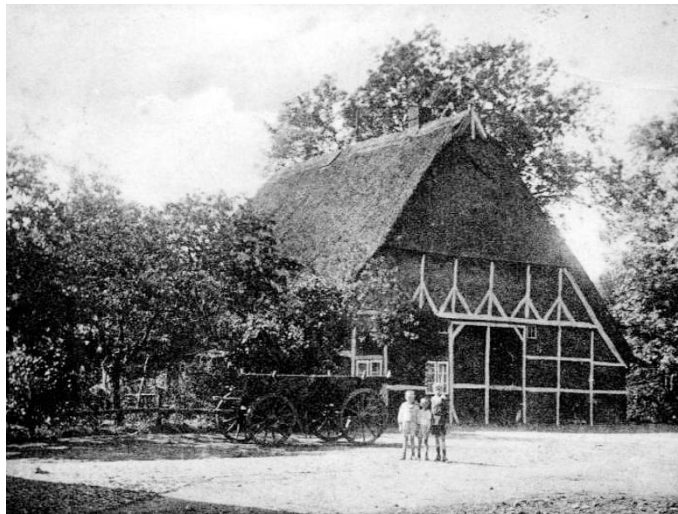


## Heinrich Emil Julius Peters: (1906–1942)

### Early Life and Background

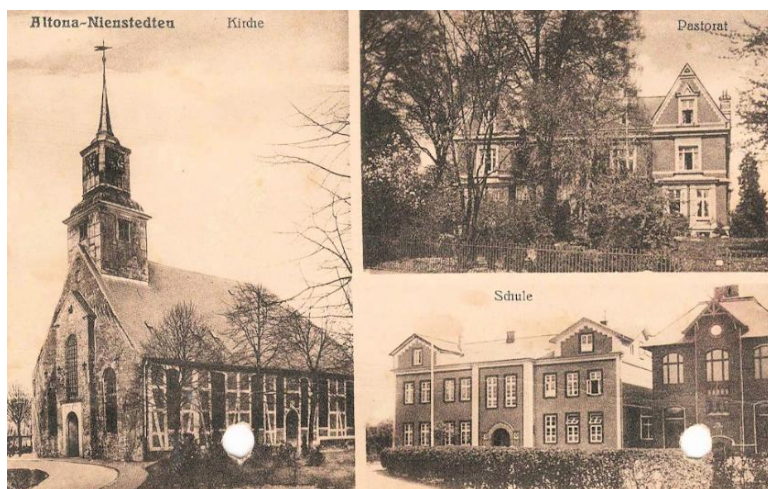
*Heinrich Emil Julius Peters*, known throughout his life as “Karl-Heinz,” was born on 5 February 1906 in Groß Flottbek, a prosperous suburb of Hamburg where the Elbe widens and the villas of merchants and professionals line the river. His family belonged to the Protestant bourgeoisie, a world shaped by discipline, education, and the promise of upward mobility. His father worked as a school principal at the Altona Gymnasium on Hohenzollernring 57–61, a role that reflected the family’s emphasis on education and professional respectability.



Bauernhaus Lüdemann, Groß Flottbeker Straße 51 Erbaut 1814, abgebrannt 1945

The *Peters-Chronik* traces the family’s background through clerks, craftsmen, and small merchants who, by the early twentieth century, had established themselves within Hamburg’s civic and commercial environment. His wife Helene’s family added another cultural layer: her father was a crane operator who spoke Plattdeutsch, the Low German long rooted in Hamburg’s port districts and everyday working life, and the Lüdemann family included a former *Gemeindevorsteher* (village mayor) of Nienstedten. This gave Karl-Heinz a distinctive Altona identity shaped by both bourgeois aspiration and the working-class linguistic heritage he encountered through marriage.

Karl-Heinz’s upbringing took place in a home where order, music, and steady work set the tone—traits that later influenced both his civilian career and his alignment with the structured, hierarchical culture of the Schutzstaffel (SS). Hamburg’s Protestant bourgeoisie cultivated a sense of moral clarity rooted in self-improvement and civic responsibility,



Altona-Nienstedten (Postcard from Peter’s Letters). Family Collection.

school concerts, and community events formed the rhythm of his early years. The Peters family embodied this ethos: respectable, ambitious, and confident in the stability of their world. These values—order, loyalty, and cultural aspiration—would follow

Karl-Heinz throughout his life, shaping both his achievements and his compromises.

