

# PATERNAL LEAVE

What happens when you lose  
the child you love — even  
when it's not your own?

The novelist *Polly Samson* traces the  
heartbreak that has echoed through  
her family for generations



**W**hen my great-uncle Heino died, in 1973, I knew little about the circumstances leading to his suicide. “It was his heart,” was all they said. I was fond of this uncle, who would often visit from Paris and whose melancholy eyes were so often hidden, cast down into his Rolleiflex camera. But I was 11, and talk of Heino’s tragedy went on behind closed doors. Left to my own detective work, I came mostly to wonder about the identity of an incredibly cute, dimple-faced and often laughing little girl who figured in so many of the black-and-white prints that, since his death, had made their way into our house. She clearly had a powerful impact and resonance on his life, and unexpectedly the

lives of the generations that followed, including my own, as I was to find much later.

Heinrich Hermann Elkan was born in Hamburg in 1903, to a bourgeois family of assimilated Jews. His father, Carl, my great-grandfather, was a useless banker but



a talented painter; his mother, Amelie, a scion of the wealthy Oppenheims. In the memoir that Carl left for his children, he paints a blissful picture of family life in Hamburg between the wars, with scripted and costumed plays and recitals, and much climbing of mountains. Though he was their youngest child, Heino was far from being the pet. My great-grandfather refers to him mostly unfavourably and, from what he writes, it's clear that Heino could never match up to his elder brother, Felix, a promising poet who died in 1915 fighting for Germany.

Although Carl had little time for Heino, he certainly did approve of his youngest son's choice of Olly, his wife. He writes: "It would not be wrong to say that she has become the centre of attraction in our circle — we all love her. Her appearance alone is most agreeable, as are her voice and her uncomplicated ways." Though Heino was trained as a lawyer, his passion lay with photography, and the pictures he took of Olly attest to a striking woman with a generous mouth and slanting pale eyes.

When I met her at my grandmother's 70th birthday party in London, I remember she still held the family in thrall — my father introducing me and later sighing: "Still she has the most exquisite legs."

When Heino was in Hamburg as a small boy he met his best friend, Kurt, who was to become his nemesis — and the ultimate cause, many years later, of his own lonely death. Kurt was a violin prodigy whose career, in 1933, took him out of Hitler's way to America, where he became a celebrated conductor and musician. Before he left Germany, he made a kind offer to his friends Heino and Olly. Tests had revealed that Heino was infertile, and Kurt was willing to step in. With Kurt about to be out of the picture, the young couple accepted — though I have no idea by which method the gift was given — and Olly became pregnant.

By the mid-1930s, Heino, Olly and their daughter, Lotte, the dimple-faced girl in so many of the photographs, were living in Paris. He could not practise as a lawyer in France, but sold insurance to maintain his little family and large photography habit. Shortly before he was arrested and interned in the south of France, Heino sought Kurt's

help to get Olly and Lotte safely to America. Heino escaped from the camp, was recaptured crossing the Pyrenees, escaped

## **When my parents said it was Heino's heart, they weren't lying. That his heart never mended was the message left beside the empty bottle of pills**

again and made it to Morocco, where he joined the French Foreign Legion.

It was another two years until he was able to follow Olly to New York, only to find that she had fallen in love with Kurt — and she wanted Lotte to have just one father. Heino became a teacher of photography at Smith College in Massachusetts, but his gifts and letters to Lotte were returned. He never saw his daughter again. Always ready to assimilate, he changed his name from the "Henri" he'd become in Paris to "Henry Elkan"; and despite gaining recognition for his work as an abstract expressionist and for portraits of his friend Mark Rothko, he became desperately unhappy. As someone who knew him well wrote to me recently: "Poor Heino. So much love to give, but no one to give it to." When my parents said it was his heart, they weren't lying. That his heart never mended was the message he left beside the empty bottle of pills, three decades later in Paris. He wrote about the loss of Lotte, the loss of love and being very, very tired.

I trace him now through his photographs: the geometric patterns he made of trees. ➡



**ALTERED STATES**

**Lotte was photographed obsessively by her father, Heino, who was devastated by his estrangement from her**

NOVEL UPBRINGING

*Below: the author Polly Samson's parents both arrived in England as child refugees, but there were two dads in her life. Previous pages, left: Polly's great-aunt Olly and great-uncle Helno with their daughter, Lotte. Right: Polly with her biological father, Lance*



ALL PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF POLLY SAMSON UNLESS OTHERWISE STATED. RIGHT: PORTRAIT BY HARRY JOE DEN FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES MAGAZINE. STYLING AND MAKE-UP BY JULIA WILKINSON

and skyscrapers and snow; his juxtapositions of graves and stunted battalions of blackened vines that reach from the ground as far as the eye can see; Camargue horses, galloping like ghosts from stormy skies.

Then there are the photos he took of me and my father. (My father is also a youngest son; his mother is Heino's sister, Ilse.) I see how tender Heino's pictures are and what it must have cost him to take them, and it's only now the story of his lost daughter has germinated into my book that I see the link between a painful episode in my father's life and Heino's, and realise this may also be the reason that his is the story that won't leave me alone.

