours of her apartment block but rather to intensify the minor irritations of communal life into flashpoints of rage and violence. And with Russian victory the survivors could not look forward to a return to peacetime but rather to pillage and rape. It was only gradually that Schneider's life returned to some kind of normality, as her beloved father returned from the front, carrying his own scars of the war. This shocking book evokes the reality of life in a wartime city in all its brutality and deprivation, while retaining a kernel of hope that while life remains not all is lost.

About the Author

Helga Schneider was born in Steinberg (now in Poland, then in Germany) but spent her childhood in Berlin, where she was raised by her stepmother after being abandoned by her mother. She has lived in Bologna, Italy, since 1963, and is the author of *Let Me Go*.

Also by Helga Schneider

Let Me Go

Helga Schneider

THE BONFIRE OF BERLIN

TRANSLATED FROM THE ITALIAN BY
Shaun Whiteside

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‘Adolf Hitler is nothing but a vain bohemian from the streets. That people should be afraid of him is something that is really beyond my understanding.’

President Hindenburg on the occasion of a meeting between General Schleicher and the Bishop of Münster, 4 February 1931

Vienna, spring 1971

We hurried up the stairs of the old Viennese building, my heart thumping so hard that I couldn't ring the bell. Renzo, my son, rang it for me.

I had been looking for her for a long time. Now, thirty years after she had abandoned me in a Berlin already traumatised by war, I had found my mother again; she was back in Vienna, her home-town.

As for myself, I'd been born in Poland, I'd lived in Nazi Germany and been repatriated to Austria (also the country where my father had been born), and now I was settled in Italy; I had a husband and a son.

When the door opened, I saw a woman who looked strikingly like me. I gave her a tearful hug, overwhelmed by happiness and disbelief, and ready to understand, to forgive, to let bygones be bygones.

She immediately started talking, talking about herself. There was no attempt to justify her abandoning of me, no explanation of any kind.

She told me her story. Many years previously, she had been arrested in Birkenau concentration camp, where she had been a warder. She had been wearing an impeccable uniform 'that suited her terribly well'. Before twenty minutes had passed, she was opening a horrible wardrobe to show me, nostalgically, that very uniform. 'Why don't you try it on? I'd like to see it on you.' I didn't try it on; I was confused and upset. But what she then said was even worse, a denial of her role as a mother: 'I was condemned by the Nuremberg Court to six years' imprisonment as a war criminal, but none of that matters anymore. With Nazism I was somebody. Afterwards I was nothing.'

My blood froze. If she, in 1941, had decided that she didn’t want her daughter, it was my turn not to want my mother! My son and I took the first train back to Italy. Renzo wept with disappointment. How could I explain why I hadn’t found a mother, and he hadn’t found a grandmother? He was only five years old.

So I lost my mother for the second time.

I don’t know if she’s still alive. Every now and again people ask me whether I’ve forgiven her.

I

Berlin, autumn 1941

MY MOTHER WAS a blonde woman who shouted *'Sieg Heil'* whenever Adolf Hitler appeared at rallies. Sometimes she brought me along, and one day I got lost in the crowd, finding myself alone when the square had emptied. My grandmother told me the story often, her words heavy with the hatred she felt for her daughter-in-law.

When my brother, Peter, was born, my mother discovered she had chosen the wrong career. Having convinced herself that serving the Führer's cause was more honourable than raising her own children, she abandoned us in a flat in Berlin-Niederschönhausen and enlisted in the SS. It was the autumn of 1941; the German forces were suffering badly on the Russian front.

We were taken in by Aunt Margarete, my father's sister. My father had left for the front some time before. Aunt Margarete lived in a villa in Berlin-Tempelhof, had a daughter, Eva, and was married to a count who was off fighting in the war as well.

At my aunt's villa, food rationing was unknown; the table was always groaning with *foie gras*, canapés, various kinds of sausage, apple juice and fresh bread. I often stuffed myself until I could eat no more, only to throw it all up again, to my aunt's great consternation. I was four years old, my brother, Peter, nineteen months.

