

## Chapter Four

### POLANOWITZ

Back to the history of Polanowitz and the six children that grew up on this lovely country estate during the last years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.



*Copy of a painting of the house Polanowitz – back entrance*

The original house was extended and renovated. That is when the little turret was added and that probably earned it the appellation of *Schloss* - in translation a castle, but it was never that. It is much nearer to the large country estate houses that are found in England. It was a home for a large and growing family.

The work on the house was completed in 1910 and in August of that year a celebration that combined the initiation of the enlarged house with the elevation of Walter von Gierke to the nobility was held, as described in Chapter Two. It was an auspicious occasion and it was only natural that his eldest brother should join in the celebration. That the latter could celebrate the anniversary of having achieved his PhD fifty years earlier at the same time was a happy co-incidence.

I am certain that the photograph of the family having gathered there on that day was taken then. It explains presence of the Loening brothers, Edgar and Richard, Edgar's wife and his youngest son, Hermann, as the brothers would have been invited to help celebrate their brother-in-law's achievement. Absent from the assembled family are Walter's elder sons – Hans and Konrad Gierke. They may possibly have been away at boarding school. All the children from the *Carmerstrasse* are present. Somewhat inexplicable are the two children in sailor suits as the Otto and Lili's grandchildren were too young. The eldest would have been only 7 then, and whereas he could be the one standing between his grandparents, this does not explain the presence of the girl dressed in similar clothes.



*Photograph of August 1910:*  
*Back row standing: Richard Loening; Etzel von Gierke [Otto's eldest son]*  
*2<sup>nd</sup> row: Hermann Loening; Prof Edgar Loening; Marie Loening; Eva von Gierke;*  
*Hilda von Gierke, Julius von Gierke; Anna [Nanna] von Gierke; Desi Wegener*  
*(Gierke) 3<sup>rd</sup> row: Lilo von Gierke; an unknown friend; Front row: Luise von Gierke*  
*with youngest son Fritz; Walter von Gierke; Eva von Gierke; Otto von Gierke; Lili von*  
*Gierke with possibly grandson; Tina von Gierke*

This was in all probability the first time that Hermann Loening, 25 at the time, would have seen the pretty Eva von Gierke, then not quite 11. At a subsequent celebration

in 1916 he saw her again and decided then that she would be his future wife but thought her a bit too young yet to be approached. He was to do that three years later.

The years before this auspicious day in August 1910 would have been a busy time for Luise as she had altogether eight pregnancies – while the two oldest children, Hans and Konrad (1897), were born at *Deutschwalde*, the rest of the family arrived over the next years: Liselotte [Lilo] in 1898, Eva in 1899, Ernstine [Tina] in 1901, Ilse in 1903 and Fritz in 1907 were all born in Polanowitz. Ilse died of diphtheria in 1905, while one boy (Karl) died at birth in 1909.

In 1906 Walter Gierke established a little cemetery within the boundaries of the large park that surrounds the house. He dedicated this to the Lutheran congregation of Polanowitz. The words he spoke when he dedicated the ground have been preserved. He explained that he had decided to divide the area into two parts:

“ ...not to draw a dividing line between us [he was addressing the congregation] because in death we are all the same but because I have decided that the estate should for perpetuity be kept in the family so I would like to keep the graves of generations of my family together”.

He had Ilse’s grave moved to the cemetery at the time of the dedication. An even tinier grave was added next to hers in 1909 when little Karl died. The third grave was to be his own when his coffin was brought back to Polanowitz in 1925. In 1939 those were the only graves in that little family cemetery. I doubt if any more were added to these three after 1939. [See footnote at the end of this Chapter, p.36].



*Walter von Gierke*

That speech at the cemetery gives us some idea of the security Walter felt and he had no inkling of the forces that were to destroy the whole fabric of the life of the solid hard-working middle class of Europe. Within a decade war broke out and 1<sup>st</sup> World War [1914 –1918] was upon them.

