



VINTAGE

LET ME GO

HELGA SCHNEIDER

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About the Book

When Helga Schneider was four, her mother, Traudi, abandoned her to pursue her career. In 1998, Helga received a letter asking her to visit Traudi, then 90 years old, before she died. Mother and daughter had met only once after Traudi left, on a disastrous visit where Helga first learnt the terrible secret of her mother's past.

Traudi was an extermination guard in Auschwitz and Ravensbruck and was involved in Nazi 'medical' experiments on prisoners. She had never expressed even the slightest remorse for her actions, yet Helga still hoped that at this final meeting she would find some way to forgive her mother.

About the Author

Helga Schneider was born in Steinberg, then in Germany, now in Poland, and spent her childhood in Berlin where, after being abandoned by her mother, she was raised by her stepmother. Since 1963 she has lived in Bologna.

ALSO BY HELGA SCHNEIDER

The Bonfire of Berlin

To Daniela

Let Me Go

Helga Schneider

Translated from the Italian by
Shaun Whiteside

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

‘The feeling of hatred has always been alien to me.’

Rudolf Höss, commandant of the Auschwitz death
camp

Vienna, Tuesday 6 October 1998, in my hotel

TODAY, MOTHER, I am going to see you for the first time in twenty-seven years, and I am wondering whether in all that time you have ever understood how much damage you did to your children. I didn't sleep a wink last night. It's almost daylight now; I've opened the shutters. A smoky veil of light is brightening above the roofs of Vienna.

I'm going to see you again today, mother, but what will I feel? What can a daughter feel for a mother who refused to be a mother, so that she could become a member of Heinrich Himmler's evil organisation?

Respect? Only for your age - nothing else. And apart from that?

It would be hard to say that I don't feel anything. You're my mother, after all. But I can't say it will be love. I can't love you, mother.

I'm in a state of agitation, and in spite of myself I'm thinking about our last meeting, in 1971, when I saw you again for the first time in thirty years, and I shudder to remember my dismay upon discovering that you had been a member of the SS.

And you hadn't even shown any remorse. You were still perfectly content about your past, about what you had been, about that efficient factory of horrors where you had been a model worker.

It's seven o'clock, a pale sky; it's going to rain. And I'm going to see you today, mother, for the second time since you abandoned me, fifty-seven years ago: a lifetime. I'm becoming aware of a sense of bitter excitement, of impatience. Because in spite of everything, you're still my mother.

What will we say to each other? What will you say to me? Will I find any trace in you of regret for what we've never had? Will you have that motherly caress for me, the one I've spent more than half a century waiting for? Or will you torment me once more with your indifference?

In 1971 I was living in Italy and had a little son, Renzo; all of a sudden I felt an uncontrollable need to track you down. I found you. And I hurried to Vienna with my son to hug you again. But you treated that grandson of yours, that boy who looked at you with such keen curiosity, with frosty detachment, denying him the right to a grandmother, just as you had denied me my right, in the end, to have a mother. Because you didn't want to be a mother. Ever since we were born, you always entrusted me and my brother Peter to other people. And yet in the Third Reich, motherhood was obsessively praised, particularly by the Propaganda Minister, Josef Goebbels.

Even Heinrich Himmler, the Reichsführer of the SS, your boss, mother – maintained that there was one principle that his members must unfailingly obey: honesty, loyalty and fidelity towards people with the same blood as oneself. Did your children not share your blood?

No, you didn't want to be a mother; you preferred power. Faced with a group of Jewish prisoners you felt omnipotent. A guard in charge of famished, exhausted and desperate Jews, heads shaved, eyes vacant – what a despicable kind of power, mother!

I stare at Vienna's inhospitable sky, and find myself being filled with an impulse to rebel: I regret replying so diligently to the call of a stranger. I should have ignored it, I tell myself; I should have let things drift along as they have for the last thirty years.

I was too hasty in deciding to leave.

The letter had arrived one day in late August, and for some strange reason it had filled me with apprehension

even before I opened it. What on earth could be inside that disgusting pink envelope? I wasn't expecting any post from Vienna. I had left the city in 1963, and from then on I had lost all contact with my old friends.

The writer of the letter was a woman called Gisela Freihorst, who said she had been a dear friend of my mother. That was how I learned that my mother was still alive.

Yes, she was still alive, but she had recently been transferred to a *Seniorenheim*, an old people's nursing home. Her condition was deteriorating: she would leave her house and get lost, she would forget to turn off the water, or, even worse, the gas, and risk blowing up the entire building. All in all, as they say in such cases, she had become a danger to herself and to other people.

At first she had been looked after by her local mental health service: she had to attend the day hospital for the elderly three times a week, and the rest of the time she was visited by various kinds of social worker. She always sent them away with a flea in their ear; clearly the years had done nothing to sweeten her character, which had always been suspicious, confrontational and rebellious. But in the end the decision had been taken to remove her from her flat and place her in an environment where she could be monitored day and night.

'Your mother is approaching the age of ninety,' the letter concluded, 'and she could pass away from one day to the next. Why not consider the possibility of meeting her one last time? After all, she is still your mother.'

Those words, at once plain and bureaucratic, disturbed me profoundly. After my bruising encounter with my mother in 1971, I had buried her memory in a dark recess of my mind. For many years I was convinced that my virtual burial of her had somehow become real. I imagined my mother interred in one of those haunting cemeteries in Vienna, the city where both she and my father were born.

That same Vienna where I had lived as a girl, at school, lonely and resentful; the city that I had admired but never loved. Vienna with its ancient imperial pride; rigorous, polite, green, clean, frosty Vienna.

That Vienna which even today from a distance of twenty-seven years, I still observe with a kind of suspicious fascination.

And I had been fooling myself all along. That letter in its disgusting pink envelope dragged me out of my cosy conviction that my mother was dead, and that I would never again have to confront torments and pain on her account.

It is twenty past seven, and it's starting to drizzle. The gloomy sky is aggravating my unease.

I should have ignored the letter, I'm becoming more and more convinced of it. I would have been unsettled for several days, and then I would gradually have buried it along with all the rest, slipping once more towards some semblance of tranquillity. And yet I didn't. I allowed myself to be overwhelmed by the news, by Frau Freihorst's sad words. Or perhaps it was just my own curiosity: what would my mother look like today?

Or was it rather a small and foolish hope that was awakening in me? Perhaps she would have changed; perhaps her great age would have softened her heart; perhaps she would even be capable of some kind of maternal gesture. Curiosity, hope; and a kind of dark attraction. I had succumbed and, as though afraid of changing my mind, I had immediately informed Frau Freihorst of my impending arrival.

I'm going to see you again today, mother, and my heart is pounding. What am I going to say to you? And if, as happened in 1971, you only want to talk about yourself and your past? So gratifying to make yourself heard after the collapse of Nazism, as though you had been simply erased.