### Merchant Career, Pulvermann, and Harbin



Karl-Heinz and Helena



As a young man, Karl-Heinz entered the world of international trade under the mentorship of Eduard F. Pulvermann of Markt & Co, one of Hamburg's most prominent merchants. Pulvermann was a cosmopolitan figure, deeply embedded in the city's equestrian and social elite, and known for designing the famous Pulvermann's Grab obstacle at the Klein Flottbek Derby. He was also of partial Jewish descent—a fact that would later seal his fate under the Nazi regime.

Pulvermann regarded Karl-Heinz as capable and dependable, entrusting him with responsibilities beyond his years and sending him to Harbin, Manchuria, in the late 1920s to represent the firm. The journey across the Soviet Union on the Trans-Siberian Railway exposed Karl-Heinz to the growing violence and instability of the emerging Stalinist regime—banditry, surveillance, and tightening political repression.

Harbin was a frontier city shaped by migration and empire: Russians fleeing revolution, Chinese merchants, Japanese officials, Jewish traders, and Europeans seeking opportunity. Karl-Heinz lived among them, absorbing languages, and cultures. He became fluent in Russian, developed a fascination with English, and moved comfortably in a multilingual world. These experiences sharpened his intellect, broadened his horizons, and gave him a sense of worldly competence that would later define his military identity as an interpreter.

### Family Life and Early Nazi Years

Returning to Hamburg in the early 1930s, Karl-Heinz married Helene Lüdemann in Riga, Latvia, in 1933. They settled in Hamburg-Blankenese and later Nienstedten, raising four sons in a home defined by music, discipline, and cultural aspiration. Their *eldest son studied violin* with a respected teacher from the Hamburg Conservatory. The family attended community events and festivals, took seaside holidays, and embraced the civic optimism of the early Nazi years.

Helena and Jens Peters



They were present at the 1936 Berlin Olympics, swept up in the spectacle of national revival. Though not overtly political, the Peters family found comfort in the promise of restored order and national pride. Their identity as a respectable, cultured, Protestant family aligned with the regime’s early appeals to tradition and unity.

### Joining the SS and Social Circles



In 1937, as the Nazi regime’s racial policies intensified, Pulvermann advised Karl-Heinz to join the Reiter-SS. “Those are my former friends,” he said. “They’re alright.” The suggestion reflected the realities of the time: the SS had begun absorbing Germany’s elite equestrian culture, a process shaped in part by figures such as Hermann Fegelein, who helped draw competitive riders and club members into SS equestrian units. Within these circles, membership had become a practical means of maintaining professional stability and social standing in an increasingly politicised environment. From his home at Schäferkamp 3, it was roughly a half-hour walk to the *Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei* (NSDAP) local office on Ulmenstraße 25 in Groß Flottbek.

On 1 May 1937 Karl-Heinz joined the Nazi Party (Membership No. 4974476), seeking security and position within a milieu where professional advancement had become entangled with political affiliation.

