

Geraldine Oetken

Frieda.

***The search for my forgotten
great-great-aunt***

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- **Frieda interweaves journalistic research with a personal detective story**
- **Author Geraldine Oetken brings the topics of Nazi perpetrators, transgenerational trauma and decentralised euthanasia into our present day.**
- **A story about responsibility, guilt, and being different.**

The great-grandchildren's generation confronts silence and responsibility.

At a funeral, Geraldine Oetken learns by chance that she had a great-great-aunt: Frieda, whom no one ever talked about. No one knows anything about her except that she died in 1941 in an institution for people with disabilities.

But who was Frieda? Who put her in the institution? How did her life end? And what does that have to do with us? Geraldine Oetken sets out to give Frieda back her story. Her search for clues takes her to archives and cemeteries, to Nazi Oldenburg and the Oldenburg of her youth – and into the depths of her own family history.

Geraldine Oetken, born in 1990, studied fine art at the Braunschweig University of Art and works as an artist and freelance journalist in Hanover.



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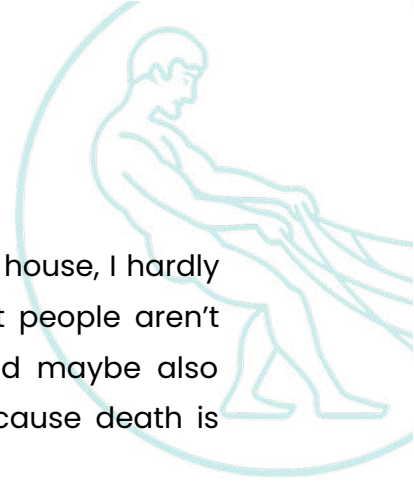
Grave, unknown

Frieda, after eighteen months of searching I am standing in front of you. Or diagonally above you. You are lying under the ground – at least 1.8 metres deep, and maybe you’ve sunk a little further over the years.

I have walked the length and breadth of Oldenburg, our old hometown at the north-western tip of Germany, to find you. I’ve asked all kinds of people if they know where you are. Relatives. Historians. Church administrators. Parks authority officials. Archivists. City employees. I’ve been down into cellars and up into attics. Held fragile books, tattered document folders and yellowed letters. I’ve tried to decipher old Sütterlin script and untangled scrawl. Again and again, I’ve said: ‘I’m looking for my great-great-aunt, Frieda Helms. Do you know where she might be?’ And sometimes also: ‘Do you know how she died? Do you know if she was killed by the Nazis?’ But at some point in the course of history, over the last eighty or more years, you were lost to everyone. You became so slight that today, it’s almost like you never existed.

The search for my great-great-aunt Frieda began in 2017. In front of a different gravestone, in a different Oldenburg cemetery. I had been living in another city for a long time by then, having moved away straight after I finished school. In 2017, I’d just started an internship with a regional newspaper. But I’d returned once more, months after my grandfather’s death, to lay roses from my parents’ garden on the family grave. The breeze that late spring day was light by North German standards. To left and right, traffic roared by on the main roads that run past every cemetery in Oldenburg. The din of cars in the stillness of the graveyard. I was standing in front of the grave column, which had just been reinstalled following the burial. Sand-coloured and freshly cleaned, it shone out over the cemetery walls. A whole tribe of ancestors lie in this grave. People whose funerals I attended, and others I never knew. Like Elli and Martin, my great-grandparents.

Although this grave is only a few hundred metres from my parents' house, I hardly ever used to go there. Perhaps because the column suggests that people aren't equal, even in death. It towers over all the other gravestones. And maybe also because relations within the extended family were fraught. Or because death is seldom at the forefront of young people's minds.



My grandfather, born in the early 1920s, had died a few months before my visit in 2017, at well over 90 years old. An old man with piercing, clear blue eyes surrounded by deep lines, whose body gradually gave out. I called him Apo-Opi, a name that originated in toddler-talk, and that I used until his death. At Christmas he would buy every member of the huge family a large bar of chocolate. They were distributed – as I remember it, with scarcely a word from him – and received reverently, while the parcels of toys that my grandma had chosen were ripped open in fevered excitement by us grandchildren. Christmas days in velvet and gold. But at the same time, my grandfather was a dominant figure in my world. His word was law. He oversaw everything. In our family's business, which used to mainly do construction and now mainly does rental, and in its social fabric.

