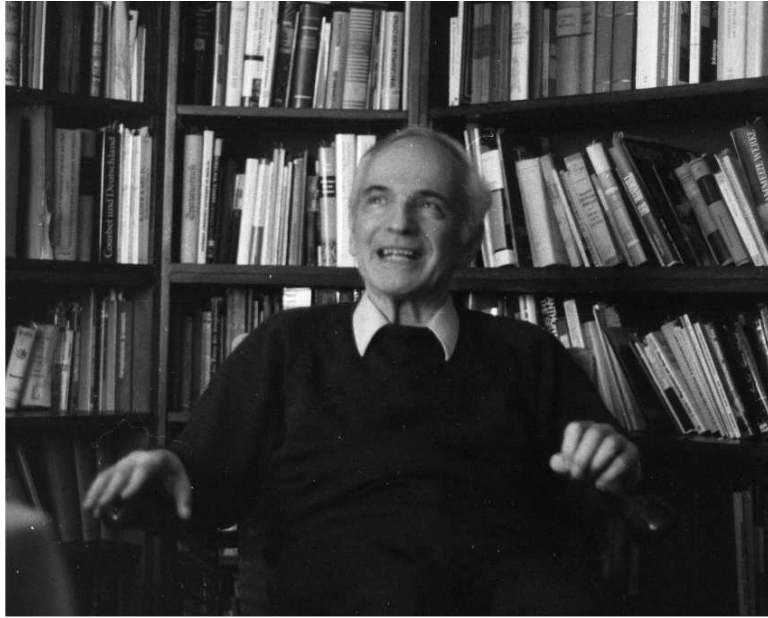


# Farewell to Kurt Wolfgang van der Walde

*(January 20, 1915 – May 27, 2003)*



My dear father,

It was your wish - as expressed in your last Will and Testament - to be laid to rest among only your family, without any funeral service. But you had forgotten how often you said of your dear friends that they were as close to you as your own family. Who, when not your family in spirit, has a rightful place at your side on your final journey in loving and respectful remembrance?

We are seated here together in a family celebration, in which we wish to remember you, dear father, Wolf, Kurt or Kuvo. We are thinking of you, as someone whom each of us has met and accompanied through one or more phases of your most varied life, glad and thankful to have known you. This is a solution which you would surely have approved of. It was my good fortune to have known you for the longest of all, and therefore I would like to tell your friends a little about you, about your life, your values, your actions and your being.

It began on January 20, 1915, in Posen (Poznan), then a part of Germany, in the birthplace of your mother Goldi. Who could have imagined at that time that many years later your application for immigration into the USA would be rejected as a "Pole"? Goldi travelled back with you to Hamburg, where you greeted your father Max on his return home from the war with "Good day, Uncle Papa!", so strange to you was the man in the Hussar's uniform. But that quickly changed; your father, who played the flute in a private chamber music quartet in his leisure time, occupied a large place in your heart.

You grew up in secure, bourgeois surroundings, in which one felt German but observed the high Jewish holidays within the family circle and in the synagogue, not too strictly but in

the traditional way. Your grandmother, who still wore a wig and ate kosher, had meanwhile also moved to Hamburg with her eldest son and lived directly opposite you in Haynstrasse, in Hamburg's Eppendorf district. With her, the centre of the family, you shared a special mutual affection, you were the apple of her eye, forgiving many a childish prank and trick. As a child you accompanied her on numerous family visits, and were delivered back home with the words: "The boy has peppered me with questions again!"

Yes, during your life you have asked many questions and searched for answers. Perhaps that is why you concerned yourself particularly intensively with philosophy, and discovered Humanism as your own universally applicable way of thinking, independently of the political theories which have occupied you during your life. Of these, Marxism was the one to which you felt closest.

But a lot of water had flowed under the bridge by that time! You took your bar mitzvah, which meant that at the age of 13 years you were accepted into the Jewish community as an adult. Your father sent you to the liberal synagogue, and your study of the Talmud impressed you so much that for a while you even wanted to become a rabbi.

That all changed abruptly in the year 1929 when you came into contact with the "Kameraden", a Jewish *Wandervogel* (rambling) organisation,<sup>1</sup> of which certain other young people from Haynstrasse were already members.

From 1931 you led your own group for the first time. Initially you went out by train, but after the Nazis came to power, in order to appear less in public, you cycled across the Elbe into less frequented districts where you were less likely to come under attack. So the Lüneburger Heide became a favoured area for rambling.