**I**n 1938, four years before Heino made it safely to America, my parents arrived in England separately as child refugees.

My father was escaping the Nazis on the Kindertransport. My mother, meanwhile, fled the Japanese on a slow boat from China.

My father, Lance Samson, was 10, and although his own father, my grandfather, was dead and his mother remained in Germany, he and his siblings were lovingly protected by the far-reaching branches of a well-tended family tree. Though my father never again lived with his mother and siblings in a proper family home, he did receive a good education at the LSE and became a communist journalist.

My half-English, half-Chinese mother had been six when she came, also without her father. She received such a thorny welcome from her mother's English family that she, her younger sister and baby brother were referred to as "the Chinky brats" and were deposited with Barnardo's. My mother returned to China at the first opportunity via her first marriage, aged just 16, to Don, one of General Chennault's Flying Tigers — Chinese airmen who were fighting with US forces against the Japanese.

But my mother always felt that the West had been no friend to her. By February 1949 she had dumped Don in Hong Kong and smuggled herself into Red China to find the Chinese father she hadn't seen since she was six — and to join the revolution. She signed up with Mao's army, rose to the rank of major and stayed for 10 years. Although she never found her father, she did find a father figure — the British foreign correspondent Alan Winington. They met at the Xinhua news agency, where

she was working as an announcer for Radio Peking and he for the Daily Worker.

They were in North Korea together, his reporting of which was to prove his downfall when his friendship with the revolutionary Liu Shaoqi, who was at odds with Mao, put them in danger. By 1960, married and with two young sons together (who would become my half-brothers), she and Alan were ready to return to England. Their boys were coming home from nursery school in Peking, calling their parents "imperialist pigs". But Alan had been in China for 10 years and the British government refused to renew his passport, amid claims that he had collaborated with the

North Koreans. It became urgent that they leave and eventually, via Moscow, Alan, my mother and the boys settled in East Berlin.

My mother was free to travel to Britain to plead for Alan's passport, and the man chosen to run the campaign was Lance, the Daily Worker's diplomatic correspondent, who became the love of her life and my biological father. She was pregnant with me when she returned to Alan and the boys in Berlin. She was back in London for my birth, Lance in attendance, but by the time I could talk the man I called Daddy was not him.

Alan, who had lost his citizenship, did not give up his family easily. Though the MPs Tom Driberg and Sidney Silverman were on side, he didn't receive an apology and his passport until 1968. My mother struggled with leaving him stranded in the east. He refused to let one of my brothers go. To make matters worse, Alan adored me on sight. The Wall had just gone up as we crossed on foot at Checkpoint Charlie. Back in London, Lance

became seriously ill. To and fro we went from the house we shared with another family in Crouch End to the more lavish conditions provided to Alan by the Soviets in East Berlin.

We make a convincing family group in the Berlin photographs: Alan, the silver fox gazing lovingly at me and his young half-Chinese wife, the boys standing behind like good little soldiers. A lilac tree flowers in the courtyard. But then, in the same drawer in my parents' house in north London, are the photos that Lance's uncle Heino took. I am the same age as in the Berlin pictures, but the lap is a different one: in some, I wear the same shoes in the west as I do in the east. Heino's pictures

are less posed, candid, my father crouching behind a brick wall to smoke as I come into focus around a corner at Hampton Court, or looking strained as I feed him a spoonful of tea, his misery apparent in the thinness of his face, anxiety in his eyes.

Alan, who died in 1983, never again lived in England. He never stopped sending me presents, but somehow they were always chewed up by the dog while I was at school — yet another echo of what had happened to the presents that Heino had sent his own lost daughter, Lotte. Lance died while I was writing *The Kindness*, which is probably what frees me to think about Alan now.

If I'm honest, it made me sad that Lance never favoured me, his only biological child, over my two brothers, whose father was Alan. They opted to stay with Lance and my mother rather than return to East Berlin and live with Alan. But it's no bad thing to be reminded that, as the "anti-psychiatrist" David Cooper said in his book *The Death of the Family*: "What the world needs is fewer mothers and fathers, and more mothering and fathering." A few years ago, one of my brothers did visit Berlin and took back a single child's shoe, softly worn with the print of my foot. Alan's widow wrote that he kept it with him until the day he died.

And so I think on and on about this question of love and non-biological fathers, and the way these family stories lie at the heart of my book. As it happens, the father that mother nature chose for my first child decided that he didn't want to join in the nurture bit, but the man I subsequently married, David, very much did ■

*The Kindness* by Polly Samson is published by Bloomsbury at £14.99 (hardback) and £12.99 (ebook). To buy it for £13.49, call 0845 271 2135 or visit [thesundaytimes.co.uk/bookshop](http://thesundaytimes.co.uk/bookshop)



**MIXED FORTUNES**

**Polly with her mother, half-brothers and the journalist Alan Winnington, the man she regarded as her father**





**STRINGS ATTACHED**

**Polly's son Charlie, from her first marriage, pictured with her second husband, the Pink Floyd guitarist David Gilmour**