The conversations I'd had with him as a young adult, as a teenager, were hardly ever open or honest. I spent most of them trying not to provoke an outburst from him, while he himself caused countless of these. At his funeral, the city's largest church was packed to the rafters. People I didn't know, shaken by his death, came up and told us anecdotes we'd never heard, told us about his wit – as if he'd radiated a light that had warmed them all. And they told us about his genius at accumulating and keeping money.

But now, here at his grave, months after his death, he was not drawing all the attention like a magnet. I was alone, contemplating my family's dead, who now occupied more space in my mind. There was my grandma, who'd made the world's best muesli, sprinkled with lactose powder, and who always had tiny ice-cream cones in the freezer. I saw the name of my great-grandfather and wondered what that father-son relationship had been like. I read the name of my great aunt, who used to live in the flat above ours. Who always sat in the same pale blue armchair, in a darkened room, who wore her hair in two incredibly long grey plaits, and whose

girlishness somehow frightened me. Then there was the name of an uncle who had died young.

The full heads of the roses I'd brought hung over the thick green rim of the cemetery vase. They weren't as uniform as supermarket roses, but their scent was far stronger. My grandfather had no interest in roses, flowers, sentimentality. But I always brought him some anyway. When he was alive, we never quite connected, he and I. But he was still my grandfather. A part of where I'm from.

But this time, something about the grave was different. And it wasn't just that my grandfather's name, the last of his generation, had now been carved into the pillar. The previously blank west side also had the name 'Frieda Helms' on it, all by itself on the polished surface. When you turned off the central path, her name was now the first one you saw. She had a different surname to the rest of the family. To me. Helms, not Oetken. Helms, which was also my great-grandmother Elli's maiden name. Frieda, I could see from the birth and death dates, was Elli's big sister.

'Frieda Helms 22.12.1881 – 5.2.1941, Kloster Blankenburg.' Dates between which a whole, unknown life had played out. A life before my time – in an era whose stories had been passed down to me only as vague shadows.

A few weeks after this visit to the cemetery, I finally read the email that another uncle had sent to the family, including me, and which had been waiting unread in my inbox. Frieda Helms, it informed me, had been my grandfather's aunt. My uncle had wanted Frieda to be given a place on the family grave. Now, when it was being added to anyway. Even if she wasn't buried there.

The little my uncle knew about Frieda was this: she died in 1941, at the age of 59, in Kloster Blankenburg. That sounded like contemplative retreat and rest in her twilight years. A nun-like existence. But this convent near the city was a place where minors and adults with 'incurable illnesses' were housed: the 'Gertrudenheim Education and Care Facility'. And here, as an historian named Professor Ingo Harms had discovered in the 2000s, Nazis had neglected and starved the patients, in an act of what is now described as decentralised 'euthanasia'. The link between this Kloster Blankenburg as the place where Frieda died, and 'euthanasia', the killing of people with

disabilities, mental and chronic illnesses in the Nazi period, was one my uncle had only made following a newspaper report in the 2010s.

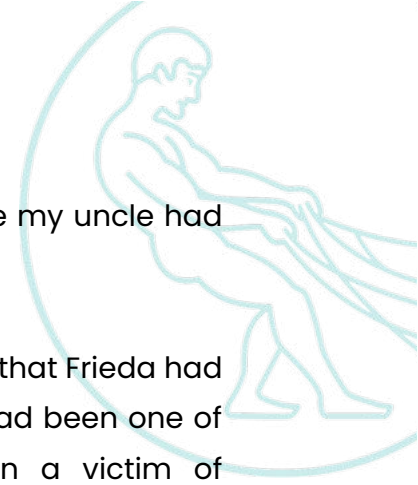
He wanted to know more, and asked the historian. Harms confirmed that Frieda had been admitted there as a patient; he assumed therefore that she had been one of the victims. He wrote 'presumably'. She had 'presumably' been a victim of 'euthanasia'. Her legal guardian, who had signed the few papers relating to Frieda in the files, was my great-grandfather Martin. Probably her closest male relative. My grandfather's father, one of the construction firm's bosses. Overseeing everything, I suspect. His word was law, I suspect. My forbear.