Through friends in the "Kameraden" you found your way to the Communist resistance movement.<sup>2</sup> In 1935 your name was already known to the Gestapo. A girl who felt compelled to name names under interrogation mentioned your name. She said she had met you at a Whitsun camp and could not imagine that you - of all people - would have any contact to Communists. The Gestapo conducted a house search in Haynstrasse. Your mother phoned you at your place of work. Terrified, you threw the leaflets which you were carrying with you into the river. At home you were interrogated by the self same Gestapo man who was to arrest you the following year, and who was naturally angry that you had previously slipped through his fingers.

At a very early stage you encountered two people who became very important to you: Rudi Mokry and Carlheinz Rebstock. Of Carlheinz you used to recount how thankful you were for the advice he gave you in the concentration camp. He had already been arrested on a previous occasion and had experienced the interrogation techniques. He said: "Don't listen

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<sup>1</sup> For a brief description of the Wandervogel see Wikipedia: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wandervogel>

<sup>2</sup> A detailed account of Kurt van der Walde's experiences in the Jewish youth movement and the Communist resistance in Hamburg in the 1930s, including an interview with him, can be found in Ursula Wamser & Wilfried Weinke, eds, "Eine verschwundene Welt: Jüdisches Leben am Grindel", Zu Klampen Verlag, Springe, 2006 (ISBN 3 934920 98 5), pp.266-272.

to what the SS say! Run straight up the stairs! Stand straight against the wall, with your hands at your side!”

You said of Rudi Mokry on many occasions that he saved your life.<sup>3</sup> During the trial the two of you were confronted with each other, with the intention of splitting the Jews from the Communists. Rudi simply said: “Oh, him! He’s got no idea about anything! He’s just an adventurer who was looking for a bit of excitement!” Your prison sentence was milder than expected; you were sentenced to two-and-a-half years in Fuhlsbüttel concentration camp, whereby the remand period was taken into account towards it.

From 1937 onwards, your mother tried to obtain a residence permit for you through relatives in the USA and England. She saved your life.

The British authorities delayed for a long time; only the November pogrom of 1938 (the so-called “Kristallnacht”) persuaded them to open their doors. The entry permit was granted in the middle of November. The Nazi authorities did not object, because in the period prior to the outbreak of war and the “Final Solution” their slogan was still: “Jews out!” Shortly before your release, your mother visited the Gestapo. The result of her “negotiation” was a deadline of three days to leave the country. By that time it was already common practice for prisoners to be immediately transported to a concentration camp on completion of their sentence.

Immediately before the pogrom, your father was warned by a policeman whom he knew: “On November 9, go away for the whole day!” Thus he was the only adult male in the family who was not arrested on that day. Goldi and your younger sister Vera, who slept at your grandmother Eugenie’s house opposite, met him every two hours at an appointed street corner to supply him with food, drinks and the latest news. On the morning of November 10, Max, already 58 years of age, was so exhausted that he decided to give himself up at the police station. He hoped that his Iron Cross, awarded for his service at the front in the First World War, would offer him a certain amount of protection. This was indeed the case, and he was allowed to go back home while the other men were only released from Buchenwald concentration camp six weeks later.

Goldi was anxious that you might have been removed to another concentration camp in the course of the pogrom activities, and she went to Fuhlsbüttel together with your sister to ask about you. You recalled being taken by surprise by your mother’s first remark on seeing you. She said: “Thank God you’re still here!”

On the day of your release from prison, Saturday December 10, 1938, there was a curfew for Jews! Your mother hired a taxi which waited at the gate. In the evening, one of the other families living in No.5 Haynstrasse invited all the Jewish residents of the house for a meal. Since your arrest, your parents had lived very retiringly and had little contact with the other residents. After all, their son had been arrested and sentenced as a criminal! But it seemed

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<sup>3</sup> Rudolf Mokry (1905-1944) was murdered by the Nazis at the Sachsenhausen concentration camp on 11.10.1944. Kurt van der Walde’s recollections of Mokry have been published online in German at the “Hamburger Bildungsserver”, <http://www.hamburger-bildungsserver.de/welcome.phtml?unten=/hamburg/nationalsozialismus/wilh-143.html>. A detailed article about Rudolf Mokry’s life can be found at <http://www.dok-barth.de/vvn/veroeff/faltblaetter/mokry.pdf>

that with the November pogrom it had become clear to all the residents that the day of reckoning had arrived. Although hardly anybody spoke to you and your prison sentence was not mentioned, your parents were given a place of honour and treated with special respect.