One day Aunt Margarete sent two cablegrams: one to my father, informing him of his wife's desertion, news that gave him an attack of jaundice; the other to our paternal

grandmother, who immediately put my father's elder sister in charge of her already impoverished farm and rushed from troubled Poland to equally troubled Berlin.

My grandmother arrived smelling of poultry and aniseed biscuits, deposited her suitcase and her umbrella by the empty swimming pool, cast a withering glance at the liveried butler with his Hitler moustache who was fawning on my aunt with ludicrous zeal, and started swearing like a trooper. Calling my mother a *Nazihure*, a Nazi whore, she considered our fate. She had clear ideas about what should happen to us.

Aunt Margarete was willing to bring up Peter and me along with Eva, but my grandmother was having none of it. Worried that her daughter would turn us into two little manikins, she insisted on taking us to Poland. The two women had a heated conversation beside the pool. Soon another cablegram made its way to the front, but it was my father's view that we should stay in Berlin. So our grandmother settled with Peter and me in the Niederschönhausen flat to await developments. She eradicated all traces of my mother, as though the house had been infested with plague. However, she found a way to renew her memory every day by talking about her in unrepeatable terms, adding fresh hatred to old rancour.

Grandmother was both loving and severe. She punished me without hesitation whenever I told lies, and I told them often. I liked to go around saying, for example, that my father was a famous General, while in reality he was only a soldier in an anti-aircraft division, and furthermore he was a fervent antimilitarist. An Army career had always been the least of his ambitions. His presence in Berlin had a great deal to do with the fact that his sister Margarete lived there; being so well connected, it seemed likely that she would be able to open a few doors for him. He had found himself involved in the war in spite of himself, due to the German annexation of Austria. Having been born in

Vienna, he was irritated at having to wear the uniform of the *Wehrmacht*, though such sentiments were not openly expressed in those days.

My lie about my father the General was the product of a need to overcompensate. I had been deprived of maternal warmth, and although I loved my grandmother very much, I had focused my entire being on my father. But as he was far away, it was essential for me to create a fantasy substitute for myself. That is why I devised the legend of my father the General, a fantasy that gave me great consolation, particularly when other people expressed their admiration for this 'hero of the Fatherland'! Who could command greater respect than a brave General fighting to save the German people from Bolshevism?

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In Niederschönhausen there was a cobbled yard called the Böllerhof. Our grandmother took us there to play. All the children loved her for her cheerfulness. She had a vivid imagination and a rather girlish manner. She was always making up new games, allowing us to forget the war for a while. She would sing in Polish, and we would listen with delight even if we didn't understand a word. In that bare yard she sang and danced, moving with grace, with an innocent, traditional spontaneity; everyone loved her, and I was sometimes jealous of her. But often, in the middle of her performances, the sirens would scream, and we would have to run to the shelter in the cellar. The spell would be broken.

Grandmother was fat and poetic, and blessed with a keen intelligence. She listened to the BBC in secret and told us about the course the war was taking, although Peter and I didn't understand what she was talking about. We knew only that war meant hunger, sirens, fear and bombs. To help us go to sleep, Grandmother told us fairy-tales from

the Black Forest in a mixture of German and Polish. Her voice gave us the reassurance we so badly needed.

Early in the summer of 1942, my father came to Berlin on leave, and Aunt Margarete gave a little party in his honour. The guests included a beautiful young woman called Ursula. At the party Peter and I ate our fill of canapés. Peter threw up twice; I got hiccups. My cousin Eva looked at us as though we were two Cinderellas she was ashamed of. Eva's vanity made me feel inferior, and I was happy that we hadn't ended up living with her.

That evening, between one mouthful and the next, I noticed that my father was spending a lot of time with Ursula. She was flirting with him, and he was flirting back! I felt embarrassed and curious at the same time. What was going on?

The only thing that cheered me up when the party came to an end was the hope that my father would never see Ursula again.

During the days that followed, I managed to spend some time with him, but something was wrong. I found him reserved and distant, and began to feel uneasy. He only had three days' leave; then he returned to the front.

I was confused.

My father, slim and handsome, with his high forehead and wavy hair, his thoughtful artist's expression as he absorbed colours, sounds and emotions – my father, with his considered gestures, his low, seductive voice – had nothing at all to do with the heroic General of my imagination, so it was difficult for me to reconcile him with my ideal.