The information swirled around my head, lacking the threads to knit it all together. But one thing I did understand: a woman in my family had disappeared in the Nazi period. In an institution where she had 'presumably' been weakened so severely that she died. Probably because she had a disability, the nature of which I didn't know, but which meant the Nazis regarded her as worthless.

The Nazi regime was never really spoken about in this branch of the family. Until this point, it had almost seemed as if my ancestors had just gone into hibernation for the period between 1933 and 1945. As if there was 'nothing to see here'. Nothing particularly worth mentioning. But now I had an anchor, a clue: Frieda was something to see. And then she disappeared. And neither my great-grandparents nor my grandparents had ever spoken openly about this after the war – if they had, then that knowledge would eventually have reached me. So there must have been more to it. For the first time, my ancestors made me shudder.

I began to wonder about Frieda: was she alone when she died? How long had she spent in this institution before her death? Did she call her parents Mama and Papa? Did she have friends in the home? What did she do in her free time? Did she have any free time? Which flowers did she like? What was her favourite food? Did she know what was awaiting her in that home? And did that frighten her?

But I also had questions about my ancestors: what did they know? How did they live in Nazi Germany? What did they tolerate? Did they sign letters and documents with 'Heil Hitler', hang a swastika flag from the bedroom window? Did they march with the others, did they wave to Hitler in 1931 on the market square in Oldenburg? Did they try to stay out of it, or did they describe themselves as proud National Socialists?



And I also wondered: at what point does someone count as a Nazi? Or as a neo-Nazi?

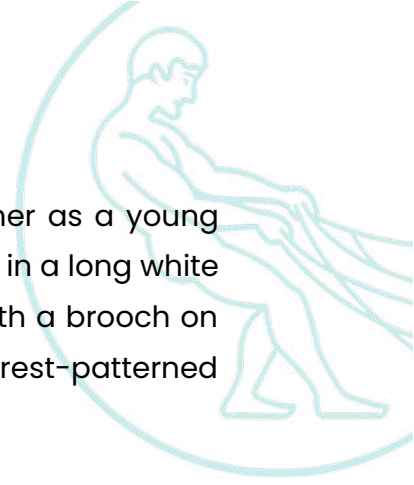
My grandfather was twenty, almost at the age of majority, when his aunt Frieda died. So he must have known her, must have heard about her death while he was an enthusiastic soldier somewhere in Europe. Must have noticed the empty place when he returned and took over the construction firm he'd grown up with. The construction firm I, too, grew up with. Family and company were always interwoven for me, never entirely separable. The building site as an adventure playground. Children's drawings on a pad of headed paper. The extended family and me: never an entirely private matter.

And then, finally, came the questions I put to myself. The ones I could perhaps find the most honest answers to, if only I sought them honestly: what things in life have I inherited from my ancestors, without realising it? Which family stories have I taken at face value? Or to put it another way: is any of what I knew about their lives based on reliable facts? If they kept quiet about the existence of a sister, aunt and daughter who was presumably murdered, what else might there be?

I asked my dad a few of these questions. Or rather, I tried to. But whenever I'd prepared what I was going to say – Papa, what did the firm do in the Nazi period? Papa, were my grandparents, your parents, Nazis? Papa, did you ask these same questions when you were my age? Papa, what did you know about Frieda? – they lost substance. My tongue struck my teeth, the roof of my mouth, formed the sounds I needed. But as soon as they passed my lips, they lost their force. Their urgency. Importance and emphasis. And anger. The questions didn't shake him or open his eyes. They became minor matters, historical platitudes. And my father gave routine answers. 'No, Martin wasn't a Nazi, I don't think,' he said once. And another time: 'The construction firm was practically bankrupt in those days.' The same sentences he had always come out with during my childhood, my teenage years. Which he in turn had heard as a child, a young man. Sentences that had echoed down the generations. He'd gladly tell me everything, of course he would, but that was all he knew, he said patiently. He'd learned about Frieda at the same time I had.