On Tuesday morning you took the first and only air flight in your life. That same evening the Gestapo called at your door to arrest you.

After some weeks in London you were allowed to travel on to Manchester, and it was there in May 1939 that you met Liesel. You had received the news from Hamburg that a young woman, very distantly related to you, was coming to bring you socks and presumably also a few valuables. She was feeling very unhappy and lonely, unable to speak a word of English.

In Hamburg Liesel had seen a picture of you, and commented to her sister Clärchen that she thought you looked dreadful. Her sister's reply was prophetic: "Wait and see. Maybe you'll marry him!" The appearance of the real Kurt turned out to be a very pleasant surprise.

You married in May 1940. Liesel worked as a housemaid for a Canadian factory owner who also gave you a job, namely as a diamond polisher. Throughout your life you were proud to have once belonged to the working class. The deep respect enjoyed at home by the term "worker" made such a strong impression on me that, as a child, it felt like the greatest of privileges to march on the May Day demonstration carried on the shoulders of a dock worker.

After only two months of marriage you were forced to separate. All Germans, refugees as well as Nazis, were interned by the British. You were sent to the Isle of Man, and it was far from certain whether you would ever see each other again, as Manchester was suffering heavy bombing raids. Only after Hitler Germany attacked the Soviet Union did the situation become a bit more relaxed. You were released, and you were finally able to begin your life together.

But you were haunted by fears for your relatives in Germany. There was Liesel's sister, for whom you hoped that her marriage to a non-Jew would protect her, and your family in Hamburg - parents, uncles, grandmother and sister - who, already evicted from their apartment, were waiting for deportation.

One of your mother's brothers, David Krombach, was a member of the committee of the *Centralverein deutscher Staatsbürger jüdischen Glaubens* (the central organisation of German Jewry).<sup>4</sup> He came into possession of two tickets for a sea voyage to Argentina for his sons Heinz and Ernst. But Ernst preferred to wait for the chance to emigrate to an English-speaking country, so David offered the ticket to Vera. She was thus saved. Ernst however did not make it into emigration. He was deported along with his parents and died a terrible death with them in the Izbica concentration camp. From the camp he had been able to write

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<sup>4</sup> David Krombach (1884-1942) was a respected and influential German-Jewish lawyer in Essen. Together with his wife and son he was murdered by the Nazis in Izbica concentration camp in May 1942. He is remembered on a memorial tablet in the foyer of the Landesgericht (District Court) at Schweigerstrasse 52, Essen, Germany. See: <http://www.jugend.essen.de/Gedenktafelplan/Ruettenscheid.htm>

moving letters to his emigrant girlfriend, and many years later these were handed over to his brother Heinz.<sup>5</sup> We have never shown you these letters, for fear that you would not be able to bear them.

Emil Krombach, Goldi's second brother, learned Spanish for the emigration at the Berlitz School. When attendance at the school was forbidden to Jews, he asked to be put in touch with a private tutor and thus came into contact with Enrique Vilar. This gentleman had been stuck in Hamburg with his sailing boat since the outbreak of war. The two of them struck up a friendship, whereupon Vilar contacted his embassy to obtain a certification from the Spanish government that his vessel, a fishing boat, was crucial to the war effort and should return urgently to Spain. Vilar presented this certification to the Gestapo, and stated that a Jewish family had declared itself willing to pay him the freight costs for his boat to be carried aboard a Turkish ship if they would also be permitted to travel with it. He may well have also expressed his willingness to carry out espionage in the Antilles; at all events, he obtained the exit permit. However it appears that the Gestapo did not quite trust him, and a Gestapo man, Döbler, was sent to keep an eye on him. But it turned out that this Döbler also had a serious interest in disappearing from Germany to Spain, where his non-Aryan girlfriend Carmen was waiting for him.

Your parents, grandmother and Uncle Emil obtained permits for a single journey by train to a port on the French Atlantic coast on the Bay of Biscay. There the family boarded Vilar's sailing boat to enter the Spanish port of San Sebastian where the voyage to Argentina was to begin. From July until November, eight persons lived in two cabins outside Spain's territorial waters. The Spanish authorities refused permission to land because no entry permits for Argentina had been granted, meaning that the onward voyage from Spain was not guaranteed. Vera, who was already in Argentina, only obtained these permits in November thanks to the intervention of her Belgian employer, who possessed the necessary "pull".

