

Story from Süddeutsche Zeitung, Print: [Heft 45/2014](#)

<http://sz-magazin.sueddeutsche.de/texte/anzeigen/42371/Die-Dame-in-Schwarz>

Original: "Die Dame in Schwarz" by Erwin Koch (Protocol). Illustration: Paula Bulling

This translation: Eulenspargel, 11.2014

The Lady in Black

All her life Ursula von Arx searched for her mother's love - and for the name of her father.
The story of an unwanted person.



How to begin?

With the man who begot me, Myran Meyer, and who never learnt that I exist?

With the woman who gave birth to me, Marianne von Arxt?

Or, quasi as consolation, with a phrase? - Life is no request concert.

They loved each other, Myran and Marianne, he a teacher, she a dress maker, beginning of 1945.
Yes, I think they loved each other.

Because, as I asked my best friend ten years after father's death in August 2012, whether he, Myran, who had never married, ever told him of a great love in his life, the friend admitted that my father, since an old man, had only once spoken of a woman, a dress maker from *Zug*, that he had coveted and lost, as beautiful as no other.

Anything more?

Nothing.

I hope they loved each other, Myran Meyer and Marianne von Arx, as they made me.

Here my birth certificate -

On the second of November one thousand nine hundred and forty-five, fifteen minutes past eleven a.m. was born to *Zürich, In der Hub 34*: von Arx, Ursula Verena, daughter of von Arx, Maria Anna, born October 7 1922, of *Kerns, Canton Obwalden*, resident in *Zürich*. Excerpt from the birth register of the registry office *Zürich*. From Volume VI, page 11, No. 6477 of the year 1945.

My mother was twenty-three.

I think I have reconciled myself with her.

As I saw mum, terminally ill, for the last time on April 29, 1986, she asked: Can you forgive me?

Yes, mum, I can.

I called her mum.

Did I touch her in parting?

I don't know.

Could be that I didn't dare to.

For seven long years I hadn't seen her.

Next day she was dead, April 30 1986.

Marianne's father, my grandfather, was a carpenter in *Zug*, roman catholic, upright. Marianne had five brothers and two sisters. The eldest sister, as I know today, brought her, pregnant out of wedlock, to *Zürich* to a catholic home for single mothers and for those that were on the way, the Monika home at *In der Hub 34*. The people were very kind when I called to ask if I could visit the house, sixty-eight years after my birth. I travelled to *Zürich* by train, took the tram to *Irchel*, tramstop *Milchbuck*, March 27 2014. I didn't dare asking in which room I came into the world.

But it was good to see the place where everything began -

My open skull, the cerebellum in the light.

The palatine cleft.

My hunchback, the crooked spine, kyphosclerosis.

The right half-lung that hardly functions.

They immediately called a priest who christened me, November 2 1945. In the *Zürich* children's hospital they closed my head, lay me on my stomach, as I know today, and on the question of my probable life span, they estimated seven weeks.

I hope that a copy of my erstwhile case history will arrive soon.

Luzern, March 28 2014.

Children's Hospital *Zürich*

Steinwiesstraße 75

Dear Sir or Madam

in reference to my telephone call of this morning I would like to ask you to send me, in case they exist somewhere, copies of my clinical history. As I already mentioned over the phone, immediately after my birth in the Monika home (November 2 1945), I was treated in the Children's Hospital *Zürich*. According to your information, the files of the time before 1965 have since been archived in the State Archive of the Canton *Zürich*. I would be very obliged, if you could arrange for me to be sent a copy of them. I am now 68 years old and would like to find answers concerning the events in my life. I would be happy to call on you, should this be necessary.

Yours sincerely.

I don't know why I believe that I had lain in the Children's Hospital *Zürich* for half a year, on my stomach. I no longer know who told me that I was brought to the University Clinic Balgrist in which I spent another half year in plaster. At some point, 1946 or later, I lived in the house of my uncle Sepp and his wife, in *Sarnen, Obwalden*. He was a teacher, a painter, an artist.

One day, I must have been about three, he seated me in his car, and we drove to *Kerns*. He stopped before a house in the middle of the village, and my uncle Sepp, Marianne's brother took me by the hand and led me into a living room, not large. A woman sat there, three girls stood around, they stared at me. Toys lay on the table, things I had never seen before, and the uncle said: This is Mrs. F., from now on she is your mother, be nice to her.