Once, I tried an interview set-up. I placed old family photos on the table in front of us, having found them in boxes in a storage room where what was left of my grandparents' possessions were kept. Black and white photos of women with tall,

snow-white collars and carefully pinned buns. My great-grandmother as a young woman, with a film star's romantic good looks, leaning against a wall in a long white dress and gazing into the distance. Frieda, looking down absently, with a brooch on her blouse. Two siblings in their Sunday best, against a backdrop of forest-patterned wallpaper. I arranged the old photos in a tableau.



We met in his conference room at the company office. What they used to call the Kontor, an old term that went right back to the Hanseatic League. I hid behind my professionalism, pulled out my biro. 'What do you feel when you look at these photos?' I asked my father. I was standing beside him; he looked up at me. 'What should I feel? I guess that's how it was back then.' He shrugged the question off. 'What do you want me to say?' And even though he thought it would be a good thing to find out what had happened to Frieda, even though he gave me everything he knew, and supported me with time, trust, and later with childcare: Frieda did not become a family project. Finding Frieda was my thing now, mine alone.

A family's past is a set of stories. Events that have been recounted and repeated so often, from one person to another, to another, to the next and the next, that they become condensed into a story. Like the one about Papa and his dog, who waited faithfully outside the school gates, slobbering and frightening the other children. There are stories about my grandma, who is said to have been the most elegant lady in the city, wearing high heels even in the kitchen, and who believed children should be left to cry. The story of my grandpa, who apparently got his driving licence after just one and a half lessons, because he brought enough petrol with him. The story about my great-grandfather, who went blind and took his own life.

My forbears were not big storytellers. The tales were cobbled together a little awkwardly from a few sentences, with little embellishment. But when it came to National Socialism, even more was missing. These weren't stories; they were not-stories. Negations. 'They weren't Nazis.' 'The company was practically non-existent.' No one told stories about what was done, just what was not done. These were the most minimal accounts, and I didn't even know who had originated them. Elli? My grandpa? My great-aunt? Short sentences, in which a protective mechanism had smoothed away all meaning.

So, during the Nazi period the company had been practically bankrupt. But no word was ever spoken about what the company was supposed to have done in this almost insolvent state. The company was practically bankrupt. I sought clues in these sentences, repeated them to myself over and over. Like a word that you murmur to yourself so many times it loses all meaning.

And then I imagined what the company had been like during the Nazi period. What it must have looked like if the firm was practically bankrupt.

I imagined Martin sitting in the Kontor. In the house where I grew up. Just a few hundred metres from where he's now buried. I imagined him after too little sleep, rubbing his eyes, his bad eyes, which were increasingly letting him down. Screwing them up to decipher letters by the light of his desk lamp, just as I sometimes do with my bad eyes. I imagined him smoothing his moustache and, somewhere in the house, coffee being brewed. His chair creaks as he leans over the papers on his desk. Maybe the Kontor was what later became my bedroom, where as a child I would search fruitlessly for secret messages hidden under the loose tiles of the herringbone parquet floor. The room that looked out onto the street.

Martin picks up his pen – in my mind I make him left-handed – and then he pauses. He doesn't use that fountain pen, which always scratches holes in the paper, for anything. He doesn't write an invoice, a cost estimate, doesn't sign a contract. Because the firm, according to the story, hardly existed. The image of Martin freezes, while in the front garden outside the window, the sunflowers track the sun every day from left to right, always turned away from the window – for twelve years. Martin sits there and does nothing. No costing, no project planning, no ordering of materials. No construction.