Up to then the children grew up on this lovely large property, many visitors came to spend summer holidays and it was a well established home, albeit under the strict hand of the parents.

The older boys were sent to school in Bromberg and much later the girls were sent to Hohensalza. In the early years a governess came to teach the girls.

The war years must have been worrying and the stories that came through from the war front were horrific but the armistice in November 1918 brought relief even if after the Treaty of Versailles the province of Posen became Polish, thus making the whole area Polish. We can only guess what effect this development had on Walter von Gierke. He was, however, established there and continued to farm successfully for the next six years. He became ill and was sent, or decided to go, to Wiesbaden to seek a cure. Much to the dismay of his family he died there on 30 November 1925.

Hilda von Gierke wrote about the fate of the family in 1960 and queried as to who could have predicted that less than twenty years after Walter's death his wife, Luise, would have to flee while the six children would be spread all over the divided Germany and in Africa. She mentioned the very last family gathering of the Gierke clan in Polanowitz in 1938. Sadly letters that would have come from there at the time have got lost and I have no record of them. I think that it would have been Luise's wish that Eva should be present on the occasion but at the time it was impossible. In fact Eva, Walter and I were there to help her celebrate her 71<sup>st</sup> birthday in 1939.

## **Hans**

The eldest son grew up to be a good-looking young man and at the age of barely 19 must have joined the German army as he became an officer. I am not quite certain about this but I seem to remember photos of him in uniform. After the war he came back to Polanowitz and was married. I have only a very vague memory of the wife.

She was known as *Tante Loli* – short for Liselotte. They lived in the house very close to the big house, presumably built for them. There were three children – Sabine, Klaus and Walter.

Naturally he would have taken over the management of the estate after his father's death. From letters by Luise's sister, Elfriede [*Tante Frida* to us] to Eva we gather that there was much unhappiness, as he wasted money on large new buildings for the farm. He may not have been a very good farmer and administrator.

Sadly his marriage was most unhappy. I know no details but my mother did tell me that they were divorced. Whether our good-looking uncle was in fact unfaithful and had an affair with the lovely, very young Maria [Mia] before the divorce can be left to conjecture. He did marry this young, half Polish girl. The family especially his mother, Luise von Gierke, was most unhappy with this second marriage, mainly because Mia was half -Polish. I remember Mia clearly from our 1939 visit when both she and Hans, my godfather, were very kind to me. I was given some lovely jewellery, which she had a hand in selecting.



The first wife, Loli, and their children, moved to Germany after the divorce and denounced her ex-husband as a traitor to the Nazi regime. He was living in the part of Poland that the Germans felt was theirs. He had to adapt his farming to the Polish law and was no doubt friendly with many Polish officials. The Nazis, in their zest to find anyone not being a true German, imprisoned and executed him in October soon after the outbreak of the war in 1939. [We recently received an extract from a German document that describes the dramatic night of 22 October 1939 when Hans von Gierke was the first of a group of prisoners to be shot by a drunk and power-hungry official. Mercifully he died immediately]. The family believed him to be in a concentration camp during the war and only heard of his death in 1945.

On the other hand Loli felt that she and her children had been deprived of their

rightful home and their inheritance. She moved into Polanowitz to administer the estate during the war years. Many years later a labourer who was asked about this time remembered her and testified that she had been a good administrator. From this interview it was clear that the people there felt she had been unfairly treated, as it had been wrong to break up a marriage. When the Russians came to that part of Poland she too had to flee and settled back in Germany with her family.

[Attempts have been made by other members of the Gierke family to establish contact with this branch of the family. These ended very unhappily as the reply was so vitriolic that it seems better to ignore these cousins.]

Mia was in a concentration camp for the duration of the war. She was released in 1945 in Sweden through the services of a lawyer who was a family friend. A year or two after the war he married her and they settled in Baden-Baden. It was Mia who was the first member of the family to make contact with us through the Red Cross in 1945 and through her our mother could trace the fate of other members of the family. Mia's husband died a few years ago and she lived in rather luxurious retirement till her death in 2001.

