

Once Lisa Wrote a Letter...

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It was in mid-September of 1946 when at the age of 76, the nearly illiterate Lisa Mathilde Pulst (1870–1957) wrote one of the few letters in her life. It was addressed to a 10 year old girl, Margit Mende, who lived in a small village in a low mountain range in Germany. Although it was written in a phonetic language resembling German mixed with Estonian elements that was even less understandable than its barely legible handwriting, Margit and her family understood clearly what Lisa was asking for. Margit's former Estonian nanny, who had joined Margit's Baltic-German family in Riga in 1936 and had accompanied them throughout the war from Warthegau to West-Germany, and was now living with her son in the Ruhr area, was heartrendingly asking to be taken home again, back to her "real" Baltic-German family.

Who was Lisa? In the article we discuss what we have found by following her traces both in the archives and in the memories of Lisa's corporal family and her chosen family. The story highlights the life of a woman born in the countryside near Pärnu who was badly off and became the mother of three illegitimate sons, whom she gave away to an orphanage. She had to struggle to survive and to find work. It is the story of a woman who changed her identity several times, leaving Estonia for Riga, and subsequently leaving the Baltic region for Germany. Most of all, it is a story of deep love between an old nanny and "her" children in a transnational family.