

## Chapter 1 Family beginnings

The story of Hanna Schilling and Walter Pfander, their love and their later conflict over their son Hans, is central to understanding Hans' life, and why he never lived in Germany after the age of five, although both his parents were German.

Hanna Schilling, Hans' mother, was the central star of his childhood universe. She was his fierce defender, the one who largely formed and shaped his life. Talented and eccentric, she was born into a middle-class Hamburg family in 1905. Her father was a merchant in this historic northern port city on the Elbe River. After the privations of the First World War she was sent to Holland, to recover her health. There, while still in her teens, she earned money in the street markets making fashionable cut-out black and white silhouette portraits of her customers or of famous people. With some of her earnings, she bought herself a bicycle. Bicycles especially suited to travelling around the flat Dutch countryside, were becoming ever more popular. Her talent and initiative were already obvious. A studio portrait of her at sixteen shows a determined sensuous face and direct gaze. Of average height, she had lively grey eyes and strong features framed by abundant, wavy, chestnut hair.

Hans' father and his father's family came from Baden-Wurttemberg in southern Germany, a traditionally Catholic area, sentimental and conservative in outlook... Southerners have the reputation with their fellow citizens in the north for knowing how to relax and enjoy life, and somewhat bucolic, even lazy. Lazy was not a word that could be given to any of the Pfander family, who were hard-working, Lutherans. Walter Eugen Pfander was born near Stuttgart, the provincial capital, one of two children, in 1898. He trained as a lawyer, but joined the well known textile firm, Bemberg, after graduating. As a very young man he served in the German Army during the later part of the First World War. Although he had a sense of humour, an underlying moral seriousness predominated in his character.

Bemberg had its Company Headquarters in Barmen, part of the larger industrial city, Wuppertal on the edge of the Ruhr. Barmen and its neighbour Elbefeld had been industrial towns since the nineteenth century German industrial revolution. When Walter joined the company, Bemberg had worldwide interests, in Britain, as well as in North and South America.

It was while Walter was in Holland on business that Hanna and Walter met. Shortly afterwards, Walter was sent by his employer to Brazil where the company was expanding its interests. Walter had made her no promises, but Hanna, impetuous and in love decided to follow him there. It was a characteristic act: if she wanted to do something, she did it. She always followed her impulses.

Walter was based in Recife on the northern coast where reliable trade winds moderate the intense tropical heat and humidity. Portuguese traders had founded the town in the seventeenth century. It is sited at the meeting place of two rivers, at a place which was also believed to be the shortest sailing distance away from Europe. A little further north,

in the hills behind the white, sandy, palm-fringed beaches, lies Olinda, noted for its beautiful gardens, and narrow cobbled streets now designated a historical monument by UNESCO for its Portuguese baroque architecture. In that romantic setting, Walter and Hanna were married in January 1925. Not long after, Walter was recalled first to Germany and then to take up another post, this time in England. As a souvenir Hanna brought back a South American monkey, a monkey small enough to fit into a breakfast coffee cup. When they left Germany, the monkey was found a home at the Hamburg Zoo, then one of the most famous zoos in Europe.

They moved to the Manchester area. They lived in Didsbury, then still retaining its identity as a town separate from Manchester, but today a very fashionable suburb, just a few kilometres south of the city centre. Their son, Hans Walter, born in October 1927, was delivered at home by a midwife.

Bemberg was producing synthetic yarn, used as an alternative to natural silk, particularly in women's hosiery. "Bemberg-silk" became the trademark of ladies' stockings made from synthetic yarns, and it was widely advertised by film stars, including Marlene Dietrich. Their product, cuprammonium rayon, was finer than anything else then produced, having a sheen similar to natural silk, and importantly, also a good affinity for dyes.

Less than two years later, in mid 1929, Walter was sent to America, where the company, Bemberg and Glanzstoff, had large plants in Tennessee, as Secretary to the Acting General Manager, W G Krummer. After Krummer's sudden unexpected death within a few months of Walter's arrival, he was recalled to an appointment as Secretary to the Board of Directors at Company Headquarters in Barmen.

Their marriage did not survive these rapid changes of circumstances. Hanna returned to Hamburg with the boy to be near her family. In photographs of that time we see a sturdy smiling boy in a sailor suit, riding his first bike, at the beach, sailing a toy boat, or climbing a ladder, photos taken by a proud parent. Copies were sent to Walter in Barmen: proof that their boy was being well looked after by his mother.

Some snaps show Hanna and Walter and Hans together on holiday in Bavaria, in the late spring of 1931. Hans is wearing traditional Bavarian costume, leather pants, white shirt and hat. His willowy mother stands to one side, in peasant skirt and embroidered blouse, against dramatic backgrounds of waterfalls, lakes and mountains. Their divorce had been finalised earlier in the year. By law, German fathers were automatically given custody if there was any dispute between husband and wife. But they had agreed Hannah should have the boy, for it would be difficult for a man on his own to care for a child. Walter also agreed to support them. The arrangement temporarily suited both parties.

During 1933, Walter, now thirty-five, announced his decision to marry Hilde Reclam. Just nineteen, her family owned the large Reclam publishing company. When Hanna heard of the impending marriage planned for September, she carefully made her own arrangements. Walter and Hanna had previously agreed that if he should remarry, the boy

would go to him, but now, faced with the actual reality, Hanna changed her mind. She was determined never to surrender him.

She began planning their escape. A passage by ship was booked leaving Europe that July, Hanna using her German passport, and Hans on a separate British one, as he had been born in England. They were leaving one port city behind them for another: China's second largest city, Shanghai. Shanghai welcomed everyone in those days, with no questions were asked. Local residents assumed that anyone who came to live there had something to hide as no entry passport or visa was required. Hanna would be effectively beyond the reach of German law. Neither Hanna nor Hans were ever again to make Germany their home.

Walter never showed bitterness or anger towards Hanna. He continued, when he could, to make financial contributions to his son's upbringing once she had written to let him know where they had gone.