Finally, in December 1942, the family was able to embark on the "Capo De Hornas". Meanwhile, in England you were running around from pillar to post, trying to help your parents. You approached the Dean of Canterbury and the Foreign Secretary, Anthony Eden, but never received replies. Nevertheless some political movement apparently did take place. Eleanor Rathbone MP, a campaigner on behalf of refugees,<sup>6</sup> must have been active; it is likely that the Dean of Canterbury also took a hand. Eleanor Rathbone evidently mobilised the High Commissioner for Refugees in Geneva. There is also a presumption that the office of Admiral Canaris in the German *Abwehr* (military secret service) had knowledge of the events surrounding the family.<sup>7</sup> At all events, the Duke of Alba, the Spanish Ambassador in

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<sup>5</sup> The smuggled letters from Ernst Krombach (1921-1942) to his girlfriend Marianne Strauss represent a unique and tragic record of the conditions of Jewish extermination camp victims. The whole terrible story of Ernst Krombach and his family is recounted in Mark Roseman: "The Past In Hiding", Allen Lane The Penguin Press, London, 2000 (ISBN 0 713 99374 X), which also contains a photo of Ernst Krombach. There is an account available online at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/1775349.stm> and a review of Roseman's book at <http://www.dolphin.soton.ac.uk/July2001/hiding.html>

<sup>6</sup> Eleanor Rathbone (1872-1946), Independent MP for the Combined English Universities, warned the British public against the rise of Hitler in the 1930s and set up the Parliamentary Committee for Refugees in 1939.

<sup>7</sup> Admiral Canaris provided cover to a group of highly-placed anti-Nazi resisters within the *Abwehr* around Hans Oster and Hans von Dohnanyi which was instrumental in protecting numerous Jewish families including

Great Britain, negotiated with Franco to allow the family to enter Spanish territory, and in November the Spanish authorities provided permits to enable the family to wait in San Sebastian for the arrival of the ship. The voyage to Argentina began in December.

On January 2, 1943, on board ship outside Rio de Janeiro, your beloved grandmother died. It is reported that she had said: "All I wanted was to see my children in safety. In Argentina I am a stranger, old and without any knowledge of the language. What should I do there?" She passed away quietly and peacefully. The ship arrived in Buenos Aires on January 11, 1943.

I have recounted the story of this part of your life in some detail, although it is true that the life stories of so many other refugees are equally exciting and moving. But this, after all, is our story, and I always listened eagerly whenever you told me about your family, whom I had never had the chance to meet.

As for many others, your life in the post-war period was dominated by two typically Jewish sentiments: feelings of guilt to have survived, and of gratitude that this was granted to you. Whenever you were asked, you drew attention to the non-Jewish friends who showed solidarity with you and saved your life. These people, and those who returned from emigration, made up our family's circle of friends.

I recall the evenings together when I listened to their stories. They spoke of concentration camps and the threat of death, of fear, and the boundless relief of having survived. And yet, these people had not forgotten how to laugh! They remained optimists, and because all of them had lived through similar experiences, they shared a close bond. Oh, the passionate discussions, especially with those returning from Israel! Then it could get really loud! Critical remarks about Israeli policy were often vehemently rejected: "You have no idea! You have never lived there!" I think this was a period that really taught me to appreciate what friends can mean to one another, how much support and security they can provide in difficult times. These are more important than prestige and riches.

In any case, the latter were in pretty short supply in the first post-war years! We were really poor! Liesel had to run up debts with tradesmen because, as a student, your earnings from evening jobs were nothing like sufficient. At school, when asked our fathers' occupation, for many years my answer was: "My father is a student!" And so what? In our family there was no stigma attached to that. What counted were quite different values, certainly not the accumulation of possessions. I never felt ashamed of our poverty; you must have given me the feeling that there was no cause for shame as long as one behaved decently and fairly towards others. One of your principles was: "One must be able to do without!" I cannot claim that this filled me with great enthusiasm because every child has wishes, especially seeing the presents which other children received. But your own life has always been a testimony to this willingness to go without - you spoiled *us* while yourself living a life of abstinence. The youth movement left a decisive mark on you!

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that of Marianne Strauss for a period of several years, smuggling several of them to South America, also under the pretext of using them for espionage purposes. See for example the account of "Operation Aquilar" in Mark Roseman's book, *op cit*. Canaris and Oster were executed in Flossenbürg concentration camp just a few weeks before the end of the war in 1945.

After nine years as a student, often studying at night, you were able to pay something back. You entered the examinations and passed them in front of your revered Professor Fritz Fischer.<sup>8</sup> You were one of the oldest students and you knew he was well disposed towards you, and that gave you confidence.