That is now your mother.

And I stand in this room, and they stare at me. I wish to cry.

I wanted to cry.

Now I am almost seventy. I don't know when that was, the last time I cried.

Before retiring, I was a doctor's chief secretary in the Canton Hospital *Luzern*. I was secretary there for thirty seven years, pathology, ophthalmology, oncology, haematology, gastro-enterology, urology, neuro-habilitation.

I was good at work.

I don't cry, I want to learn how to.

And I remember how glad I was as night came and I was shown a bed. Urseli, that is now your bed. I climbed into this wooden bed beside the wooden wall, and tucked myself in, alone at last, a white thick heavy blanket over me.

My oldest recollection.

Maybe my worst.

Mrs. F. was a hat maker, Mr. F. a carpenter, they already had five children, I was their sixth, youngest, financed by the Disability Insurance of the Swiss Confederation.

What did I call them?

Mother.

Father.

Although I knew, that they weren't my parents.

For whatever reasons I never had parents. That's the way it was.

Urseli von Arx has no proper parents.

I never asked myself why that was so, I didn't dare to. I thought that's the way it had to be.

You don't deserve anything else.

Every now and then this thought comes to me even today.

You deserve it like that, that's the way it has to be.

I don't know if anyone can understand how difficult it is to not think of something of which you know that you shouldn't be thinking of.

Now I am almost seventy, and at the beginning.

Those that love me - a handful of people -, call me Ursulina.

Because I am little, 137 centimeter.

Thirty-eight kilogram.

A birdie.

Which one day discovered it had a real mother, Marianne.

My foster mother groused that Marianne emigrated to Canada with a Swiss straight after my birth, and gave birth to a second daughter there.

I didn't know any more.

Learning came naturally to me, I was good at school, and sometimes brought better marks home than Helen, the youngest daughter of the Family F., who was in the same class. The woman I called

mother said: Such a hunchback must make a difference of at least one mark.

Lying in bed was what I liked best.

Then, I was around eight years old, the Disability Insurance sent for me. I had to go to *Zürich*, Klinik Balgrist to be fitted with a corset, to prevent my back from deteriorating further. Rods of steel covered with buckskin. Every half year for the following ten years I travelled to Zürich for adjustment. I wore this kennel during the day. At night I put it beside my bed in *Kerns*. Over the years it became bigger and bigger.

Does your hunchback hurt?, the girls at school asked.

It doesn't hurt.

May I stroke it?

Go ahead.

How hard it is.

Only once the teacher told me to go to the climbing pole.

But Sir! Ursula can't do that!, the class cried.

I was glad to be in bed - and at school.

On a Sunday afternoon, all wore their Sunday dress, the family F. wandered up to *Sankt Niklausen*, I went with them. And I lost a shoe. I lost a shoe and went on without this costly Sunday shoe. I didn't dare to mention my shoe is gone, I'm missing a shoe.

Back home my foster mother asked at first: Where is your second shoe?

Lost.

Then she said nothing for a whole week.

I don't remember that she stroked me.

Nor taken me on her lap.

Nor that anyone had stroked me at any time.

Does that sound weepy?

Life is no request concert.

I have never allowed me a school sweetheart, not even in secret. I thought I don't deserve a school sweetheart. Years later, in the Hospital in *Luzern*, I fell in love with a doctor.

You are married, I said.

Yes, and?, he said.

And basically I was glad that morality stood me by.

When I again had to go to *Zürich* I might have been ten or eleven. My steel corset. The workshops of the Clinic Balgrist were in the cellar. Men with precise saws and small hammers. Suddenly one of them pressed me to himself, held me with both arms, pushed his hand between my legs and groaned. I didn't grasp it, stood there, didn't understand, and then did understand, fought and shouted and ran through a long, long corridor. Doors left, doors right, always in fear that the man was behind me. Still three meters, two. I have never told anyone of that, no father, no mother, no mum.

No-one would believe you. Just be glad that you exist.

I fear, no-one would understand that.

I don't understand it myself.