Name: <i>Peters</i> <i>Grünig</i> Beruf: Geborene: Geb.-Datum: <i>5.2.06</i> Geb.-Ort: <i>Gr. Flottbek</i> Nr.: <i>4974476</i> Aufn.: <i>1. 5. 37</i>		Wohnung: <i>H. Schäferkamp 3</i> Ortsgr.: <i>Hamburg</i> Gau: <i>Hamburg</i> Monatsmchg. Gau: ..... Nr. .... St. .... St. Nr./..... vom .....	
Name: <i>Lüdemann</i> <i>Otto</i> Beruf: Geborene: Geb.-Datum: <i>13.11.79</i> Geb.-Ort: <i>Schenefeld</i> Nr.: <i>4957071</i> Aufn.: <i>1. 5. 37</i> Aufnahme beantragt am: <i>3.5.37</i> Wiedereingetr. beantragt am: ..... genehm.: .....		Wohnung: <i>Altona, Großflottbekerstr. 38</i> Ortsgr.: <i>Hamburg</i> Gau: <i>Hamburg</i> Monatsmchg. Gau: <i>Hamburg 6/38</i> St. Nr. <i>3/6</i> St. Nr./..... vom ..... Wohnung: <i>H. Gr. Flottbek, Lüdemannstr. 1</i> Ortsgr.: <i>Hamburg</i> Gau: <i>Hamburg</i>	
Name: <i>Biegemann</i> <i>Frieda</i> Beruf: Geborene: Geb.-Datum: <i>15.11.78</i> Geb.-Ort: <i>Apenrade</i> Nr.: <i>4651874</i> Aufn.: <i>1.5.37</i> Aufnahme beantragt am: <i>2.6.37</i>		Wohnung: <i>Saabad Heringsdorf, Bulow 6</i> Ortsgr.: <i>Neuhof-Heringsdorf</i> Gau: <i>Pommern</i> Monatsmchg. Gau: ..... Nr. .... St. .... St. Nr./..... vom ..... Wohnung: .....	
		Name: <i>Biegemann</i> <i>Otto</i> G. D. <i>24.5.85</i> Det. <i>Grünig</i> Stand: <i>Dr. Ing.</i> Nr.: <i>4057307</i> Eingetr.: <i>1. 5. 37</i> Ausgetr.: ..... Wiedereingetr.: ..... Wohnung: <i>H. Gr. Flottbek, Schäferkamp 3</i> Ortsgr.: <i>Hamburg</i> Gau: <i>Hamburg</i>	

On 1 May 1937, Heinrich (Karl-Heinz) Peters, his father-in-law Otto Lüdemann, and his relatives Frieda and Otto Biegemann all submitted applications to join the National Socialist German Workers’ Party (NSDAP). Their membership cards show the same application date. After a four-year membership freeze (1933–1937), the Nazi Party reopened admissions on 1 May 1937, a symbolic date tied to the regime’s “Day of National Labour.” Local party offices across Germany processed large batches of applications on that day, and many families, workplaces, and social circles appear with identical dates in the records.

The Hamburg social circles in which Karl-Heinz moved—among them Dr. Georg Bonne, a respected physician, and the equestrian elite—were increasingly intertwined with the Nazi state. Pulvermann was arrested by the Gestapo, sent to Neuengamme concentration camp, and died in the Langenhorn prison hospital in 1944. Karl-Heinz’s decision to enter the SS, shaped by the pressures and calculations of his milieu, ultimately tied him to the regime that destroyed his mentor.

## SS Cavalry and the Eastern Front

From 14 May to 15 September 1940, Karl-Heinz appears in SS personnel records as an SS-Mann in 3. Squadron, 2. SS-Totenkopf-Reiterstandarte, stationed in Zamość in the Lublin district of occupied Poland. These mounted SS units—formed partly from concentration-camp guards—were instruments of occupation terror. Their duties included patrolling rural areas, enforcing expulsions, and participating in actions against Jews and Poles. The Totenkopf cavalry formations were deeply implicated in the early implementation of Nazi racial policy in the region.

From 16 September 1940 to 26 May 1941, Karl-Heinz served in the Lublin district with W-Kavallerie-Regiment 2, 1. Kavallerie-Kolonne, a unit responsible for transport and logistical support. Lublin was a central hub for SS cavalry operations and a key staging area for preparations for the invasion of the Soviet Union. On 26 May 1941, he was reassigned within the district to the Reitende Batterie of SS-Kavallerie-Regiment 2, part of the SS-Kavallerie-Brigade commanded by Hermann Fegelein. This brigade played a