Meanwhile the war had been growing more and more intense; as air-raids became more frequent, food supplies dwindled. Grandmother often returned from the shops empty-handed, and when that happened all we had for dinner was a glass of water. To make us forget our hunger, she would tell us fairy-tales or sing us Polish peasant songs.

One morning she began cursing loudly and broke a beautiful gilded coffee-pot. Hurling it to the kitchen floor, she shouted, ‘What an idiot! What a fool!’ My father had written to tell her that he had got engaged to Ursula. After their meeting at Aunt Margarete’s villa, they had corresponded, and now they had decided to marry. My grandmother was beside herself. ‘For heaven’s sake!’ she yelled. ‘Just a year ago your father was devastated when that good-for-nothing mother of yours abandoned him, and now he’s getting ready to marry again! What an idiot! What a fool!’

She couldn’t get used to the idea. She said that Ursula was too young to take on two children who were not her own, and where she had previously spoken of my mother in the most appalling terms, she now lambasted my father for having sought consolation so quickly. All her indignation counted for nothing. The two love-birds had already set a date for their wedding.

When Grandmother realised there was nothing to be done, she packed her suitcase, grabbed my grandfather’s umbrella like a bayonet and set off for Poland, swearing that she never wanted to see her son again, let alone his new bride. Poor Grandmother, she had so looked forward to raising us.

Once Grandmother had gone, I felt lost. She had given us love and joy and, in spite of the war, a sense of security. I was inconsolable and hated Aunt Margarete for bringing my father and Ursula together. We were parked once more at the Tempelhof villa to allow the newlyweds to spend a brief honeymoon in Ursula’s rented flat in Friedrichsruher Strasse in Berlin-Steglitz. I tried to suppress the pain of separation from my grandmother by filling myself up with food. I ate and threw up while Eva looked on in disgust.

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It was September. Life at the villa continued as usual. The deaf-mute gardener went on pruning the hedges, and the war seemed only to concern people unfortunate enough to live beyond the big gate capped by the family crest.

Eva was unbearable. Possessive of her dolls, she would not let me touch them under any circumstances. Apart from that, she affected such exaggerated aristocratic manners that I laughed until I was fit to burst.

Aunt Margarete was tall, slim, austere and very beautiful. She had magnificent red hair and splendid skin, white and transparent, with a scattering of pale freckles. She was extremely elegant and wore hats with little veils. When she kissed us goodnight, I could smell a faint perfume that lingered in the room until morning. Three years later, sad to say, she would kill herself with Veronal. I never knew why. My grandmother was given to understand that her daughter had died of pneumonia.

Peter was a terrible child and kept everyone on edge. On two occasions he threatened to throw himself into the empty swimming-pool, and on another he swallowed a little chocolate made of porcelain which gave him a terrible stomach-ache. Not a day went by when he wasn’t up to some mischief or other.

After this short honeymoon, my father returned to the front, and we went to live with our stepmother in Friedrichsruher Strasse. I was troubled and anxious. The war was worsening rapidly. Air-raids were becoming more frequent and intense, and Ursula complained of the lack of safety in our cellar. On top of that, it was becoming increasingly difficult to find provisions: rationing was not working, and all the shops were empty. You couldn’t find as much as a ball of thread. Old people were dying because of the growing scarcity of food and medicines, particularly those for serious illnesses.

At first Aunt Margarete would send her chauffeur over with a food parcel every now and again, but soon she

stopped doing that: even at the villa, things weren't going as well as they had been. Ursula maintained her youthful and carefree appearance despite the fact that she was growing thinner before our eyes. She had beautiful ash-blonde hair and eyes bluer than Peter's! My brother would sniff her shoes or kiss her on the chin, and she would laugh and pinch his bottom. In the wink of an eye he had begun to call her Mutti, something I was incapable of doing. The word stuck in my throat. I could say Wutti, or Lutti, or Butti, but Mutti was impossible. This was the first in a long series of difficulties.