Every Sunday, the woman who was now my mother ordered her five children and me to go to church. She scolded us if we looked around in the church or laughed. When a dead person was laid out in the ossuary, then she sent me to bring a card, sincere condolences from family F. I had to leave it in a basket next to the dead body, in accordance with the tradition. I still dream of that today - I, alone in the ossuary with a dead person that I didn't know.

Or I dream, I were alone in the forest.

I'm afraid of the forest, I don't know why.

When I lived in *Luzern*, after escaping from the village of *Kerns*, with the living room facing the lake, but the bedroom towards the forest, I couldn't endure the pines, and moved out after one year. One day Mrs. F. told me that my mother, Marianne, who had given me birth, had come back from Canada together with her husband and daughter, and would now live in *Zürich*.

I was eleven years old.

Being in bed was what I liked best.

And weeks later I was told Marianne wanted to see me.

My real mother.

The eldest daughter of the Family F. brought me to *Zürich*. In the main railway station she came towards me, my mum. She bent down to me, took me in her arms. A slim woman in a two-piece costume. I think she mentioned my name, Ursula, Ursuli. She stroked my hair. That's all I know. But I remember that I had a stomach ache.

My stomach ache.

That I always have when I want to cry.

Stomach ache and shortness of breath.

I hadn't seen mum for seven years until shortly before she died on April 30, 1986. She didn't want to see me any more, and I had given up asking.

Seven years.

Finally, some months before her death, my uncle called, Sepp von Arx. Marianne is lying in the *Zürich* Waidspital, pancreas carcinoma, pancreatic cancer. And so I went to *Zürich*, knocked on the door. Mum sat on the bed, stood up as she saw me and pushed me out to the corridor, across to a small room, and closed the door quickly.

Up to now I don't know why she didn't stand by me.

Because I had brought her disgrace?

Because I have a hunchback and am little?

Because I have a speech defect?

Two years secondary school in *Kerns*, a third in *Sarnen*. I wanted to become nurse or interpreter.

Mum sent Christmas cards. I met her once a year in *Zürich*, in *Luzern*. She came in two-piece costumes, smiled, took me in her arms.

Mum said her husband doesn't know that she was meeting me, her husband doesn't want her to see me.

I asked nothing.

Didn't ask, mum, why did you go to Canada after my birth in 1945? Because I was a cripple?

What concerns me most today, in May 2014, is this mail from my half-sister -

April 17 2014

Dear Ursula

I am very pleased to hear from you! It isn't a burden for me that you ask, when did Marianne emigrate. It must have been 1951/1952. I know that I came into the world shortly after my parents reached British Columbia, on 25.02.1953.

Best wishes.

Life is no request concert.

Almost seventy, I now find out that everything was different from what I had been told.

That Marianne, my mum, didn't emigrate until I was already six or seven years old.

Where was she in the years before that?

Beside my bed of plaster?

Just before her death, Marianne lay in the hospital of *Männedorf*. I called her, March 1986. A young woman picked up the phone, my half-sister, in the world since 33 years. I gave her my name, Ursula von Arx, *Luzern*.

She only said: Sorry, I don't know you.

That was the truth.

She didn't know me, my half-sister didn't know of my existence.

Mum had concealed me from her daughter.

Now I want to learn the real story. I owe it to myself.

After the secondary school I was sent to *Tafers*, Canton *Fribourg*, to the Vincentian Sisters of Charity. I stayed a year there and learnt French. Then I was in *Bulle* for three years, went to the commercial college of the Franciscan Menzinger Sisters.

We wore blue two-piece uniforms, with white gloves.

Three times I got an admonishment, with copy to the guardian in *Kerns*.

Because I read Camus, *La Peste*.

Because I read the magazine *Annabelle*, therein wedding announcements and advertisements.

Because I had sealed the letter that I sent to mum.

Today I have to laugh.

Over and over again I wrote Marianne letters, asked her to visit me in the boarding school. She rarely came.

Once we sat in a restaurant, I was twenty and asked: Mum, who is my father?

Stop it.

Why aren't I allowed to know that?

Because you have no right to.

But I *do* have a right to know that, mum.

I never want to hear this question again.

Then mum came still more rarely.

Once, I've forgotten when it was, she gave me a piece of embroidery, a flower. Years later, before her death, I threw it away.

