



*Manfred Kramer in La Traviata.*

catalogued the money she received from the sale of some stocks and property, and none of it ever found its way into her brother's account—though he was listed as an equal beneficiary. It hadn't been enough money to dramatically alter anyone's life, but my grandparents had led such a modest and penny-pinching life that the extra funds could have relieved them of at least a bit of the burden.

Alma hadn't only cheated her brother, she had also been insanely jealous of his wife, who by chance was also named Alma. She wrote a letter informing the bishop of their Mormon church that her sister-in-law's eldest son, Franz, was actually an illegitimate son born to a different man. The irony, I had learned that day in the records, was that her own first child had also been conceived out of wedlock and was born only twenty days after her marriage to the Nazi Erich Kramer.

"She could be a vindictive woman," says Manfred. "I wouldn't put anything past her." He tells stories of how on frequent occasions she tried to sour his own marriage to Delores, his delightful if thoroughly American wife. In marrying her, as in his choosing life as a California furniture merchant, he seems to have tried to drift as far from Germany and his mother as possible. After finishing his U.S. military service, which included a stint in Germany, he never returned to his original homeland. And he never again saw his estranged father before his death in 1983.

I ask cautiously whether he doesn't think that part of his mother's bitterness might have to do with the nature of the man she married. Manfred shrugs that it's possible. It seems clear, he says, that her pregnancy prompted the marriage, and that she had been in love with someone else at the same time, an officer in the navy about whom she spoke wistfully until her death. "I'm not sure she ever loved my father."

A part of him probably hoped that she didn't.

Manfred's father had been a true believer, having joined the SA

was set on violently reimposing his authority over the household with his “extreme view of discipline and order,” as Franz puts it.

Franz reaches into a cabinet drawer and retrieves some *Feldpost*—a stack of correspondence that his father sent to his young son from the front. The postcards are tied together with a red ribbon, which Franz’s mother strung through a punchhole in the cards to preserve them for her son. He shows me one that was dated October 5, 1944—Franz’s eighth birthday. The postmark is from Litzmannstadt—Poland’s Lodz—where he is serving as a staff sergeant.

It reads:

*My dear Lads:*

*I don't want to let Franz's birthday pass without sending you greetings. Behave yourselves always and obey your grandparents, your mother, and your teachers. Don't forget your father. With heartfelt greetings. Daddy.*

And then at the bottom of the page in capital letters: *LONG LIVE THE FÜHRER. LONG LIVE GREATER GERMANY.*

“You see how loyal he was until the very end,” says Franz. “It was clear to everyone the war was going bad, but he was true to the cause to the very end.”

We search through the cards further. The postmarks follow the course of the war, and Erich Kramer seems to have landed wherever the action was. He was part of the original invasion in Poland, and he joined the invasion of France and Yugoslavia as well. The postmarks move east to Melitopol in the Ukraine from January to March of 1943.

Most troubling to Franz, however, are the cards in 1944 from Lodz. The Jewish ghetto had been disbanded that year, its residents shipped off to extermination camps, primarily Auschwitz and Theresienstadt. The military police, Franz figures, certainly would have played a role.

“I’d rather not know what he did there,” says Franz. “That was a terrible address. It troubles me a great deal what he might have done there.”

I look at the front of the card from Litzmannstadt. It bears a naive painting of two sweet girls with red headscarves playing wooden flutes. The date is November 2, 1944, Litzmannstadt—Lodz, Gr. Kaserne, Gneisenaustrasse.

Franz frowns: “One only chose the most trusted of the Nazis to break up the ghettos.”

I remind myself that my bloodline is different from Franz’s. I find odd comfort in remembering that his father, the good Nazi, doesn’t have any Schumann blood coursing through him.

My own grandfather—his mother’s brother—had avoided the draft in the first world war by making believe that he was crazy. He convinced recruiters, an oft-told family story goes, and he thus wasn’t required to go to war. He was far too soft to survive the battlefield, and knew it. I repeat this story to Franz, making some awkward joke about how ours seems to have been a typical German family: mad poets and brutal soldiers.

“In every old established German family there are such stories.” Franz smiles as Uschi pours more coffee.

I read through more of the cards held together by the red ribbon. None of them speaks of the war, though all are sent from the front. Erich Kramer instead uses the small space available on the back of each card to scribble instructions to his two boys about how they should behave themselves in his absence. This paternal approach continues through to his time in a Soviet gulag. One letter sent from “Lager 7099-3” in Alma Ata responds to a note from Franz’s mother about problems the boy was having at home and in school. “Hopefully your next school marks will improve,” he writes. But at the same time he reminds Franz that learning his Sunday school lessons at the Mormon church could be much more important for his later life than anything else.

The irony of the imprisoned Nazi preaching religion to his son is lost on Franz. “He felt very strongly about the church,” he says. Indeed, says Franz, Mormonism and National Socialism were his father’s two great passions. Both worlds, Franz suggests, offer a man discipline and a doctrine of absolutes by which to lead his life. One requires absolute faith in some superior being, and the other demands absolute loyalty to a Führer.

What did he tell you about the war when he came home? I ask.

“He never talked about it. No, that’s not right. Some nights he would