I soon came to realise that Ursula employed a double standard when dealing with Peter and with me. Whenever he did something wrong, she found an excuse, as often as not his tender age. When I did something wrong, she would declare that I was my mother's daughter. She criticised Grandmother's way of raising us, saying it was too permissive. I didn't agree; Grandmother had been anything but permissive. Maternal and fair but never weak.

Some of Ursula's attitudes alarmed me. If I did something wrong, I would stammer, 'But I thought …'; she would interrupt me, shouting, 'You're not supposed to think, you're supposed to obey!' My blood would go cold. Obeying without thinking: I couldn't accept such an order from anyone!

She couldn't bear to be contradicted, either. And when I stood my ground, she punished me. Blind German submission was an absolute for her.

Her chosen place of punishment was the study where my father kept his things: his books, his typewriter, his canvases and his paints. In time I came to hate that studio, filled though it was with traces of him. Apart from being locked in that room, I was given other punishments as well, some of which were truly oppressive. For example, Ursula demanded that I pick out the fluff from the precious Persian carpet she had brought as part of her dowry; she made me

stay on my hands and knees until even the tiniest hair was gone. Sometimes I had to continue until the dust gave me a coughing fit.

Another thing Ursula wouldn't put up with was my innocent lie about my father the General. One day she caught me repeating it to Frau Gerlinde, a friend of hers who lived on the same floor and who sometimes dropped in for a chat. My stepmother had gone to fetch Frau Gerlinde a glass of water, and as she came back into the room she caught me telling my fairytale. She interrupted me roughly, shouting, 'That fib again! You really are incorrigible! You're just like your mother, a fake and a liar!' Then she announced in an authoritarian voice, 'Your-father-is-in-the-anti-aircraft-division, say "anti-aircraft" after me, foolish girl!'

'It's not true!' I cried, shaking with humiliation. 'My father is a famous General!'

'He's in the anti-aircraft division, I tell you!' she shrieked, red with fury.

'He's a General!'

Then she started to slap me in front of Frau Gerlinde, repeating that I was just like my mother. Finally she sent me to the study with the peremptory declaration 'No dinner for you tonight!'

There was one other thing she couldn't bear; the fact that, at the age of five, I was still sucking my thumb. She tried everything she could think of to break my habit: sprinkling my finger with salt, then with perfume, then with turpentine, half a bottle of which she had found in my father's studio. Having run out of unpleasant concoctions, she took to striking my thumb with a variety of objects: wooden spoons, a letter-opener, the handle of the carpet-beater.

One day she struck me so violently that I almost fainted from the pain, but instead I bit her on the wrist and fled to the bathroom and locked myself in. She started knocking

furiously at the door, threatening me with a variety of punishments if I didn't open up straight away, but I refused to do so, fearing that she might kill me. Crouching under the window, I waited to see what would happen.

Ursula went on knocking and threatening but in the end was obliged to call someone to force the door. I heard a lot of fussing around the lock until it gave and my stepmother burst in like a Fury. She grabbed me by the hair and hit me in front of the person who had helped her to open the door, a bent and emaciated old man with a bald head who gave me an awkward smile of solidarity.

When the old man had gone, Ursula dispatched me to the study as usual, with a series of kicks to the bottom, denying me, as she always did, my food ration. Towards evening, by now crazed with hunger, I became enraged. I started to search for something on which I could vent my rage. Finally my eye fell on some little tubes of paint lined up on a small wicker table; at the same time I noticed a canvas on an easel. It showed an interior with a bowl full of apples, pears, grapes and other fruits with which I was unfamiliar.

I picked up a tube, unscrewed the cap and, with my fingers, smeared the entire contents over the canvas, obliterating pears, apples, grapes and exotic fruits and reducing the whole thing to formless, dark brown mud. When my stepmother saw the destruction, she nearly strangled me. She broke a coat-hanger over my bare bottom and shouted, 'What else could anyone expect of the daughter of a Nazi whore?'

She shouldn't have said that! From that day onwards, our relationship became one of open hostility. I began to think about how I could avenge myself.

One morning Ursula went out shopping: someone had said there was more to buy than usual, including potatoes and molasses. She left Peter and me in the care of Frau Gerlinde.