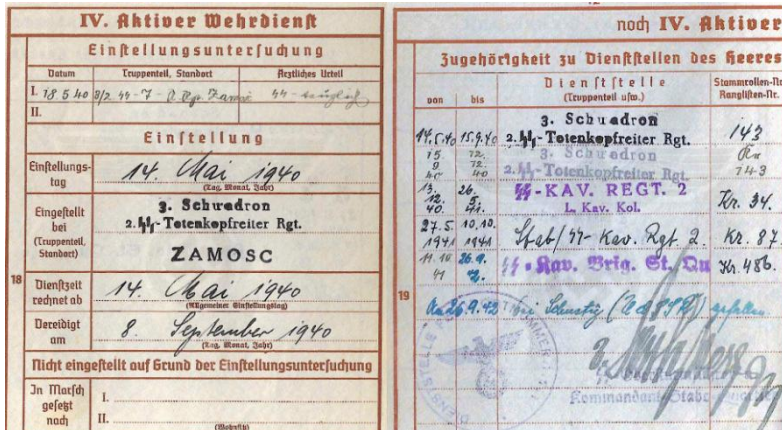
Heinrich (Karl-Heinz) Peters



Heinrich (Karl-Heinz) Peters' Wehrpass. Family Collection.

central role in the early phase of the Holocaust in the occupied Soviet Union. During the summer and autumn of 1941, it was ordered to “comb” the Pripet Marshes and surrounding areas—operations described as anti-partisan warfare but in practice consisting of systematic massacres of Jewish civilians and the destruction of entire villages.

Operational reports from the brigade record thousands of Jews shot in a matter of weeks. Orders from the SS leadership instructed the units to treat all Jews as enemies and eliminate them. The brigade's commanders interpreted this literally. Karl-Heinz's presence in these units placed him structurally within the machinery of mass violence, even if no surviving document names him in a specific atrocity.



Heinrich (Karl-Heinz) Peters War Service. Family Collection.

His [1942 pocket diary](#) places him in the Olenino–Rzhev–Smolensk sector, a region marked by brutal warfare, scorched villages, and relentless reprisals. The front here was fluid, chaotic, and deadly. The German army and SS units faced fierce Soviet resistance, and reprisals against civilians were common. Karl-Heinz’s letters from this period,

though sparse, reflect exhaustion, cold, and the grinding attrition of the Eastern Front.

### Decorations and Military Recognition

Karl Heinz’s service was recognised with three significant decorations:

#### War Merit Cross 2nd Class with Swords (Kriegsverdienstkreuz 2. Klasse mit Schwertern)

Awarded on 20 February 1942 by Army High Command 9 (AOK 9). This decoration was typically given for meritorious service in support of combat operations. Its timing places Heinrich in a staff or logistical role during the harsh winter phase of the Eastern campaign.



#### Iron Cross 2nd Class (Eisernes Kreuz II. Klasse)

Awarded on 21 March 1942 by XXXIII Army Corps (XXXIII A.K.). His Wehrpass confirms the award, reflecting the regime’s view of Heinrich as a competent and reliable NCO. The Iron Cross was not given lightly; it marked him as a soldier who had demonstrated leadership or bravery in combat.

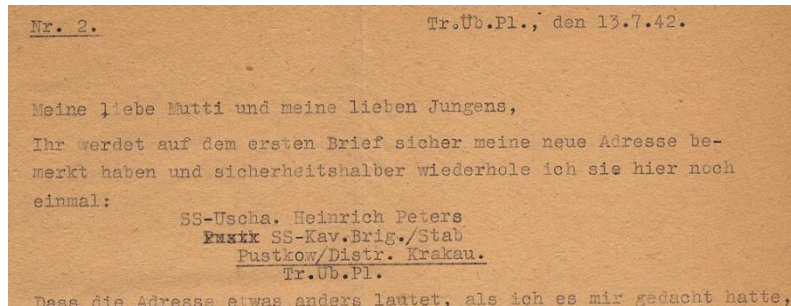
#### Eastern Front Medal (Winterschlacht im Osten 1941/42)

Awarded on 15 August 1942, this medal recognised those who endured the catastrophic winter of 1941–42. Heinrich’s receipt of the medal places him firmly in the field during one of the most brutal phases of the war. The campaign was marked by starvation, frostbite, and mass casualties on both sides. Among soldiers, the medal became known as the “Froze Meat Medal,” a grim acknowledgment of the suffering endured.

