

MEMORIES OF MY BROTHER MAX PEIFFER WATENPHUL

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The first memories of my brother Max are from the year 1917. "Ma," as I called him, was in uniform. He was standing at the window of the large barracks in Mülheim, and he winked and smiled at me. I was four years old then. Later, he came home from the Bauhaus to visit, bringing along many friends who made a deep impression on me. A woman, Vally Neumann, who was his classmate in Johannes Itten's preliminary course at the Bauhaus, sat on our terrace amidst many cans of paint and did batik. I can still see her short hair and ponytail, which were unusual at the time.

My brother painted watercolors and wrote poems, and he often sat at the piano and sang (Gustav Mahler's *Kindertotenlieder*). He painted on an easel, and I was allowed to look on and see how the stiff little pictures came about that few people understood. He often painted our mother, whose profile with chignon can be seen on some of the early paintings.

My brother made a doll's house for me for Christmas, and a female student friend of his did a batik for my first dress with a flower she had designed.

My brother went to Mexico in 1924, and returned in February 1925 with a stack of oil paintings. He and his friend, the writer Wilhelm Pferdekamp, were wearing knickerbockers at the time, still unknown in Europe, and the children in Hattingen ran after the two of them, laughing. In Hattingen, my parents lived in a delightful little house with a large garden. This garden was my brother's joy as well as an essential influence on his painting. He enjoyed working on the fruit trees and on the strawberry patch, but, above all, he planted the most beautiful flowers and tended to them. The flower paintings of the nineteen-thirties show the flowers from this garden, and the still lifes depict the vases in our parents' house.

Max had two rooms on the garden side. In his studio, the delicious smell of the paints mingled with the scent of the large bouquets of flowers he was painting. The studio had lovely old chairs and carpets that he had bought in Paris. Later, they burned in a bombing raid on Krefeld. He was at his easel early each morning, and the results were the paintings so prized today. He often painted an oil painting a day, and in the evening he would place it in front of his bed to contemplate for a long time, a habit he continued throughout his life.

Throughout his life as well, my brother always prepared his own canvases. In Hattingen, we always made our own frames. He designed the decorations, and I was allowed to gild them. Later, he made the frames match the color of the painting. Naturally, in Italy, he could often buy old frames very cheaply, his sharp eye immediately recognizing a valuable piece. In Hattingen, my brother was interested in photography. During his residency at the Villa Massimo, he took photographs of Rome that are still being published today.

Max always spent the winters in the south, and we were accustomed to his long journeys. He would then write many letters home and send many affectionate postcards to his little sister. If he was in Hattingen, he would often go to Paris, where he was friends with important French painters, or Berlin, which he loved for its theater and cabaret. He was a cosmopolitan in the truest sense of the word, read several languages, and wrote much on a little typewriter to his friends across the world.

If he was at home, there were always guests, painters, poets, collectors, names that are famous today. The conversation at the table was very interesting. Only the sound of the resounding, heavy steps of the SA marching past our house quieted my brother's foreign friends.

My brother distanced himself from every form of politics, National Socialism, above all, and wrote that unreservedly to his friends. One day, the postman came to my father: "Your eldest son's mail is under surveillance." The postman saved my brother's life. My brother left Germany after that. He went to Ischia where a group of German artists lived. He was happy there, he could live as he wished, paint, cook (he was an enthusiastic cook), and see his friends. That was the merry atmosphere out of which came the beautiful southern landscapes that made his reputation. He painted watercolors on site. He always had paper and pencil in his pocket to make sketches. He always brought back a sketchbook from a trip and, often, little pieces of paper, too, with sketches for a painting. But it was first in his room, in the shelter of familiar surroundings that he would paint the oil painting that was in him, in his spirit.

After Ischia, he spent a long time in Cefalù on Sicily, where he even stayed throughout the summer. When the heat was greatest, he wrapped himself in wet linens to bear the unfamiliar temperatures. But he could paint freely as he wished, while in Germany, his paintings were being removed from museums as "degenerate art." In April of 1941, financial circumstances forced him to return to Germany, to Krefeld, where he took a teaching position at the vocational school for textiles. In Krefeld, my brother had a very beautiful apartment with an old lady. On one visit, I burned the burnished lacquer table on which I was ironing a dress. The old lady was appalled, but Max said to me: "Don't worry about it. Soon everything will burn here."

When his studio in Krefeld went up in flames, he lost many paintings and his beautiful French furniture.

In 1943 he was back in Salzburg, where he accepted a position as a teacher at the *Kunstgewerbeschule* (School of Arts and Crafts). Salzburg was his second home, and he loved the city above all else. He lived there for months in his youth, and had adopted much of the Austrian spiritual form. But now it was war, and the dark times and the utter remoteness from his family weighed on him.

He painted many oil paintings and watercolors and saw Salzburg in a way unlike any painter before him. The landscape and the city inspired him, but it was a serious Salzburg. Gray clouds hang over the cupolas and towers.

As a German, he was unable to get a passport after the end of the war, and my mother and I were, sadly, only able to see him every few months at the Brenner Pass. There, after a thirty-six-hour journey, he was allowed to talk to us for an hour. Finally, his longing for the south and his family caused the physically delicate man with no papers to go over the Brenner on foot, on an icy night. The enterprise was very perilous, and many who had tried never arrived at their destinations. Until the end of his life, my brother spoke with horror of that night.

My brother stayed with us in Venice, taking a small room adjacent to our mother, who had lived with us since the beginning of the war and, finally, now had her beloved son nearby again.