In 1956, ten years after your return to a Germany that you had hoped to help rebuild, you were finally entitled to practise the profession on which you had set your heart: you became a teacher. It was the beginning of a period which was not particularly easy for you, because as a politically-committed Jew you were naturally viewed with a degree of suspicion by some of your colleagues, but you did not give in, and you gave as good as you got when the need arose. Your pupils held you in high esteem, as is proved by many letters that you received from former scholars in later life. You were regarded as firm but fair, and devoted to your pupils. There is a letter of thanks from the former Director General of the Staatstheater Oldenburg, Hans Häckermann,<sup>9</sup> whose son you had supported many years before during differences with his classmates, helping to bring this unworthy situation to an end. You always gave me the feeling that your profession filled you with satisfaction despite the enormous pressure of work, because it gave you the opportunity to try to help young people appreciate the purpose of life and pass on your knowledge to them.

On one occasion you caused a scandal at school! You were on a class trip, and Liesel was visiting me in Oldenburg. Then one day a rucksack-packed figure was waiting for us at the front door. "Daddy! What are you doing here?" "I have broken off the trip!" you said. Wow! Such a thing had never happened at the school before! The reason was that one of the schoolboys had been caught consuming alcohol. And that by an old member of the youth movement! You could not tolerate such a thing; it was the end of the line! Your colleagues' comments sounded very thoughtful: "Yes, when van der Walde breaks off a trip there must be a very good reason for it!"

You were a political person. Again and again you were approached by friends with requests to help on this or that campaign. Nevertheless you always gave Liesel and myself the feeling that your family came first. You had a clear humanist standpoint, longing for a more just social system. But you never allowed yourself to be categorised; you were never a yes-man, you always reserved the right to say "No!" You always referred to yourself as a "great individualist". I also think you unconsciously lived according to the quite simple rule that if you want your children to think the same way as yourself, above all you must give them the feeling that they are important to you! How can your children appreciate that your great goals are also good ones, when these always seem to steal their beloved parents away, when the great goals always push them into second place?

My family home, in which so much was spoken, debated and discussed, was one in which I always felt myself to be taken seriously. My plans, whatever they were, were not brushed

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<sup>8</sup> Professor Fritz Fischer (1908-1999), German historian. For a biography of Fischer see: [http://www.bautz.de/bbkl/f/fischer\\_fr.shtml](http://www.bautz.de/bbkl/f/fischer_fr.shtml)

<sup>9</sup> Hans Häckermann (1930-1995) was an actor and theatre director, and Director General of the Staatstheater Oldenburg from 1985 to 1993. For a biography see: [http://www.steffi-line.de/archiv\\_text/nost\\_buehne/07h\\_haeckermann.htm](http://www.steffi-line.de/archiv_text/nost_buehne/07h_haeckermann.htm)

aside with comments like, “You are too young, too inexperienced, not clever enough!” and such like. Almost always you would ask, “What do you have in mind? What exactly do you want to do?” This challenged me and gave me strength at the same time.

On January 31, 1970, a new member joined the family. Jan, son of Wilhelm Schönfeld – whom I had married in 1966 – was born, your grandson, in whose progress you took such a lively interest. You can see how similar are our recollections of you! Jan writes:

*“My grandfather was and remains a model for me on account of so many of his characteristics. The most outstanding of these are, for me, his generosity - both in ideas and in more mundane matters such as money - his modesty in respect of his own wishes and the importance of his own person, his sense of family, and his strongly developed sense of justice.*

*When growing up, and as a young adult, I always felt that my grandfather took me seriously. He was always interested in everything I thought and did, and I always saw my talks with him as an enrichment. The ideas and experiences that he conveyed to me, on the other hand, always gave me food for thought and have made a profound impression on me.*

*Although his death leaves me with a deep sense of loss, at the same time I am very grateful to have been accompanied along a substantial part of my life’s journey by such a wonderful person. My grandfather has died, but for me he is not dead. In my thoughts and memory he remains every bit as lively, passionate and benevolent as during our meetings while he lived. I will always think of him with a smile, and will continue to be guided by the same principles which he taught me and for which he was always a model: sincerity, love and tolerance; in short: humanism.”*

After your retirement, a new life began. You were free from the pressures of school and ready to try new things. On “alternative city tours”<sup>10</sup> and school visits you were asked to speak about your life as a historical witness. Not easy, because these reports aroused painful memories and caused you many sleepless nights. But you faced up to this responsibility, which you considered very important, and you certainly reached and impressed many young people, as their letters prove. You sensed that your gratitude at having survived had found an appropriate form of expression. Liesel accompanied you as often as possible, and together you enlarged your circle of friends to encompass those people who were responsible for the success of these activities. You were kept very busy and led a fulfilled life in retirement.

