



Ami

**Letters and
Writings of
Annemarie**

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*Letters & Writings of
Annemarie Wächter*

Edited by Marianne Wright and Erna Albertz



THE PLOUGH PUBLISHING HOUSE

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This book is dedicated to Annemarie's children:

Roswith

Johann Christoph

Maria

Edith

Lisa

Monika

Else

and in memory of Emmy Maria
and Marianne

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Foreword

Dear Reader,

The writings in this book were only discovered after my mother's death. Astonishingly enough, until then neither my father nor I as only son knew of their existence. Reading them for the first time, it was remarkable to be able to meet my mother as a young woman through her correspondence with her family and various friends, and even more personally through her diary, and we marveled at the depth and openness of her thinking.

Inspired by what we had found, we shared her correspondence within our family circle and with friends. In the ensuing years we began to hear more and more often from young people—and especially from young women—how much my mother's life spoke into their own turbulent youth years. And so I am very thankful that this book will now make my mother's exchange of thoughts and ideas accessible to an even greater audience. We remain grateful to my mother's brother, Reinhold Wächter, who preserved these letters for over half a century and then sent them to us after she died.

During the time period between the two world wars which these letters span, Germany stood at a critical point in its history. Although the First World War had created an entire generation of wounded, distressed, and disillusioned young people, a vision and hope for a new and better world awoke in many and came to expression in the German Youth Movement, in which my mother participated. Tragically, this idealism and optimism was exploited by the Nazis only a short time later, as they enlisted these same youth to serve their terrible purposes. Only very few living in Germany at the time found another way, and for those who did it meant renunciation and suffering. For my mother, making the decision to follow this other way cost her many struggles.

Our world today is certainly just as exciting and full of challenges. In my role as author and youth pastor, I meet thousands of students of all ages each year. They all yearn just as strongly for meaning and fulfillment in their lives. They, too, wish for true friends and honest relationships and for more than that—they want to make a positive difference in this world and change it for the better.

You may be asking yourself what the thoughts and impressions of a young student from the turn of the last century could possibly have to do with the questions and problems of today's youth. As you begin reading, you will realize that it is my mother's honesty about her searching that makes this book a signpost for a disheartened generation. I hope that many will recognize themselves amongst its lines.

As a young woman, my mother longed to find meaning and a purpose for her life. The basis of faith, hope, and love my mother later carried with her and pointed me to in all situations was largely built in those early years of her life. She taught me much. May this book encourage you, as well, to never give up your search for a fulfilled and meaningful life.

Johann Christoph Arnold
Rifton, August 2010

Editors' Note

Anni was a prolific writer. Her weekly letters to her mother and sister, which frequently exceeded a thousand words, are a valuable record of 1920s Germany with their descriptions of daily life, accounts of educational trips around Germany, and commentary on events of the day. We have included a representative sampling of these letters, leaving some out entirely and shortening many others. Complete manuscripts of all the letters are available in the Church Communities International Archives.

In translating Anni's writing from the original German, we have attempted to preserve the youthfulness, individuality, and candor of her voice. We have also preserved the ambiguities in some of the letters and diary entries.



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I.

Childhood

The baby was christened Anna Marie Lina Hedwig Wächter, but to her family she was just "Anni." Her arrival on Sunday, October 24, 1909 was a complete surprise to her older brothers and sister. They listened in amazement as their father and the midwife announced the happy news, and then all three—Reinhold (eight), Hilde (ten), and Otto (twelve)—tiptoed into their mother's room to see the baby sleeping in a lace-curtained bassinet.

Anni was now the youngest member of a large and happy household. In addition to their own children, Anni's parents had the care of over a hundred boys. These were students who came from all over Germany to attend the boys' boarding school of which Anni's father, Dr. Christian Otto Wächter, was the director. The students lived, studied, and played under one roof with the Wächter children. The house was seldom quiet.

Dr. Wächter had begun teaching in the Keilhau school in 1895, having come from a nearby town where his father, an amateur composer, had been mayor. The

village of Keilhau, population ninety, is picturesque and remote—it is accessible by only one road, which ends at the end of the village—and Dr. Wächter was still considered something of a newcomer. Not so his wife. Hedwig Wächter was the daughter and granddaughter of the school's previous directors, and the great grandniece of its founder, the philosopher, philanthropist, and educational reformer Friedrich Fröbel.

Fröbel, best known for establishing the world's first kindergarten, had opened the Keilhau school in 1817 as a place where he could put his educational ideas into practice. "A child who plays thoroughly and with determination until he is too tired to continue will surely be a thorough, determined man, capable of self-sacrifice for the promotion of the welfare of himself and others," he proclaimed. Accordingly, unstructured play in natural surroundings formed an important part of the school's curriculum. Anni's older brother Reinhold, describing life as a student, later wrote, "It is strange, but school work was not important for us. At least, it was no more important than our life together, both among ourselves as pupils and with the teachers. Those were the things that mattered to us. That is part of the nature of a Fröbel school. Its aim is formative and educational rather than merely academic."

