Life before death
Selected descriptions and portraits
taken before and after death

Michael Lauermann
Age: 56
Born: 19 August 1946
First portrait taken: 11 January 2003
Died: 14 January 2003, at Ricam Hospice, Berlin

Michael Lauermann was a manager. A workaholic. One day he just keeled over. At the hospital they said: “Brain tumour, inoperable.” That was six weeks ago.

Herr Lauermann doesn’t want to talk about death, he’d rather talk about his life. How he managed to escape the narrow confines of his native Swabia and go to Paris. Studies at the Sorbonne, Baudelaire, street riots, revolution, women. “I really loved life,” he says. “Now it’s over. I’m not afraid of what’s coming.” There is no one by his side, that’s his choice. That’s not the way his life was. But he has no regrets. He even derives a certain enjoyment from this advanced stage of the illness. Free and easy, a kind of weightlessness. He feels as if his body were fading away. He is not in pain. “I will soon die,” Herr Lauermann says.

Three days later there is a candle burning outside the door of his room. It indicates he has passed away.

Images: Walter Schels
Text: Beate Lakotta
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Barbara Gröne
Age: 51
Born: 15 December 1951
First portrait taken: 11 November 2003
Died: 22 November 2003, at Leuchtfeuer Hospice, Hamburg

From the outset, Barbara Gröne has had the feeling that she has no right to be alive. Her mother hadn’t wanted her. Soon after the birth she had put the child into a home.

The child has a strong survival instinct. She puts up barriers around her soul. Protective barriers to ward off her fears. Discipline is the most reliable ally. Achievement becomes a justification for existence. Barbara Gröne works hard. She is a good pupil. She becomes a physiotherapist, sets up her own practice. Her partner admires her for her energy. She is successful. Her practice flourishes. Finally she can relax and enjoy the fruits of her labours.

Then the cancer appears, an ovarian tumour, metastases in the lumbar vertebrae and the pelvis. Nothing can be done. Abruptly her fear returns. The familiar sense of worthlessness. The sadness. Barbara Gröne is overwhelmed by these feelings. “All my efforts were in vain,” she says. “It is as though I am being rejected by life itself.”

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Heiner Schmitz
Age: 52
Born: 26 November 1951
First portrait taken: 19 November 2003
Died: 14 December 2003, at Leuchtfeuer Hospice, Hamburg

Heiner Schmitz saw the affected area on the MRI scan of his brain. He realised immediately that he didn’t have much time left. Schmitz is a fast talker, highly articulate, quick-witted, but not without depth. He works in advertising. Everyone has to be on top form, on the ball. Normally, Heiner’s friends don’t want him to be sad. They try to take his mind off things. At the hospice, they watch football with him just like they used to do. Beers, cigarettes, a bit of a party in the room. The girls from the agency bring him flowers. Many of them come in twos, because they don’t want to be alone with him. What do you talk about with someone who’s been sentenced to death? Some of them even say “get well soon” as they’re leaving. “Hope you’re soon back on track, mate!”

“No one asks me how I feel,” says Heiner Schmitz. “Because they’re all shit scared. I find it really upsetting the way they desperately avoid the subject, talking about all sorts of other things. Don’t they get it? I’m going to die! That’s all I think about, every second when I’m on my own.”

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Jens Pallas
Age: 62
Born: 13 April 1941
First portrait taken: 1 December 2003
Died: 15 December 2003, at Leuchtfuehr Hospice, Hamburg

Jens Pallas had a look of surprise on his face when Sister Dagmar checked on him at
eight o’clock in the morning. She realised at once that he had died. Herr Pallas had not
had any illusions about the outcome of his illness: chronic obstructive pulmonary disease
with emphysema. He had started to suffer from this condition ten years ago. Now it was
becoming critical. He assumed that he would suffocate. But no one, least of all Herr Pallas
himself, had anticipated that death would come so suddenly.

Jens Pallas’s cheek was still warm. Sister Dagmar could not detect any signs of a final
struggle for breath. Nothing, save for the startled look, as if he had wanted to say: “What?
Was that it?” She closed his eyes. “I suppose his weakened body just gave up,” she said.
“He was lucky”.

