

Sample translation

Julia Albrecht/ Corinna Ponto: **PATENTÖCHTER**

("Goddaughters: In the Shadow of German Left Wing Terrorism – A Dialogue")

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On July 30, 1977, Jürgen Ponto, chairman of the Dresdner Bank board of directors, was murdered in his house in Oberursel, Germany, a town outside of Frankfurt. The assassins were the Red Army Faction (RAF) members Christian Klar and Brigitte Mohnhaupt. They gained access to the Ponto home by Susanne Albrecht, daughter of Jürgen Ponto's friend, the marine lawyer Hans-Christian Albrecht from Hamburg. Susanne Albrecht's sister, Julia, 13 at the time, was Jürgen Ponto's goddaughter. The godfather of Ponto's daughter Corinna, 20 at the time, was Hans-Christian Albrecht. Following the murder, all ties between the two families were cut. Thirty years later, Julia Albrecht contacts Corinna Ponto, and a correspondence ensues. The two women occasionally meet. They decide to write a book together.

Like a voice from another world

Julia Albrecht

Her words reached me like a voice from another world. Even if they weren't directed at me. And yet that's how I heard them, the sentences spoken by Corinna Ponto about the murder of her father. They were printed in the book by Anne Siemens, *Für die RAF war er das System, für mich der Vater* [He Represented the System for the RAF, For Me He was My Father]. Corinna Ponto accuses my parents, very discreetly and yet unmistakably, of not having informed her parents about my sister's evolution prior to her visit to the Pontos on July 30, 1977.

Corinna's words about her father's murder struck me at a time when I happened to be highly involved with the topic. I had decided to make a documentary about the consequences of my sister's actions and what it meant for us as her family and had already spent months, together with my mother, sifting through old letters, documents and photographs. All the while we asked ourselves, over and over, the same agonizing question: How could it ever have happened? How could Susanne have taken advantage of family friends and her own parents to fulfill her ideological goals for the RAF?

I felt a deep need write to Corinna. I didn't know her. And even if I may have seen her once when we were children, I couldn't remember. Corinna was the daughter of Jürgen Ponto. Corinna was the slender figure standing next to her mother in the picture taken at Jürgen's funeral that I had looked at so many times. For me, Corinna was not so much a tangible person as she was the daughter of the man whose death my sister had facilitated and was accountable for. Ever since Corinna's mother Ighes Ponto had broken off all contact with us that same year, the two families never met or corresponded with each other again. I wrote Corinna Ponto a letter, in which I also referred to the interviews she had given. Here, then, are excerpts from it:

Dear Ms. Ponto,

Everything I have read about you in the previous months has deeply upset me. I never knew anything about your side of the story. I didn't even know that we are almost the same age. The year 1977 was the turning point in my life as well. Not only on account of what the unbelievable horror that the crime committed against your father meant for me. But also because of the sheer impossibility of being able to comprehend that my sister had made it possible. Your father was my godfather and was thus very important to me. (...) I can understand quite well the accusations you make against my parents – that they should never have allowed my sister to visit your house. I have thought the same for years. Prior to your father's murder, my parents had the impression that Susanne was back on the right track and headed towards a middle-class existence. According to my mother, they thought Susanne had straightened out precisely because she wanted to be close to your parents. (...) My parents knew that my sister was very active in very leftwing circles and were very concerned about it. But, as far as I know, there was no evidence that Susanne had anything to do with Stockholm [the 1975 RAF attack on the Germany Embassy], and I am positive my parents didn't assume she did. There was, however, the arrest at the Dutch border. I don't know exactly what my parents thought of that. But I have the impression that my parents – which for me, I have to admit, is hard to understand – didn't see the connection between the arrest and Susanne's participation in one of the first squattings in Hamburg. Because, although they were already worried,

that would have made them even more vigilant and critical of my sister's actions. Or maybe it was just the opposite: they wanted to trust her. They just wanted to believe that everything would work itself out. But these are just speculations on my part. I am not trying to reconcile or defend anything. The heinous actions of my sister are completely beyond me. The betrayal of your family aggrieves me without end. For me it is more incomprehensible, more inconceivable than almost anything else in the world.