These decorations show how the regime evaluated Heinrich: as a loyal, effective soldier in a unit central to its war of annihilation.

### Interpreter Identity and Pustków

In mid-1942, Karl-Heinz was reassigned to SS-Heidelager Pustków, a training complex near Dębica in occupied Poland. His letters from this period describe a carefully ordered world: clean barracks, reliable meals, long walks through the countryside, and evenings of organised entertainment in the camp's makeshift theatre. The performances he attended were variety shows typical of wartime *Truppenbetreuung* (troop entertainment): ballet numbers, Japanese dances accompanied by gramophone recordings, and cabaret-style acts such as “Alraune” and the “Dance of the Seven Veils.” One performer, Gentiana, danced a comic half-man, half-woman routine; others, like Escandel and Dolores, were listed in the program but did not appear that night.



Karl-Heinz’s description of the evening reads almost like a miniature theatre review. He notes that the wooden barracks “swallowed much of the music,” that Japanese dance music “cannot be reproduced by a German band,” and that the gramophone was too weak to carry the sound. His tone is cultured, observant, and faintly nostalgic—yet the setting was anything but benign.

Food appears frequently in his Pustków letters, often in small, domestic details that reveal both rationing and his attempts to maintain normality. On one Sunday he writes: “I had no cake left, but still some marmalade, so I managed a modest Sunday afternoon coffee.” In another letter he mentions saving small treats from home to make the days feel more civilised. These moments of comfort stand in stark contrast to the starvation conditions the forced labourers endured.

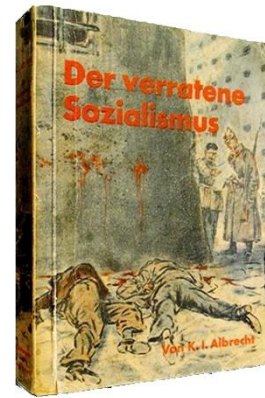


Heinrich (Karl-Heinz) Peters with comrades – Ca. 1942.

Pustków itself was built and maintained by Jewish, Polish, and Soviet prisoners who were worked to death constructing the very barracks in which Karl-Heinz slept. They died in the open-air testing grounds he walked past, starved in the camps whose smoke he must have seen. His silence about them—whether due to censorship, self-protection, or habituation—reveals the moral dissonance of his position.

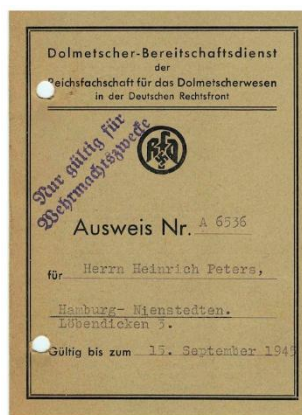
Karl-Heinz also continued to read widely. In one letter he recommends the book *Der Stechlin* by Theodor Fontane to Helene, noting that it would interest her “if you can find it.” In another, he mentions the forthcoming film *Münchhausen* (released in 1943), which

he hoped to see after the war. He also recommends *The Betrayed Socialism* by K. I. Albrecht, Nibelungen-Verlag, commenting that it is sometimes long-winded for someone not interested in economic matters, but very interesting and instructive. These scattered references show a man trying to preserve fragments of cultural life even as he lived within a system of violence.



He passed a Russian interpreter exam in Berlin in August 1942 and received a Wehrmacht interpreter ID. This achievement reflected both his linguistic skill and the value the SS placed on educated, multilingual personnel.

In August 1942, Karl-Heinz received a *ten-day bunker* punishment for a disciplinary infraction. His letter about the incident shows a man concerned with honour, family, and self-image. He insists the punishment is not dishonourable, that it affects him only outwardly, that he knows his own worth. He worries about how it will reflect on his wife and sons. He vows never to forget it and to let it shape how he raises his boys.



Heinrich (Karl-Heinz) Peters – Sprachkundiger (linguistically knowledgeable in Russian) document. Family Collection.

It is a moment of vulnerability and introspection—but it unfolds entirely within the disciplinary machinery of the SS, whose internal harshness mirrored its external brutality.