The Nazi dictatorship lasted twelve years, and over those whole twelve years the construction firm was apparently barely active. But insolvency can't be held at bay for twelve years. So Martin must have written invoices, drawn up estimates. He must have used that fountain pen to answer queries, draw building plans. Pay workers. Cause buildings to go up.

So what did Martin and Elli do for twelve years, from 1933 to 1945? What names, what addresses were on those invoices? Who did they build for? What did the estimates pertain to? And what did they do with Frieda? Where does she fit in?

These are the stories that were not told. My family didn't talk about Martin or Elli. Or about Frieda. I had no info, no material that could help me to make Martin and Elli more tangible. To fill them out and release Elli's sister Frieda from her existence as a forgotten shadow. All I had were the family not-stories.

At this point, as a trainee journalist, I couldn't believe that there was no information about Frieda, while my world seemed to be overflowing with researchable facts. I Googled Frieda – there was nothing. I could find only fragments about the convent. The mention of apparent 'euthanasia' cases there. The internet threw masses of articles at me about the state authority for refugees, which is housed in the convent today, and about the reform of psychiatric care in the 1980s.

But Frieda was missing. And at this point I was still missing the tools and the determination to delve any deeper. Frieda Helms slowly retreated to the back of my mind, and I focused on learning the nuts and bolts of journalism. I interviewed animal rights activists, then never did that again, allowed people to smile nicely at me in press conferences, waited in the newspaper office for the cold sweat after we went to print, put together local editions and had local bosses shout at me for it. I phoned the police early in the morning and the fire brigade late at night. I interviewed prime ministers, all on my own, was proud of myself and then afterwards reversed into something and put a dent in the company car.

I became an editor, moved into national newspapers, went on maternity leave and came back. Still broke out in a cold sweat while sitting in a loop of video calls with highly polished actors. Wrote about everything and everyone and hardly ever about the things that interested me. By spring 2023 I had spent long enough begging and finally got a free pass: a few days for research and a topic of my choosing – as long as it was good. So what was it that I wanted? That I really wanted to know? A subject where I had questions but no answers? Frieda, who had been waiting in the shadows, raised her head. There it was again, the one question that would spark an immense number of others: where was Frieda?

I went back to my hometown several times for research, staying with my parents in the new house they had built on the land behind the old one. I picked up my old Dutch bike and cycled around Oldenburg. A medium-sized city with lots of students, small shops, pedestrian areas and farmers' markets, and a well-established cycling culture. A city that feels like the centre of the region. I rode my creaking bike to the

state archive. Or to interviews with people like the medical historian Ingo Harms. Or to the cemeteries. Always returning to the old pole, my childhood address.

I know all the streets here like the back of my hand. When I used to travel around the city, I would hardly see my surroundings, and when I reached my destination, I often didn't know how I'd got there. Cycling has always been a meditative thing for me. But now the journeys were different. To my eyes, the passing rows of houses were superimposed on each other. First, the Oldenburg of my childhood. My primary school. The Aldi we would later sneak off to in our lunch break at secondary school. The streets I once ran down as a distraught thirteen-year-old, soaked to the skin and sobbing because the guy I liked had been mean to me. This vague feeling of constriction that grew ever stronger with age. The feeling that Oldenburg already knew exactly who I was going to become.

Second was present-day Oldenburg: the Aldi was now an organic supermarket. New apartment blocks with floor-to-ceiling windows and pale bricks. I saw the name of our company on a construction-site fence, saw new projects. New buildings about which we would later be able to say: We built that. A little slice of immortality.

But now a third Oldenburg had appeared, one I hadn't been aware of before: the historical city. More precisely, the Oldenburg of the Nazi period, which was slowly taking shape through my research. An SA office had been located just a few houses down from my parents' place. My favourite cocktail bar from my teenage years was on a square that the Nazis had called 'Platz der SA'. Beside it had been a forced-labour camp. Places of violence hidden under normality. When I cycled it was suddenly as if a new film had been superimposed over my vision. No street was innocent any longer. On these research visits, I felt once more the constriction of the city. The weight of what was unspoken and buried deep.