You were happy that a degree of peace and quiet came into your daughter’s life after her divorce from Wilhelm when she met John Attfield many years later. John writes of you:

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<sup>10</sup> These are tours to locations in Hamburg associated with Nazi oppression and resistance to it, organised by the Landesjugendring Hamburg among others. See: <http://www.ljr-hh.de/data/aktuelles/index.php>

*“For me you were not only a unique and remarkable individual, but also a living representative of an aspect of German history, whose life and experiences made a deep impression on me. I think of you, with love and respect, as a person whose burning drive was to teach others to see the same truths and insights which you yourself had so bitterly and painfully learnt. You were for me a good friend, a teacher, and a wonderful man.”*

A personal disaster occurred on June 14, 1991, when your beloved Liesel died as the result of a heart attack. You fell into a bottomless pit, and were filled with such infinite fears for the future that we were anxious about how you would overcome your grief. You would let the kettle boil dry; you were in such desperation that all the life had gone out of you! Fifty rich years of marriage were suddenly at an end; it was too much to bear!

In this situation, in which you seemed to be facing a joyless future, something like a miracle occurred! A Sonnenberg Conference<sup>11</sup> on a Jewish topic was coming up, and I wanted to take you to it so that you would not be left alone at home. In my need I called my friend Elfie Meyer to ask for her help. Her job was to convince you how much good it would do you to attend this conference and meet other people who would surely have understanding for your distress. She was successful, and what is more, you took a liking to Elfie! And it must have been immediately clear to you that you had met your saviour: a person from the same generation, who had remained honest and decent during the Nazi period, intelligent and loveable, helpful and energetic. And thus began your second love affair!

And like a phoenix from the ashes you picked yourself up and rediscovered some of your old *joie de vivre*. Together you continued to visit schools and undertake the alternative city tours. You married in 1992, but for Elfie the time to come was not easy; you had by no means overcome your mourning for Liesel! You were torn between your sense of loss and the hope that a new happiness was possible. Elfie performed this task and gave you strength and simply brought Liesel into her own life. That was certainly not always an easy matter.

The two of you were able to enjoy some rich and wonderful years before your illness - which had probably been the real reason for your early retirement - slowly but surely took its hold on you. You had Parkinson's Disease, with all the terrible consequences which arise when it remains untreated. Your memories began to fade! That must have been a dreadful experience, when you, always so preoccupied with your past, were no longer able recall it to mind.

When finally the pressure became too much to bear – Elfie had to go into hospital several times within a few months – we took the joint decision to move both of you into a nursing home near us. During the following year Elfie was your entire support; the thought of losing her filled you with boundless dread. But at some point you must have lost the struggle; you simply lost your healthy appetite and stopped eating. When the doctor diagnosed kidney failure we knew the end was near. Elfie and I took turns to sit at your bedside; one of us constantly held your hand and spoke to you. At the last you granted me a wonderful gift:

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<sup>11</sup> At the International Sonnenberg Centre in the Harz Mountains, Germany. See: [http://www.sonnenberg-international.de/home\\_e.html](http://www.sonnenberg-international.de/home_e.html)

I could be with you as you took your final breath, and I could try to give back a little of the love which I have received from you throughout my life.

To end, your favoured motto should be heard once more. The Meissner Resolution, proclaimed on the Hohe Meissner mountain on October 12, 1913,<sup>12</sup> declared:

*“The Free German Youth, on their own initiative, under their own responsibility, and with deep sincerity, are determined to independently shape their own lives.” To which you added a further thought: “...these ideals should be linked with the following ideas: fighting for peace, equality for all people and social justice for all people and the protection and preservation of the Earth.”*

Daddy, we all loved you so much! We miss you so much!

Norma van der Walde  
Buchholz, Germany

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<sup>12</sup> There is a description in German of the first convention of the Free German Youth on the Hohe Meissner in 1913 in Wikipedia, at [http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Erster\\_Freideutscher\\_Jugendtag](http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Erster_Freideutscher_Jugendtag). Finding an online account in English is not so easy, but see: <http://histclo.com/youth/youth/org/nat/ger/wander-chron.htm>