As I visited the best friend of my father in August 2012 he said that he knew Myran Meyer well enough to know that he would have searched for me, had he known of my existence.

My stomach ache.

Myran Meyer died on July 15 2002.

I left the boarding school in 1966 with grade 5.6. I would have liked to stay in the *Suisse Romande*. Mrs. F., whom I called mother, meant that I felt most comfortable in *Kerns*. Her Son, an electrician, needed someone in the office. So I returned to the house that I had left four years earlier. During the day I worked as secretary on the ground floor, and at night lay in the wooden room, covered by the heavy blanket.

Mrs. F never knocked on the door when she came into my room.

She said: If you don't like it here, you can go.

I stayed seven years.

On Saturdays I went to *Zürich*, took the tram up to *Fluntern*, attended the doctor's secretary school, for a whole year. In the final exam I picked the question that I would have preferred not to pick, the subject Lungs. The lecturer asked: What does the term *Cor pulmonale* tell you?

Today I know it.

I passed despite that.

Mother, I have a position in the Canton Hospital *Luzern*.

So.

On March 1 I will start work there.

Then you won't need to live here any more, said the son.

I was now twenty seven.

Once a year I met mum.

I'm not blaming you, mum. What's done can't be undone. But please tell me, who is my father.

Stop it.

Why?

Just stop.

I never had a picture of my father. I never thought of how he could be, big or small, rich or poor, priest or robber.

I just wanted to know.

So that I don't startle at night, alone in the forest, alone in the cemetery.

I moved to *Sarnen*, *Brünigstraße*, lived with a girl friend and went to work in *Luzern*, at the Pathological Institute, from the beginning of March 1973 to the end of May 1975.

Sometimes a child asked me why I talk so peculiar.

Because I have a hole in the palate.

Does it hurt?

It did hurt - not in the palate. Of all my deficiencies, inner and outer, my speech defect hurt the most. Sometimes I sit in a bus, a girl friend next to me, I begin to talk. Suddenly someone would imitate me.

So I prefer to stay silent.

Having put down the phone still fills me with pride today

In the end I moved to *Luzern*, lived in a small room, then in the *Hirtenhof*, the living room towards the lake, the bedroom towards the forest. I stayed only a year, then moved on to *Kriens*, after that to *Bramberg*, where I stayed for almost thirty years, looking across to the mountains Pilatus and Rigi,

not a bad time. Mum hardly wrote any more.

She now lived in *Männedorf*. And when I met her in *Luzern* or *Zürich*, she railed against men, all men are the same, men are morons.

Mum, you did what you could for me, but tell me: who is my father?

I believe that the biggest victory that I, almost seventy, could celebrate, would be the control over my thoughts - no longer having to think that Ursula von Arx deserves what ails her.

Every now and then Marianne's brothers and sisters met to hold a family feast. I was invited, I went along, stood on the sidelines, silent, little, humpbacked, and asked my uncles, my aunts about my father.

If we knew, dear Ursula, we would tell you.

Three, four days after mum's death, Sepp called on the phone, Marianne's brother, he said, a mistake occurred in the writing of the obituary notice, my name was missing on the list of mourners.

Why?

Your name was on the first version, but Marianne's husband lost it. On the second version it was missed out by some oversight.

That I put down the phone still fills me with pride today.

In 1976 I let the palatine cleft be closed, that hole in my mouth, and went to speech therapy. I can't describe what I felt, as I heard my voice for the first time on an audio tape.

That wasn't me.

It was me.

Not being able to talk normally disables more than a hunchback, a defect heart valve, a lung that underperforms.

Since fifteen years I wear a mask at night, the end of a CPAP apparatus, Continuous Positive Airway Pressure, that helps me to breathe, trains my weak lungs - health can't find much room within me. I fear, I'm going to need oxygen soon.

No request concert.

I worked for two years at the pathology institute, then ten in the eye clinic, 1975 to 1984, the tenth was bad, a year of anguish.

Could be that I, little and quiet, invite others to load their garbage on me.

Could well be.

But a point comes, when I am no longer prepared to endure the moping of my boss.

No longer prepared to burden myself with the guilt when a nurse injected an operated patient with the wrong medicine, despite the fact that I had passed on the correct name of the medicine.