The aim for the first stage of my search for Frieda was to find her grave. How hard can it be, I thought. In the meantime – that is, between my first visit to the family grave in 2017 and my cycling trips in 2023 – the historian Ingo Harms and a group of school students had published some new information on Kloster Blankenburg: a list of the dead from the convent care home where Frieda had lived during the Nazi period. And with it, the cemeteries where they were buried. Frieda Helms was on the list.

Frieda. I was seeing outside evidence of her for the first time. A piece of information that didn't come from my family, several pieces in fact: a name on a list, a date of death, age at death and an abbreviation that could lead me to her grave. No clues about who she had been, but for the first time, certainty that she had been.

I was relieved. Somewhere inside me, there was still a gnawing fear that I had got the wrong end of the stick. That there was no crime to solve here. That Frieda had died of natural causes. She did reach the age of 59, after all. Everyone has to die eventually.

Until this first clue, the difference between Frieda, who simply died, and Frieda, a potential victim of the Nazi regime, had been my interpretation of the facts. My belief that there must have been someone who stuck Frieda in the convent home, and it was her stay in this home that killed her. It was a decision to search for Frieda, to give her a story, to restore her biography. But what if I'd made a mistake? Then I would have stamped my feet, shouted 'injustice!' and pointed the finger dramatically at my family for no reason at all. And one didn't talk about family and company, so I felt.

I was kindergarten-aged when I realised my grandfather was rich. Really rich. A millionaire. I was so excited by this, I wanted to tell the other children. Wow, a genuine millionaire. I know him. And he's my grandpa. Ronja, my grandpa's a millionaire. He's got millions. A million billion. 'Like Scrooge McDuck!' I cried out to the girl next to me, as we stood by a bench in the sun-drenched cloakroom. Ronja, did you know that?

Mama crouched down by my coat-hook label, a picture of a child in a lantern parade. 'That's true, Geraldine, but don't tell the others. They might not know what that's like,' she said softly, as I remember it. I nodded and bit my lower lip, as I always did when I retreated into myself. And still do sometimes, when no one's looking. As one of my children does when they want a cuddle. Mama might not have given these words too much thought, in the morning rush before she had to hurry off again. The memory feels warm, not stern. Mama was trying to protect me from envy and resentment. But maybe the protection went both ways: she was protecting me, and the family. From talk. From attention. I listened to her and stopped talking to people about money or the company. Tried, with little success, to pretend that neither of these things existed. Over the years, these warnings were repeated. And I tried not to talk. Not when the firm really did go bankrupt. Not when we started new projects. Or rows. I didn't quite succeed. Company secrets and family secrets were impossible to separate.



Don't talk about the company, don't talk, don't talk, don't talk. The commandment, the protective mechanism, seemed older than my parents. My uncle – the one who'd sent me the email about Frieda – told me that in the past, he'd tried to speak to his parents about the Nazi regime. 'No one talked about the whole war and the Nazi period. It was blacked out,' he told me on the phone. It was the longest phone call the two of us had ever had. I wondered if I should ask all my relatives for permission to carry out this research, so deep was my conviction that I wasn't allowed to speak publicly about company or family. But with every find regarding Frieda, with every piece of evidence that she had really lived, and had once been a person, a baby, a child, a daughter, a sister, this commandment that was so firmly lodged in my mind slowly worked its way loose.

Frieda deserved to be remembered by us. She deserved a grave people could visit. Just like every other member of the family did. Each snippet of information I found in my search for Frieda changed my mantra, until it went: I am allowed to speak about my family. I am allowed. I'm allowed to look for Frieda. And I'm allowed to write about my family's involvement in her disappearance. In her being forgotten.