The move to Italy was eased by my brother's good relationship with my husband, under whose roof he had found sanctuary and who remained, throughout my brother's life, his foothold in this country. Even as an old man, my brother returned, sick and tired, into his brother-in-law's house—by then, in Rome—to die there.

It was not easy at first for my brother in Venice. The winter of 1946 was so icy cold that the lagoon froze, and the opportunities for heating were limited. It also took some time before he found "his" Venice. Critical of his art, he destroyed everything he first painted.

The dark canals, the decaying palazzo façades, glittering San Marco, the colorful seals on the lagoon, all of that fascinated him, but only slowly did it become his intellectual property. He worked obsessively, and his room was so small that he had no space for his easel. Instead, he painted on a table that gradually grew, covered in specks of paint. That practice stayed with him, and, henceforth, he painted without an easel. Without buyers, the paintings piled up in his room. There was an immense stack in the middle of the room.

My children, whom he loved very much, came and walked through with bare feet. Often they had to stay with him, and he drew them or wrote a poem in their album, accompanied by a drawing.

One day, my little son (then four years old) snuck into his room, took a brush and black paint, and made a brushstroke in the middle of a painting. My brother was beside himself, but, kind as he was, came to me the next day and said: "Grace, I will leave the brushstroke as it is, I think it's very good."

We took strolls in Venice nearly every morning. We roamed through the narrow alleyways along the little canals and would arrive around noon at the Piazza San Marco, where the sun was shining and all of Venice bustled. Sometimes my brother would discover a good piece offered by a second-hand dealer, and we would haggle over it.

We would get paints and canvas for him together. Likewise, we bought the board for the first Venice paintings in a little shop near the Calle Zotti. We celebrated Christmas in the German fashion. Usually, it snowed in Venice, and it was very wintry and cold. My brother would decorate the large tree. In the first years after the war, Max made many of the gifts himself, necklaces for me and photo albums and books for the children.

He was busy in the kitchen as well: he baked and decorated cakes and, to cheer us up, would make the renowned *pollo ripieno*, which, eaten cold, is a very heavy but delicious dish.

After Christmas, the opera season began, which I attended with my husband. My gowns—at that time, one still often went to the opera in evening gowns—were designed by my brother. We bought the fabric and chose the colors together. A little lady tailor would then sew the dresses. They were really the most ingenious colors, and usually in chiffon. He designed them to flow down long on me, and the Venetians much admired the dresses.

The times slowly normalized and, once again, people came to Venice, Germans interested in art, including my brother's old friends. The first Biennale in 1948, organized by Eberhard Hanfstaengl, showed his paintings in a large space; our house in the Calle Zotti became a meeting place again for many artists from across the world. My brother could also travel again (Tunisia, Morocco) which was so important to his painting.

He traveled with very little luggage. He was already making himself light canvas bags so he could move more freely. But he was always happy to return to Venice and his family. In the summers, we had a cabin on the Lido. My brother liked to bathe and swim. With a white towel on his head, he would then sit down by the water and eat mussels he found in the sand.

He suffered greatly from the sirocco, and would lie in a darkened room and take a medicine he carried with him in large quantities wherever he went.

It was unusual for Max to go to museums. He only stopped to look at paintings that he thought were important.

He was so critical in spirit that he would, for example, leave the cinema after ten minutes if he did not like the film, giving no thought to his companions. His work with color lithographs began during his time in Venice; he printed his first in Zurich. Later, when the city of Salzburg provided the artist with a studio, he printed his lithographs on the Residenz press, all by himself, assisted only by a pupil, Herbert Breiter. Once I visited him there, and found the man, who was otherwise so elegant, wearing his painting smock tied together with a cord.

We were finally able to fulfill our wish to move to Rome in 1958, and my brother took a studio of his own high above the rooftops of the Piazza di Spagna. From his terrace, one could see the pines of the Villa Borghese. The terrace was where he painted: Rome, flowers, Sicily, Greece. The morning sun shone into his apartment, and it never lacked for anemones and mimosas, his favorite flowers.

My brother was an outstanding conversationalist famed for his witticisms. The studio was a meeting place for German intellectual society. His time in Rome was broken up with extended travels: Lebanon, Tunisia, Morocco, Greece. He cooked the most exceptional dishes in his little kitchen. He painted his paintings early in the morning. The studio was like an island amidst the Roman tumult. No street noise made its way in; one only heard the music of the adjoining academy of music of S. Cecilia.

His great model was antiquity. He lived in antiquity, and never ceased to learn from her.

My husband acquired our Tuscan country house "Il Pero" in 1963, but my brother only visited for short periods of time. The landscape was too austere and wild for him. He preferred Corfu and southern Italy, but to bring me joy he agreed to paint frescoes for the chapel at Pero.

He went to the Summer Academy in Salzburg in 1964, accompanied that time by his niece Alessandra. As always, my brother was very happy in Salzburg. The work at the Summer Academy interested him because it meant teaching pupils from different countries and social classes. This period also saw the creation of lithographs, watercolors, and oil paintings.

The really artistic aspect to my brother was that he was not interested in the fate of his finished paintings in the art trade. He often said that to me. For that reason he never made concessions in his painting, nor did he ever follow a fashion. He was consciously a loner.

As kind as he was, he was implacable about art, annihilating in rejection, silent in admiration. His beautiful blue eyes would glow when he worked on his paintings, but he had no love for talking about them.

He was convinced of the quality of his work, and he was as demanding in how he painted as he was modest in how he lived.

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