*Sincerely,
Julia Albrecht*

I was anxious after having sent the letter to the Jürgen Ponto Foundation. I had no idea what would come of it. I felt a sense of growing shame. How could it have taken me so many years to think of Corinna? Why had I only thought about our story and our pain during the thirty years since the murder, and yet never once asked myself how the Pontos must have been feeling? I saw the Pontos and the murder of Jürgen through the lens of the sister of one of the accomplices. Not from the viewpoint of the victims. On the one hand, it might be completely normal to think only of one's own misfortune at such a time and to disregard everything else. On the other hand, though, it seems to me to be completely unacceptable, on a human level, that our family never again reached out to the Pontos once Ighes Ponto wrote to my father in the fall of 1977 to say that she no longer wanted to have any contact with us because it would be impossible to grieve mutually for both her dead husband and my father's missing daughter.

I found it to be especially bitter that my father – who was Corinna's godfather, just as Jürgen had been mine – never wrote a letter to Corinna again. Or did he? Letters from all periods of his life were discovered following his death. There is also a "letter" to his deceased friend Jürgen from the year 1992. Here my father writes: "I didn't think about you and your family nearly enough or deeply enough in all these years. I suppose I didn't have the energy or the courage to do so..."

It is strange how much adults tend to disregard children. And at the same time I now know how difficult it is to find the right balance when it comes to the stories one has to tell one's own children.

Corinna's response came promptly:

Dear Ms. Albrecht,

That you address me in your letter as "Ms." is very thoughtful – and so I will do the same. (...) I thank you for your letter. We should meet – I, too, have thought about you and your sentiments and fright over the years. It upsets me a great deal, as well. It will be good to talk. Believe me, I have a very differentiated view of the RAF and your sister, and I have always attempted to express myself as carefully as possible. But perhaps we should just write each other for the time being. It might be easier for us at first, and it would also serve as a remembrance.

Sincerely

Corinna Ponto

I was delighted. I did cartwheels. I had the feeling that we had taken the first step in something that could become important. Yet I didn't know what we would be discussing.

And so we exchanged a few letters. I wanted to meet her. I wanted to reconnect with something. Her father was dead, mine was already very weak and died in December 2007, seven months before Corinna and I met for the first time. I hope that he understood that Corinna and I were in touch.

The first time we met was on Paris Square in Berlin. It was important for Corinna that we meet outside. I arrived by bike on time, but couldn't get to the square at first because it was cordoned off. A policeman standing in front of the Hotel Adlon said that the U.S. Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, was in town and would be passing by any

moment. I was finally able to manage my way to the square from the other side. There was a tall woman with blond hair sitting on the bench where we had planned to meet. She was wearing jeans and staring at her cell phone. When she saw me, she stood up, and as soon as I got next to her, she took me in her arms.

That broke the ice. It was unbelievable that she hugged me. And also a huge relief. It was a gesture that, to me, attested to such generosity that I immediately thought anything was possible.

Later, when we met again, Corinna told me that she saw or felt my father in me, and that for her, in a certain sense, us meeting like this was also a way for our fathers to meet. For me it was different. For one, I perhaps didn't have as close of a relationship to my father as Corinna had had with hers. The other point, however, is that I feel like a family member of a criminal who meets a family member of the victim. I'm always beset by feelings of shame and guilt that complicate my association with the past – and with Corinna.

On a bench on Paris Square

Corinna Ponto

Oddly enough, when I think back to the first time we met, I always see those two young policemen who were spitting out apple seeds with delight. They were sitting just six feet from our bench in the rear door to their police van, their legs swinging above the ground. Their smiles – they had no idea whom they were aiming their seeds at – met our amazement, the tremendous tension we felt at that moment. We smiled back because the situation was so “wonderfully” strange.

There we were, two poles of a political history that pushed Germany to its limits and that, to this day, still represents one of its greatest challenges. And after more than thirty years we meet, of all places, on the square that happens to be, at that very moment, the most carefully guarded place in all of Germany. Helicopters circled above us, every inch of the square was secured by police vans, and these two representatives of the new generation of authority were smiling at us in good spirits and chomping on their apples.

To this very day I hear the sound of their seeds hitting the ground more clearly than the impertinent noise of the helicopters.

On that bench on Paris Square a dialogue commenced in which we asked each other both similar and varying sorts of questions, and we started to tell each other about different periods of our lives. Our conversation soon took on a flowing rhythm, first one of us would speak, then the other, interrupted only by moments of silence, out of respect. We each had a sense of when it was better not to say anything.

The first time we met, Julia had tears in her eyes. Her first question was, “Do you have a tissue?” I gave her one, saying, “Normally, I never have any.”

The second time we met, I cried.

We met with the idea of continuing our conversation, in writing, in order to strengthen and hold onto our memories. The trust we felt in each other to go about this together arose in both of us, suddenly and at the same time. By telling our memories to each other, we were able to share them.