I would find Frieda, I thought. Because in Ingo Harms's publication, 'Helms, Frieda' had an abbreviation beside it. NF. I went to the 'euthanasia' memorial centre in Oldenburg to talk to the historian. The memorial rooms are housed in a small brick building in the grounds of the present-day psychiatric hospital in Wehnen. This village was also where the large psychiatric hospital of the Nazi era had been, with several thousand patients – and more than a thousand victims of 'euthanasia'. The home where Frieda had spent her final years, by contrast, was a small offshoot outside the city. The memorial rooms were still cold when I entered in my dripping rain cape. Surrounded by information boards and an old hospital bed, Harms told me that, unlike many others, Frieda had not been buried right there in the convent grounds, but in the Neue Friedhof – the 'new cemetery'. NF. A cemetery I knew, though none of my relatives are buried there. The Neue Friedhof is a long way from the convent: seven kilometres as the crow flies. In the west of the city, while the convent is on the eastern side.

Harms was able to tell me a lot about the psychiatric hospital, and something about the smaller convent home, too, but scarcely any details regarding Frieda, what her

daily life was like. What she died of. If she'd had to carry out forced labour. I kept asking and asking, glad to have an expert in front of me. 'Most relatives don't come with such specific questions,' he said. I still didn't have a story for Frieda, but at least I might have a place. A grave where I would find her.

I cycled back to my parents' house and prepared myself to visit Frieda. I went into the garden that my ancestors had also tended. I cut a peony with my mother's secateurs, because I thought it was beautiful. Because it suddenly occurred to me that maybe no one had ever laid flowers on Frieda's grave. The peony was dark red, full and heavy. I wanted to bring Frieda a flower from my family's garden, because I'd always done that for the family's dead. Because Frieda deserved the same rituals.

I was going to meet Frieda. But I didn't have much time. The train back to my own home would be leaving soon, back to my own world, where I never had time in the morning before nursery and work. Back to my flat, stuffed full of our own things, our own chaos. I dashed through my parents' tidy, newly built house. In a hurry, I fetched the bike from the shed and pedalled away. Out of the driveway, turn right, along my old route to school, then down the shortcut behind the playground and past the old driving school. The peony flapping, already slightly limp, in the headwind. The sweat-soaked t-shirt clung to my back. Would I tell Frieda things, as I sometimes did at my maternal grandpa's grave, murmuring softly to myself? I parked the old Dutch bike in the racks outside the cemetery wall and tried to get my bearings. Cemeteries are made for people who are in the know. You can only find your way to a grave if you already know where it is. I asked the flower to hold out a little longer until I could fetch a green vase for it.

I walked down the straight rows, past the people grieving for other people in the morning silence, tending graves, not letting their loved ones be forgotten. I felt like an intruder, because I wasn't mourning people who were gone and my memories of them. The others had a respectable reason for being here; I was a voyeur of death. In the far left-hand corner, just before the woodland burial ground, I found a plaque between two benches. Printed photos of Kloster Blankenburg and people who'd died in the home. And although time was short, I read the memorial plaque to the victims of 'euthanasia' in Blankenburg. To prepare myself for Frieda. The plaque was based on information from Harms, the medical historian from the cold memorial rooms. It said that 103 people had died in Kloster Blankenburg during the Nazi period,

presumably murdered. Again, I found no clues about life in the convent, only the figures of the many deaths. 52 people had been buried in the cemetery of the convent itself, and a further 46 patients here in the Neue Friedhof – Frieda among them, so the historian suspected. A few were interred in other cemeteries.

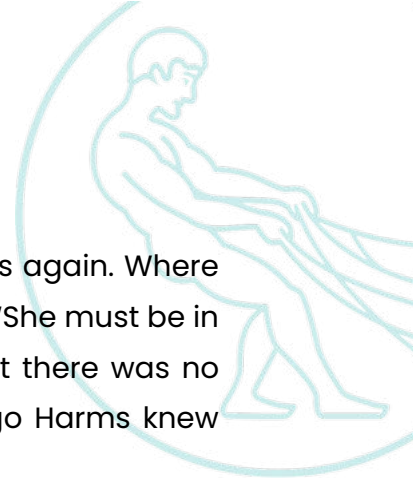
The people buried at the convent had been exhumed in December 1941. Their coffins taken from the convent cemetery to the Neue Friedhof. The home was being closed down to make room for a hospital, and the residents who were still alive were deported to southern Germany. These relocated graves, transported from Blankenburg to Oldenburg at the end of 1941 to make way for building works, were those that Harms had managed to find as part of a project with school students. 52 bodies, 52 coffins, 52 graves. The Blankenburg plot.