And asked my boss: Is my work bad, or insufficient?

No, he said, otherwise I wouldn't have hired you. And your hunchback, you already had that back then.

My head physician -

I switched to general medicine.

Played cello at home, not the standard size, a seven-eighth cello, reconciled myself with the world.

Bach, Vivaldi, Brahms.

Today the arm hurts, the shoulder, when I take up the bow. I hardly play any more.

But still, if anything consoles, it's this music, Vivaldi's cello concert, c minor, played by Sol

Gabetta, Bach's St John Passion, the Matthew Passion, Mozart's Requiem.

I began drawing, painting, clay modelling - my living room is full of figures and heads.

Visited Greece, seven times, every time a different island, travelled to Tunisia, Israel, in the USA. I was eight times in Berlin, maybe the city I like the most.

Maybe because he was there - Myran Meyer, father without child.

Yes, I think they loved each other, as they made me, Myran and Marianne, in the cold January of 1945.

Recently someone asked me, what would I say to my father, if I ever were to meet him, somewhere, somehow.

I was startled.

I was so startled, that I could hardly get air, didn't eat for days.

Because, I thought, to talk with my father, even in heaven, is something I'm not entitled to.

Maybe he doesn't even want me to talk with him.

I sat on the rearmost bench, as the pastor of *Männedorf* began the funeral service, May 3 1986.

Marianne K., my real mother, were a woman with deepest christian conviction, helpful and open for the hardships of others. In local asylums she had cared for the elderly and the sick, tirelessly, inspired by commitment for the weak. I sat on the rearmost bench, my relatives at the front -

I don't know if you know this wish to not exist, to dissolve into nothing, now and instantly.

I sat on the rearmost bench, my aunts and uncles at the front.

Helpful and open for the hardships of others -

Then we went to the cemetery.

I stood right at the back.

Then a young woman came to me, beautiful and tall. She smiled shyly and took my arm, drew me to the grave, it was my half-sister Evi. I found myself amongst the uncles and aunts and wanted to

leave because I felt sick.

Away from there.

But I stayed.

I always stayed, my whole life long.

Although I don't know why Marianne kept me secret throughout her life, I am reconciled with her.

I'm not furious with her.

If at all, then with me.

Because I have believed for so long that I have to praise and be thankful for my existence.

Yesterday, as I couldn't sleep, I wrote this sentence -

The knowledge of having behaved wrongly my whole life long makes me sad and sick.

Weeks after mum's burial, her eldest brother Otto invited me to a meeting. All uncles and aunts were present, all seven of them.

And I.

I said, I can face the truth, even if it's bitter, but not lies.

Please tell me, who is my father.

A long silence ensued.

Broken by the eldest: Ursula, we really don't know. We have never bothered about it, we had our own families and problems.

Two years later a girl cousin, daughter of this eldest uncle, admitted to me that her father had said once, that, when Marianne was pregnant, he and his brothers and sisters had signed an agreement to never reveal to anyone who made her pregnant.

Because my father was a monster?

Because he or I brought disgrace over the family?

From that time I began to wear black clothes.

I like black. I find, black fits me. Black clothing, red lips, red nails.

Black protects.

Black means security, being at one with me, not fearing people, not having to talk.

In the hospital some called me "The Lady in Black".

In 1999 my uncle Paul died, also a painter. I went to his burial, saw my relatives once more.

As your mother was pregnant with you, said Sepp, she tied her stomach flat so that no-one would notice the pregnancy.

Mum.

I didn't dare to think the thinkable.

My mum.

Hardly room in her stomach.

Not until seven years later, 2006 did I ask a doctor if it were possible that the condition in which I was born could have resulted from Marianne having for months bound her stomach flat.

My open skull.

The palatine cleft.

My hunchback, the twisted spine.

The right half-lung that isn't performing properly.

The heart valve that fails to close.

Quite probable, the doctor said.

I never blamed her.

Maybe I should have.

I worked.

Gastroenterology.

I could work well.

In July 2006 a knot was found in my right breast. I decided on a total amputation, swallowed cytostatics for five years, Arimidex, and had luck until today.