A story from the last century

Corinna Ponto

We are a completely normal family. We laugh a lot, we do silly things, we argue. Our children are growing up. And yet at the same time there's a shadowy menace growing alongside us. There's a deep fracture in our family history. And although it was observed collectively and has to do with this country, it has still been experienced by each of us as our own individual fate.

We live in the present, we learn and worry about the future – but we rarely look back to the past. “I’ll tell you when you get older!” How much longer can I tell my two children that?

There have been two moments of flight in our family history. My children have already heard about how their grandmother's family had to flee from the terror of war. It took her siblings ten days of intermittent bombings to get from Silesia, where they caught the very last military hospital train, to the boarding school in Brandenburg, where they

wanted to pick up my mother. They missed each other, however, and didn't reunite until four anxious weeks later in the northern German region of Holstein. Yet the second flight, the one from the RAF terror, has yet to cross my lips. Yorck and David are now 14 and 11 years old, and I still shy away from telling them everything in detail – worried that the violence, so close to home, could frighten them too much.

Meanwhile, after dropping hints about the year 1977, I have told my older son that we have met. His reaction was, "You must be really old." For him it's a story from the last century. And in fact, it is a story from the last century – but you, Yorck, are young, and our getting together, Julia, is something new as well. In a way, it's a time machine.

For years, Grandfather died in a kind of tragic "accident". Gradually, then, the term "terrorists" would pop up in the story. But how do you go about telling the whole course of events – terror in the living room – and in chronological order from the beginning to this very day? How am I supposed to do that?

Should I read passages from the letter, signed by your sister, claiming responsibility: *The guys who start wars in the Third World and exterminate entire peoples?* You mean the whimsically smiling grandfather up there in the picture frame *exterminated entire peoples?* The children's eyes would widen in disbelief.

Should I read to them the effulgent obituary written by Gräfin Dönhoff, or maybe other refined articles published in the fall of 1977? Or should I just use my own words. It's not like I don't have any. It's just that I don't want to speak them. For some reason I don't want to influence my children with my own feelings. So what should I do? I leave the room of the past under lock and key.

Julia, how strange – should we really venture into this room together?

Maybe we'll be able to offer something that has not been said before, something that has not already been depicted in the endless rows of books analyzing the RAF? Aside from worrying about the difficult path lying ahead of us, such a task also arouses in me an emotional curiosity. I realize our principal motive shouldn't be to question the accepted reception of RAF history, which has characteristically focused on those who committed the crimes. Yet maybe that will happen automatically. But what I'm most interested in doing is adding to the mosaic that already exists. We probably won't be able

to embark on a comprehensive investigation – but I’m confident we’ll be able to depict certain aspects of the event that have thus far been overlooked or remained unmentioned.

And we’ll certainly be able to describe what it was like “from within” – from within the crime and within our own memories and feelings. Our story is only a small piece of the entire “RAF complex”, but it can help to do justice to the victims and their own pasts.

Collective suffering can lead to collective awareness. The RAF era may be a part of our collective memory, but there was no common suffering, and there is, by no means, any sort of collective awareness. The drama of it all was engrossing, and it was readily exploited – politically, culturally, and in the media – but the sorrowful abyss that lay behind it was never seen.

July 30th

Corinna Ponto

I wasn’t there.

It was a Saturday afternoon. A mildly sunny midsummer’s day. The luggage for a South America trip, long in planning, was packed and waiting in the hallway. As a child my father had spent six years in Ecuador. The whole family – something that didn’t happen much anymore – was going to take a trip to his childhood roots and visit all the relatives of a cousin living there.

The door-length shutters to the patio were already closed, except for the ones to the living room windows, which were left cracked open, and to the back door in the dining room, which was wide open. The thin shaft of light that came through the windows and split the darkness of the room in two was to save the life of my mother – hidden from the attackers in the shadow of this “curtain of light” – a quarter of an hour later.

S. had called late the previous evening and insisted on stopping by, but her visit was set for the following afternoon. S. was half an hour late. My parents, who needed to be on their way soon, decided to go ahead and serve tea. My mother had promised to call

her sister Renate once more before leaving and was on the phone to her. She thus became a sort of third witness. Their conversation kept getting interrupted, but did continue parallel with the unfolding drama. Later, I even came up with the absurd idea that the events could be called *The Phone Call*, as though it were a play.

My father talked to his sister-in-law first. Since it was to be a trip to the past, they chatted about old times. Then the doorbell rang.

Mr. M., my father's company chauffeur, said that Susanne Albrecht was there, "together with two other gentlemen". He usually didn't talk like that.

Even the question my father then posed was very unusual: "What do they look like?"