I turned away from the plaque and found two rows of uniform, roughly carved stones right behind me, lying on the earth like pillows. The resting places of the Blankenburg dead. I walked down the rows, wondering with every name whether Frieda had known the person it belonged to. Had she been friends with Anna Dorothee, who was a similar age? Did she hear baby Peter crying in the convent, just one year old when he died? I read about Meta, Gretchen, Heino and Maxi Moritz and Wilhelm. Josef and the sisters Angela and Maria, who died just a few days apart. Karl and Lürer and Johanne, 52 names, 52 dates of birth, 52 dates of death, and 52 strangers' lives spanning them. Where had these lives touched Frieda's? And who remembers these 52 people today? Who brings flowers from their garden to these graves?

I walked up and down the rows again and again, checked the time on my phone. Went back and forth. Was I just too tired? Frieda's name was missing.

I walked quietly, quietly – I was in a cemetery after all – up to a man who wasn't holding any flowers, just a small dog on a lead. Asked him if there were any more marked graves from Blankenburg here. 'Terrible business,' he said, as his dog sniffed my leg. 'No, just these two rows.'

I'd thought I was getting closer to Frieda, but she was still hidden, invisible behind the wall of forgetting that my family had constructed around her. The forgetting that also seemed to surround Kloster Blankenburg. I laid the flower on an empty patch of ground and took a photo. As a makeshift gesture. The traffic roared past the cemetery wall.



Back at home, surrounded by my familiar chaos, I called Ingo Harms again. Where were the other bodies at the Neue Friedhof? Where could Frieda be? 'She must be in the Gertrudenheim plot, then,' he suggested. The problem was that there was no longer a marked Gertrudenheim plot in the cemetery. Not even Ingo Harms knew exactly where it was located.

The next few weeks saw an unexpected phone sprint around companies, authorities and other offices. I called my way through the Oldenburg parish officials – but they didn't know about any old names of burial plots. 'There are only two other group plots,' the parish employee told me on the phone. One was the 'deaconesses' graves'. But after a few emails and calls to the foundation that administers the deaconesses' graves, I could cross that one off the list.

The final alternative was the memorial graves for those who had died in the First and Second World Wars. The parish office directed me to the Parks Authority. They directed me back again, and then to an archivist who never got back to me. Nothing but dead ends. No one could tell me which graves had been situated in this area previously, or when this memorial site had come into existence. How could something as perpetual as a cemetery know so little about its own past? In the meantime, I kept visiting the Neue Friedhof, hoping for a chance encounter. I moved around the rows of graves like a chess piece, from one corner of the cemetery to the next.

When I called offices and authorities, the people on the other end of the line often said: my condolences. And my reaction was usually: Mmm. Because I wasn't in need of comfort. I didn't know Frieda. Until a few years ago, Frieda hadn't even been part of my history. I was ashamed. As if I was dressing myself up in someone else's grief. Making myself taller on her back.

I was researching Frieda whether she wanted it or not. Every story I would tell about her would be from my perspective. My idea of her. I was imposing my version on her, however pale and vague that version might be. But in my search for Frieda, I still thought I would find something real. Lay bare something unspoken that until then, I had only felt. Explain a little of the constriction I sensed whenever I was in Oldenburg.

I used up my research days for the paper before the height of summer. I was annoyed and under pressure. I needed to have something to show, after all this time. But instead of an answer in a prompt, concise, two-page piece of reportage – instead of 16,000 characters, written in such a way that they could be cut to fit all formats of the widest range of editions – I had a notebook full of unanswered questions.

I handed in my notice as an editor in the summer of 2023. And although in this context, it might sound like this was about Frieda, it wasn't. I think I was searching more generally in life. For direction. For what I really wanted to write about. For how I wanted to shape my life. I went freelance – and from then on, I could carry out my research entirely at my own pace.