

## **Helga F. with Sabine Weigand**

### **Helga**

**Before there was a name for it**

**My journey from man to woman**

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Translated by Katy Derbyshire



Hermann 1951



Helga 2016

### **Prologue**

Nuremberg, summer 1936. A working-class area in the south of the city. A troop of Hitler Youths march along Haslerstraße in short dark trousers and brown shirts, led by a strapping blond boy in a

military cap. An old lady looks out of her window and waves down at them with a laugh. The lads strike up a song, the tune sounding out proudly: ‘I have gladly surrendered – my heart and soul and hand – to the land of love and life – oh, my German fatherland.’

Up on the second floor, in the bedroom of a small flat, a skinny five-year-old boy is standing naked in front of the mirror. He is clutching a razorblade stolen from the kitchen cupboard that morning.

Scraps of song reach his ears but he’s not listening. Instead, he’s immersed in his own reflection. He sees a pretty boy with a pale face, dark hair cropped above his ears, thin arms and legs. And between his legs he sees the thing that doesn’t belong to him. The thing that’s wrong about him, absolutely wrong.

He swallows. He takes his small limp penis in his left hand and pulls at it until the skin is smooth and straight. Then he positions the razorblade. A tiny movement – and he flinches, screams in surprise. Where the blade has nicked the skin, bright red blood flows, running down his thigh. It hurts so much. The boy starts crying, throws the razorblade aside and cowers on the floor, a bundle of misery.

This is the story of a very special life. The story of an unusual person. A person who was born in the wrong body, at a time when

there wasn't even a name for people like them.

A person who eventually summoned up the courage to take a risk barely conceivable back then: for an operation to change them from a man to a woman.

From Hermann to Helga.

## Nuremberg, 1931

I was an illegitimate child, born in Nuremberg on the 22nd of May 1931. Born out of wedlock, that's what they used to say in those days. My mother got mixed up with a fairground showman and he left her in the lurch with me in her belly. And then she didn't want me any more. Someone came from the authorities and registered the father's name and her marital status as unmarried, and she gave me away at the age of four weeks. That's the kind of mother she was. I often told myself she was just young and stupid, otherwise she wouldn't have gone with a man from the fair – everyone knew what rascals they were. Even later I never asked her why she didn't keep me, but by then I had a good guess why anyway.

My first foster parents were the Weidingers on Linnéstraße. They were a kind couple. I don't have many memories of them, I was very little, but Mother Weidinger was a good woman. Once she cut stars out of old paper bags and threw them out of the window down into the yard.

'Look, Hermann, wee stars have fallen from heaven,' she told me, 'you go and look where they landed.' Ah yes, I had it good there. But Mother Weidinger was soon too old, and perhaps she was sick. Either way, she couldn't look after me properly. And then I was sent to another family. I was four years old.

The other family was the Schmidts. He was a furrier by trade and his wife, we called her Schmidti, came from over in Hessen. They were Mormons but I didn't understand that at the time. It was the 'Third Reich' as they called it, and the Nazis were in power. They didn't even want Christianity, let alone Mormons, that's for sure.

The Schmidts also took in my brother Erwin. That was when I first met him – I didn't even know he existed before that. Erwin was born two years after me, from a different father. Our mother gave him away right off too, he was just as much in her way as I was, that's how I see it now. She was a brazen hussy, went with anyone and didn't care about her children. She wanted a cheap life.

Life with the Schmidts was hell. If it hadn't been for Erwin I don't know how I'd have survived. They treated the two of us like animals.

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I did know there were girls and boys and that they're different, just like all children know that. And of course I knew that girls don't have a peter. The other boys on Haslerstraße always used to tease Ida from the bar on the corner. 'We've seen your panties,' they'd chant when she bent over to hang up the washing. Then we all laughed and Ida chased us away with the carpet beater.

It never bothered me that Erwin had a peter. That was just how it was and how it was meant to be. It was different for me, though. It just didn't belong to me, somehow. I didn't want that stupid peter, it was wrong for it to be dangling off me like that. I don't know why but I always wanted to be round, down there. Just round. Back then it wasn't that I wanted to be a girl, directly. Just round, that was the idea. And the more I thought about it and looked down at myself, the more that horrible thing bothered me. I got more and more of an aversion to it, felt really disgusted. Well, and one day I thought, perhaps I can get rid of it. Cut it off, the way you slice up a sausage. So that morning, once Karl had left the house and our mother was making the beds, I went into the kitchen. I knew where the razorblades were, in the little cupboard over the sink, and I took one of them. I ran and hid it at the very back of my bedside table. And when mother popped out to the neighbour's with Erwin I crept into my foster parents' bedroom. It always smelled odd in there, kind of musty and sweet, and we weren't allowed in, it was strictly out of bounds.

I got undressed and stood in front of the wardrobe with the long mirror. It won't be a minute, I thought, and I'll be rid of the thing. I was so happy about it. I took my peter in one hand and pulled it tight, and I put the razorblade to it with my other hand. It was mighty sharp and it hurt like hell before I'd even cut it properly.

And it bled as well. I got such a shock that I burst out crying. Ow ow ow! I threw the blade away and squatted down on the lino. I took Karl's hankie, which I'd got all ready to wrap up my cut-off willy in, and dabbed away the blood. The pain passed, thank God. By the time Schmidt and Erwin got back I was dressed again. They couldn't see any difference but I was terribly disappointed that my plan hadn't worked out. I washed the razorblade and put it back in the cupboard, and I threw away the blood-stained hankie the next day when I took the rubbish down to the street. The dustmen took it all away and Schmidt never noticed that one of Karl's nose rags was missing.

So that was my first attempt. I was five years old at the time and I knew nothing at all about anything.

### **...Ten years later, 1946, in the countryside**

Oh, I couldn't get the dresses I'd tried on at a junk shop out of my head, all day and night. And after my confirmation I started thinking of them even more. It was getting clearer and clearer to me that I wanted to be a girl. And then one day I came across a trunk in the attic, containing Frieda and Gunda's old clothes. I just couldn't help taking out a flowery dress and hiding it underneath my mattress. So there it was, but for a long time I didn't dare put it

on, just touched it and stroked it over and over.

One night I finally stayed awake until everyone else was asleep. I slipped into the dress – it was almost too tight but it just about fit me. And then I crept out of the house in the middle of the night and walked around the sleeping village barefoot. What an incredible feeling! On the one hand I was really happy, and on the other hand I was terrified someone might catch me. Before it got light I went home, changed and got back into bed. And I kept on doing it, time and again. I just felt an irresistible urge. No one ever saw me. Only once, when Erwin woke up as I came home. But in the dark he didn't even notice I was wearing a dress. I told him I'd been to spend a penny – the privy was outside behind the manure pile – and he went right back to sleep.

I had no one I could have talked to about the way I was. I was all alone with my problem. I never even spoke to my brother about it because I was so ashamed to tell him. What would I have said? I had no idea what was wrong with me. But I knew it wasn't normal, oh no. And I knew boys didn't do that kind of thing. I knew it was all wrong, and a bad thing. I was so afraid of someone finding out what I did at night. How would I have explained it to anyone? I couldn't even explain it to myself. There was just something inside me and it was incredibly powerful. So I kept on telling myself, you



have to come to terms with your male body, there's no other choice. I was so unhappy I can't put it into words. The only time I felt good was on my walks. Nobody noticed that it was such a burden on my soul – it was my secret from the world.