At the Keilhau school, academics were dealt with in the morning. To start the school day, Dr. Wächter led a brief worship service, which was followed by lessons in conventional subjects. This done, all students formed a line in front of a table where Frau Wächter was cutting

bread. Each helped himself and then raced off for an hour of outdoor pursuits. The midday meal at one o'clock was preceded by an inspection, conducted by Dr. Wächter, of the cleanliness of each boy's hands, clothes, and hair. Afternoons were devoted to practical activities. In addition to sports and swimming, the boys were encouraged to spend long hours in the surrounding woods, where they built elaborate huts in which they could play. In Fröbel's philosophy, the educational value of these activities was immense:

To climb a new tree means the discovery of a new world to a boy. The outlook from above shows everything so different from the ordinary cramped and distorted side view. Not less significant is the boy's inclination to explore caves and ravines and to ramble in dark forests. It is the urge to find the new, to see and discover the hidden. From these rambles the boy returns with rich treasures of unknown stones and plants, of creatures—worms, beetles, spiders, and lizards—that dwell in darkness and concealment. “What is this? What is its name?” are questions to be answered, and every new word enriches his world and throws light upon his surroundings.

The Wächter children grew up happily in this setting, despite having to share their parents with dozens of boys. Dr. Wächter was a father figure for his students, many of whom called him “Papa” and addressed him with the familiar “Du,” an unheard-of familiarity at that time. A reserved and quiet man, he loved music and delighted

in arranging evening concerts for a family string quartet; Reinhold and Anni were somewhat reluctant performers at these events. Frau Wächter, responsible for the management of a busy household, had few free moments. In Reinhold's memory, "I hardly ever saw my mother walking slowly. She was always on the go, from five or six in the morning until ten or eleven at night. She had to wake all the maids early. A large staff was needed to prepare the meals and keep the house clean. It was a big house with rooms on many floors. The whole day long she was going up and down the stairs. My mother was exact and conscientious, very strict about order and cleanliness." The school was largely self-sufficient. Its vegetable garden employed many of the Keilhau villagers, and a forester-hunter was engaged to manage its several hundred acres of woodland.

Anni's parents were committed to Fröbel's ideals and his vision of childhood. To them, working in the Keilhau school was a calling, a noble inheritance, and they considered it a matter of course that their own children would in turn dedicate their lives to cultivating Fröbel's "garden for children." Each of the Wächter children held a share in the family partnership that owned and operated the school; this partnership had been passed down in the family for over a hundred years.

Then war broke out in Europe. In 1915, Germany was on the offensive, and seventeen-year-old Otto Wächter volunteered to fight. After a brief training, he was dispatched to Priesterwald, a densely forested region sloping up from the Mosel Valley that would come to

be known as the "Forest of Death." By the time Otto arrived in mid-July, most of the trees had been flattened in the vicious fighting. German and French soldiers traded artillery fire, the French repeatedly charging the German trenches, only to be driven back. The combat was desperate, brutal, and ultimately futile: neither side advanced significantly during a year of fighting. In the midst of war, Otto did not forget his home. Postcards and gifts, addressed "Fräulein Anni Wächter, The Children's Room," arrived in Keilhau. "Dearest little Anni-sister," he wrote to her, "on the picture on the card you can see our gallant crown prince, who is trouncing the wicked French. Goodbye, my dear Annichen. Play happily with Erika and your other little friends. From your soldier-brother, Otto."

A little over a week after his arrival at the front, Otto was killed in battle. To five-year-old Anni, this was an incomprehensible event. Otto had been her particular champion, lovingly protective of the sister he called "Pummel" because of her short stature. Now he was snatched from her world by forces she could not understand. Anni grieved for her older brother, naming her favorite doll "Ottchen" in his memory. In other ways, though, the war remained a remote disturbance from her child's perspective. Battles and soldiers were far off, and even the starvation that afflicted most civilians as the war went on was kept at bay by produce from the school's garden and Frau Wächter's determination in providing for her household. Of more immediate concern to Anni in 1916 was starting first grade, an event which she later

described in an account of her childhood written for a school class:

When I was six, I entered the village school. I felt very proud the first time I walked there with my slate, and I liked going to school very much. During the three years I attended the village school I became very connected to the village children. I wanted to be just like them in the way I dressed, the way I talked, and the expressions I used. For this reason I also spoke the local dialect by preference. In summer I was very sad that I wasn't allowed to go barefoot like the others, and I considered it a shocking disgrace that I had to wear shoes and stockings.

Anni left the village school when she was nine and began attending the Keilhau boarding school, where she was the only girl in her class.

At first there were only four in my grade and from the beginning we were like a band of comrades. So I gradually drifted away from the village children, probably in part because they left school earlier. Up until then, one of the village girls had still been my friend, but now I ended up playing only with boys. Until I was in seventh grade, I always wished I were a boy.