Played cello, again and again cello. I modelled, comforted myself with Bach, Brahms, Mozart, travelled to Berlin time and again.

And went to the burials of the uncles and the aunts.

Before Christmas 2011 I gave up the lodging in which I had lived for almost thirty years, *Bramberg*, moved into a housing estate at the edge of the town, two-and-a-half rooms on the second floor, bright, big, that's enough.

Then -

Two years ago, in January 2012, a cousin called on the phone, Kathrin, the daughter of Paul.

Whether it would be OK if she dropped by.

I forgot on which day she came.

She comes and sits by me.

And begins: Ursula, we, your cousins, have decided to at last tell you who your father is, who your father was.

I stopped breathing.

Myran Meyer.

Myran Meyer?

Teacher in *Zug*, then pensioner in *Andermatt*, died ten years ago.

You all knew who my father was?

Not all, Kathrin said.

And why are you telling me only now?

I'm sorry.

Myran Meyer, how do you spell that?

I went to the computer and typed the name.

*20.7.1907 in *Cham ZG*, from *Andermatt UR*. Old teacher in *Andermatt*. Grew up in *Zug*. Lower high school in *Einsiedeln*, teacher's college in *Zug* and *Schwyz* (teacher's certificate 1927). Stage direction and drama lessons, University studies in *Zürich* and *Paris* (Sorbonne). Teacher at private schools in *Morges*, *Château-d'Œx*, *Zugerberg* (Montana), *Ecole Du Montcel* by *Versailles*, Swiss school in *Barcelona* 1937/42. At the *Stadtschule Zug* 1942/72. In between as musician, actor, stage director, reporter, commercial manager, artist impresario in Paris, Marseille, Berlin, Vienna, North Africa and Spain. Freelance radio collaborator and publicist, own hand puppet show. Stage direction at popular, youth and children's theatres. Member of the Regional School TV Commission 1963/69.

After midnight I shut down the computer. I couldn't sleep, wanted to cry, breathe, stand up, walked around the flat. Next day I called the Swiss Writers' Guild.

A woman picked up the phone.

She said, she knew my father well.

How was he?

How he was? Self-assured, big, strong, talented with fantasy. And he could be humorous, very humorous. If you like, I can send you his obituary, bulletin 1/03.

myran Meyer.

I'm getting accustomed to the idea that I will never find out why I was not allowed to learn of him. And I assume that they loved each other, myran and Marianne.

That's enough.

After retirement, 1972, he moved to *Andermatt*, Canton *Uri*, into the valley that his father, my grandfather, had once left. There myran became archivist of the Community Corporation *Ursern*.

End of June 2012 I called the town hall. Middle of July I got on the train to *Andermatt*. There, a man showed me the family tree of the Meyers. Noble people, councilmen, chief justices, officers, chief magistrates, hoteliers, stagecoach horse farmers, tourist guides, ski instructors. Myran Meyer was said to be a sociable person, welcomed in the inns of the valley, a collector of stories, tireless. Then the man gave me a CD with father's many essays, a witch-hunt in the *Urnerland*, travelling over the *Gotthard* pass in winter, such things.

And you believe me, when I say I am his daughter?

You are so much like him, said the man, that there's no need for a genetic analysis.

Before I left, he gave me father's small magnifying glass, his old pocket knife, a tape measure, his pencil with wood of mahogany.

Then I looked for his grave. Snow lay over the cemetery. I didn't find it, I didn't find it.

Not even that.

And back home at my table, as I wanted to write something with his mahogany pencil, maybe Myran Meyer, his name, or anything -

I couldn't, it didn't work.

myran Meyer.

Weeks later, on a Thursday, August 23 2012, I travelled to *Andermatt* and went to the house of his best friend, *Gotthardstraße*. I asked whether Myran, who never married, had ever told him of a great love in his life.

Only once, he was already very old, had he mentioned a woman, a dress maker of *Zug*, that he coveted and lost, beautiful as no other.

Anything else?

Nothing.

Then he said: Had Myran known, that you existed, he would have searched for you.

At last I found his grave. A flat, green stone in the midst of flowers, all wilted, Myran Meyer, 1907-2002.

Papa.

I froze.

And how to end?

With a new trip to Berlin, the nails green, the scarf in the wind.