Mr. M's response: "Very well-mannered."

Did a moment's intuition anticipate something?

Mr. M. was at the house only because my parents were set to depart within the next hour – he didn't live with us. My father wanted to finish talking on the phone and asked Mr. M. to have the three guests wait in his office in the meantime. As he handed the receiver to my mother he accidentally hung up.

My mother redialed and was telling my aunt that S. had arrived when the three guests suddenly appeared right in front of her on the patio: a pale young man, a woman whom she also didn't know, and S. with a wilting bouquet of shrub roses in her hand. All three of them were casually, yet elegantly *spruced up*.

My mother then asked my father to wait for her to pick up the other phone in the living room so she could finish talking there. It occurred to her that the three guests must have a few problems that they wanted to discuss with him. She then continued talking with my aunt in the living room after my father, having made sure she was on the other line, stated, "Okay, I'm hanging up now". She heard the click in the line of him ringing off.

And then in the next few dramatic minutes, two historical moments in German history meshed fatefully together. Renate von Moltke is a sister-in-law of Helmuth James von Moltke. As a member of the resistance, he was executed by Hitler's Nazi terrorists in Berlin-Plötzensee in January 1945. Thirty-two years later my aunt was present, this time as a silent witness, as another of her brother-in-laws was executed, by a different set of

terrorists. The English journalist Jillian Becker called the RAF terrorists *Hitler's Children* – and in this moment, through the telephone wires, both German episodes of terror were linked together.

Every time I want to look at this moment, I inwardly turn my head aside. That is why we should listen to my mother. She, after all, witnessed the crime:

It is dark in the house. Only one ray of light shines through the door into the dining room, where everyone just came out of onto the patio. I hurry into the adjoining living room so Jürgen doesn't have to wait long for me to pick up the phone, and then continue talking to my sister. While she's talking, I hear Jürgen go into the dining room, saying, "Let's get a vase for these."

Shortly thereafter: "Are you crazy!"

I'm sitting behind a small ledge of the fireplace and, frightened from what I just heard, lean forward and look in the direction his voice is coming from. Paralyzed, I see the pale man and Jürgen, dimly lit from the light outside, standing in front of the dining room table. They're both holding one of their arms up, and there's a pistol sticking out from where their arms are joined together. Jürgen wanted to wrest the pistol from the man in self-defense. As a shot fires, the barrel is no longer aimed at him. It is later reconstructed that the first shot hit the window.

Seconds later he's no longer alive. The other woman comes rushing, bursting through the patio door and fires several times. I can't see Jürgen anymore – he must have stepped backwards. The room is full of smoke. Everything is eerily quiet and happens extremely fast. And yet just like when you remember accidents, the images I see are in slow-motion. Jürgen, shot, falls to the floor just feet in front of me. The murderers rush out of the room, led by Susanne.

Without realizing it, I have hung up the phone. I make an emergency call, scream for the police, for an ambulance, and rush to Jürgen, unable to believe, unable to comprehend what I'm seeing. The driver sees what has happened and screams. We lay Jürgen on pillows – he is still alive, but he's no longer moving. He's lying with a pool of blood in his face.

A victim of "warmongers" in the midst of a peaceful age.

They call it an execution. They executed the person they came to kidnap, in a matter of seconds. A friendly-minded host in his hospitable home.

I kneel next to him for seven long minutes. A helicopter lands in our front lawn, and two medics rush into the room. Without a word, I open the large middle door that they carry him out of.

I turn to stone as he begins the deafening flight to his death.

And there it is, once again, that disabling blow – just like before.

[My mother lost her parents at the age of 14 when their bomb shelter in Berlin was bombed.]

It is as though all life and vitality in me ceases to exist.

I sense that he is going to die – die in the silence of a sun-filled, peaceful afternoon.

Then my house stops being my house. Detectives, the police and their signals, calls... How do I tell the children – what do I do next? I want to pray for him – five minutes later the priest is sitting next to my bed, but I've turned to stone, and the petrifying shock of it all is never to let go of me again.

I hug my children, my friends, family – so many people – as though I were out of stone.

I can't hold vigil over Jürgen like the last time – I have decisions to make, plans. I have responsibility for all that is to come, for the many despairing people around me.

I am a stone and without tears.

Dear Corinna,

Your mother's account brings tears to my eyes. It is unimaginable that your poor mother had to witness the murder. It is unimaginable how she survived it mentally. This level of violence terrifies me, and your mother seems to have survived it – and not as a stone, if I interpret your words about her correctly. Yet it seems to me almost impossible to be able to bear such an event.

Yours,

Julia