Because I had no other girls to play with in the years between fourth and seventh grades, I found great pleasure in reading. I devoured any book I could get hold of and read each of my own books at least twenty times. I did not especially care for sentimental girls' stories,

preferring romantic tales of robber knights and, above all, stories about American Indians. Indian stories were the highest and best, and Karl May's *Winnetou* made a tremendous impression on me. I liked the stories about Indians so much because they depicted such outlandish things, foreign to my experience, and because no limits were set to such fantasies. I always had a lively imagination of what I would do if I lived among the Indians.

These stories absorbed and excited me to the extent that, especially in the evenings, I imagined an Indian, a robber, or a murderer waiting to fall upon me from behind every tree or in every dark corner. Of course these books influenced my play very much as well, and particularly during my vacations I lived, spoke, and wrote as if I were an Indian. One or two boys usually stayed at school during the vacation, and luckily they were the kind of boys who were just as full of fantasy as I and with whom I could dream up the most marvelous games.

My vacations were always divided between playing Indians and playing with dolls. Especially during the Christmas holidays I played doll family all day long. And the same boys who had played bloodthirsty *Winnetou* games with me during fall vacation now played peacefully at being the doll father. Even though I wanted to be quite warlike, I had a great love for my dolls and was very tender with them.

For the children at the Keilhau school, life—and the life of the imagination—remained shielded from a war that left over two million Germans dead. A period of polit-

ical agitation and uncertainty followed as the shattered country began to piece itself back together again. But by the time Anni's parents celebrated their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary on April 16, 1920, they could begin to think hopefully of the future. The school had flourished under their care: the number of students had increased, new buildings had been purchased and old ones restored, and a new school house had been built. Despite their grief at Otto's death and worry over Hilde's health—she was frail and often ill—the parents could rely on Reinhold and Anni, both promising scholars, to take on the family position as head of the highly regarded school, which had celebrated its hundredth anniversary three years before with a visit from the Princess of Schwarzburg-Rudolstadt.

But tragedy struck again in 1922. Dr. Wächter died unexpectedly at the age of fifty-eight after a sickness that lasted only a few days. His death, like Otto's, was incomprehensible to Anni, the more so since death, and the nameless fear and sorrow filling her twelve-year-old heart, were not considered suitable topics for discussion. Dr. Wächter's love for his children had expressed itself in little gestures of affection—a poem written for a birthday, shared laughter at some private joke, a bedtime serenade on his cello—and his death left a painful absence in their lives.

Now in addition to overseeing the household, Frau Wächter was forced to arrange for the directorship of the school. All the more, she pinned her hopes for the future on her daughter. Anni excelled at her studies despite feeling that, "it certainly wasn't pleasant that I was always expected to be the top of the class and be held up

as an example to the others. Up to the seventh grade it didn't matter at all that I was a girl in a class of boys; it was all the same to everyone—we were just comrades. But in the following two years things gradually changed: I was simply not a boy. Gradually a separation arose, partly because several in my class were new, some of them from the city, and they introduced a new tone. I didn't care for this and kept away from them. Only the four of us from the old clan of the fourth grade remained good friends till the end.”

At that time, Keilhau and her childhood circle made up Anni's whole world. She describes her uncomplicated view of life:

I had no opinion of my own—I just accepted everything and thought things had to be the way they were. I was not concerned with the problems of life; I simply existed and responded to whatever came my way. Added to this was the fact that at my home no one spoke about life's problems. People were very closed and reserved in that respect—they were hesitant to speak to each other about things that occupied them inwardly. I think this also explains my fear of All Soul's Day, especially after my father's death. On that day people were more inclined to come out of themselves; at other times they were very reserved and did not display emotion.

Since this was the only life I knew, I thought that things must be pretty much the same everywhere to how they were in Keilhau. I clearly remember that in ninth grade, around Easter, one of the boys said to

me, “You’ll be shocked when you get to the school in Naumburg—that’s a whole different kettle of fish.” “I don’t believe it,” I replied.

Because I didn’t go on any trips, I had no contact at all with the outside world. Although many people visited us, they either didn’t concern me or they appeared to fit very well into my little world of Keilhau. They didn’t bring in anything new. Since I wasn’t allowed to read any books other than books for young people until I was in ninth grade, I didn’t find out anything from that side either.

Through her studies, however, a wider world began to open up.

My favorite subjects in school were drawing, singing, German, biology, chemistry, and math. In chemistry and biology I learned how things had come to be and about the underlying interdependence between everything. I thought this was very beautiful. In geography the same thing intrigued me as in the Indian stories, that is, I learned about things that until now I had never seen or experienced, things in which my imagination could be given free reign. I had great delight in daydreaming about such things.

My time in Keilhau came to an end with the exams at the end of ninth grade. I wanted to continue my studies, and so I left home to attend preparatory school.