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Edelgard Clavey
Age: 67
Born: 29 June 1936
First portrait taken: 5 December 2003
Died: 4 January 2004, at Helenenstift Hospice, Hamburg

Edelgard Clavey was an administrative assistant in the university’s psychiatric clinic. She has lived on her own since her divorce in the early 1980s. She doesn’t have any children. From her teens she has been an active member of the Protestant church. For the past few weeks she has been bed-bound. “Death is a test of one’s maturity. Everyone has to get through it on their own,” says Frau Clavey. “I want so very much to die. I want to become part of that vast extraordinary light. But dying is hard work. Death is in control of the process, I cannot influence its course. All I can do is wait. I was given my life, I had to live it, and now I am giving it back.

“I’ve always worked hard, following a similar path to a nun: poverty, chastity, obedience. Now, I am no longer able to contribute anything to society and this pains me terribly. I do not want to be a financial drain on resources, yet another living corpse that is only a burden. I want to go, preferably immediately. Always be prepared, just like the boy scouts.”
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Maria Hai-Anh Tuyet Cao
Age: 52
Born: 26 August 1951
First portrait taken: 5 December 2003
Died: 15 February 2004, at Leuchtfeuer Hospice, Hamburg

Maria Hai-Anh Tuyet Cao’s experience of dying would doubtless have been very different had she not absorbed the teachings of the Supreme Mistress Ching Hai. The Mistress says: “All that is beyond this world is better than our world. It is better than anything we can or cannot imagine.”

Frau Cao wears the portrait of the Mistress round her neck. Under her guidance, she has already visited the afterlife in meditation. Her call to the next world cannot be far off: her pulmonary alveoli are failing. Yet she appears serene and cheerful. “Death is nothing,” says Frau Cao. “I embrace death. It is not eternal. Afterwards, when we meet God, we become beautiful. We are only called back to Earth if we are still attached to another human being in the final seconds.” She prepares for this moment every day. She wants to achieve a sense of total detachment at the moment of death.

Images: Walter Schels Text: Beate Lakotta
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Wolfgang Kotzahn
Age: 57
Born: 19 January 1947
First portrait taken: 15 January 2004
Died: 4 February 2004, at Leuchtfeuer Hospice, Hamburg

There are colourful tulips brightening up the night table. The nurse has prepared a tray with champagne glasses and a cake. It’s Wolfgang Kotzahn’s birthday today. “I’ll be 57 today. I never thought of myself growing old, but nor did I ever think I’d die when I was still so young. But death strikes at any age.”

Six months ago the reclusive accountant had been stunned by the diagnosis: bronchial carcinoma, inoperable. “It came as a real shock. I had never contemplated death at all, only life,” says Herr Kotzahn. “I’m surprised that I have come to terms with it fairly easily. Now I’m lying here waiting to die. But each day that I have I savour, experiencing life to the full. I never paid any attention to clouds before. Now I see everything from a totally different perspective: every cloud outside my window, every flower in the vase. Suddenly, everything matters.”

Images: Walter Schels  Text: Beate Lakotta
Klara Behrens

Age: 82
Born: 2 December 1930
First portrait taken: 6 February 2004
Died: 3 March 2004, at Sinus-Hospice, Hamburg

Klara Behrens can tell that she hasn’t got much longer. “Sometimes, I do still hope that I’ll get better,” she says. “But then when I’m feeling really nauseous, I don’t want to carry on living. And I’d only just bought myself a new fridge-freezer! If I’d only known...”

It is the last day of February, the sun is shining, the first bluebells are flowering in the courtyard. “What I’d really like to do is to go outside, down to the river Elbe. To sit down on the stony bank and put my feet in the water. That’s what we used to do when we were children, when we went to gather wood down by the river. If I had my life over again, I’d do everything differently. I wouldn’t lug any wood around. But I wonder if it’s possible to have a second chance at life? I don’t think so. After all, you only believe what you see. And you can only see what is there. I’m not afraid of death. I’ll just be one of the million, billion grains of sand in the desert. The only thing that frightens me is the process of dying. You just don’t know what actually happens.”

Images: Walter Schels  
Text: Beate Lakotta