## Death and Aftermath

By early September 1942, Karl-Heinz sensed that he would soon return to the front. His final letters, dated 9 September, are affectionate and mundane—filled with small domestic details, reassurances to Helene, and the quiet hope that he might soon see his family again. There is no hint that within weeks he would be dead.



SS Totenkopfregiment 2 (1940)

On 26 September 1942, SS-Oberscharführer (SS Staff Sergeant) Heinrich Emil Julius Peters was killed by a mine near Ignatenki in the Smolensk region. The area had been ravaged by months of brutal fighting, scorched-earth tactics, and reprisals against civilians. His death was recorded in SS casualty lists and confirmed in a formal notification sent to his widow. He died in a landscape already devastated by the violence of occupation and anti-partisan warfare—a war in which the boundary between combat and atrocity had long since collapsed.



His death was a soldier’s death, but the war he fought was not a soldier’s war; it was a war of annihilation — what historians describe as the most brutal *Versklavungs- und Vernichtungskrieg*, designed not only for military victory but for the enslavement and destruction of entire populations.

In the weeks that followed, Helene was drawn into the bureaucratic embrace of the SS welfare system. She received letters from the SS-Fürsorgeführer “Nordsee,” offering condolences and outlining her entitlements as the widow of a fallen SS man. The Lebensborn Hauptabteilung SS-Kriegswaisen contacted her regarding support for her four sons. The Deutsche Arbeitsfront (DAF) sent notices concerning financial assistance and employment protections.

These communications were efficient, paternalistic, and ideologically charged. They framed Karl-Heinz’s death as a sacrifice for the “New Europe,” and they cast Helene and her sons as bearers of an SS legacy. The Peters family—once defined by music lessons, community events, and the cultural life of Hamburg—was now bound to the institutional memory of the SS.



Vintage CCCP plaque.  
Family collection.

Helene’s grief took shape within this ideological framework. By preserving Karl-Heinz’s letters, medals, and documents, she curated an archive that would shape how later generations came to understand him, even as she herself remained a committed supporter of the far right for the rest of her life. Loved and respected by her grandchildren—but also feared. What had once been a family identity grounded in bourgeois respectability now bore the weight of a far more complex and troubling inheritance. Over the years, the burden of that knowledge has settled heavily on the generations that followed.

### Movements List

- Groß Flottbek, Hamburg — Birthplace (5 February 1906) and early life
- Harbin, Manchuria — Merchant posting (late 1920s–early 1930s)

- Hamburg-Blankenese and Nienstedten — Family life (1930s)
- Zamość, Poland — 3. Schwadron, 2. SS-Totenkopf-Reiterstandarte (14 May – 15 September 1940)
- Lublin, Poland — W-Kav. Regt. 2, 1. Kavallerie-Kolonne (16 September 1940 – 26 May 1941)
- Lublin, Poland — Reitende Batterie, SS-Kavallerie-Regiment 2 (from 26 May 1941)
- Pripet Marshes, Belarus — SS-Kavallerie-Brigade operations (July–August 1941)
- Olenino–Rzhev–Smolensk sector, Russia — Eastern Front (1941–42)
- Pustków, Poland — Interpreter and staff duties (mid-1942)
- Ignatenki, Smolensk region — Death (26 September 1942)

### Reflective Epilogue



Heinrich (Karl-Heinz) Peters' Ca. 1942

Karl-Heinz was a loving father, a gifted linguist, and a man of culture and discipline. His letters reveal tenderness, curiosity, and a wish to act decently. Yet he was also a volunteer in the SS cavalry, a participant in a genocidal war, and someone who lived within a system dependent on forced labour and racial violence.

His life shows how ordinary people—educated, respectable, even admirable in private—can become involved in systems of oppression. It challenges us to consider not only his actions, but also what he allowed and ignored while serving in a unit that carried out the killing of civilians. That fact cannot be separated from any account of his life.

The uncomfortable truth is that history is made not only by monsters, but by ordinary people formed by the conditions of their time. Moral clarity begins with the courage to look without turning away.

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