### **Konrad**

Like his older brother, Konrad attended school in Bromberg and, like him, became an officer in the German army during the 1<sup>st</sup> World War. Back home there was no doubt jealousy amongst the two brothers as he also claimed his right to farm. He settled on Lojewo, the second estate that grandfather Walter had acquired. He married Annelise from Halle and there were five children. Rosemarie, Jürgen, Dieter, Birgit and Berndt. In 1933 Eva and Walter and I were in the house in *Lojewo* when Birgit was baptised. Sadly this little girl died of diphtheria a year or two later. Berndt was born after that in 1937.

By the time we visited Poland in 1939 Konrad had been persuaded that living in Poland was not a good idea and purchased a property in Austria, at that stage part of Hitler's expanding Third *Reich*. He did come to Poland while we were there – whether it was to see his sister or to sort out financial matters is immaterial. It may well be a bit of both. Fact is that the two brothers did not speak to each other on this

occasion. Konrad's oldest son, Jürgen, told Walter that the underlying problem was that, in Konrad's opinion, Hans had been too familiar with the Poles. In those days a 'good' German did not fraternise with Poles – not unlike the situation in South Africa during the apartheid years. Hans even went to a casino with the Poles. And the final blow came when he married Mia!

I think that at the time our mother felt that Konrad was leaning towards being a Nazi. It would not have made him very popular with his brothers nor his sister who had left Germany because her husband was classified as non-Aryan. Today we can sympathise and are in no position to judge, as it must have been extremely difficult to resist political pressure at that time.

Konrad was to pay heavily for any mistakes he might have made as he had a terrible time during the war. He lost all his property and the family had to find refuge in Halle where Annelise's mother was living. Annelise was very delicate and died in 1943. I am a little uncertain as to what drove Konrad to Dortmund but that is where he met Charlotte, a very young war widow. She was running a laundry and he was employed to deliver laundry. As times improved they were married and eventually could make a home for Berndt, the youngest son. All members of our South African branch of the family have fond memories of her and the lovely home she and Konrad created in Dortmund.

The fate of his children is as varied as that of many who had to find a living in post-war Germany. The eldest daughter married young and by now she is a grandmother. Jürgen, by a strange twist of fate, became a farmer in the north near Bremen where he established a very successful farm breeding pigs and much later a few stud horses. Today he lives there in retirement while his son has taken over the farm. He and his wife Elfriede have visited us in South Africa – as did, over the years, his two brothers. The older of these became a Lutheran pastor while Berndt, the youngest, is a businessman in Hamburg.

### **Lilo**

The eldest of the three Polanowitz girls married Friedrich [Fritz] Grosskreutz, an officer of the German army. He was a professional soldier. He had lost an arm in the

1914-18 war. They lived in various cities somewhere in Germany wherever Fritz was stationed. Part of this family tale is the sadness that she and her sisters, especially Eva, could not agree politically in those difficult years [1933 –1945] because as the wife of an army officer she was not strongly anti-Nazi. They had four sons – Hans-Georg, Otto-Walter, Friedrich [Fritz] and Peter. I do not have much of a memory of the family, except that Otto-Walter must have been at Polanowitz in 1933, but the memory is vague. I do remember meeting Lilo briefly in Berlin in 1939. It was a rushed and somewhat strained meeting. She seemed to me what we might now call provincial: you could see that she had come from the country. In comparison Eva looked smart and very much part of the city. Perhaps this is not surprising as Eva was the only one of the Polanowitz children who had lived in Berlin for fourteen years.

After the war the sisters corresponded and when Eva visited Germany in 1965 she spent some time with this older sister as she did with all members of the extended family. At that stage Lilo and Fritz had retired to Essen where they died shortly after each other in 1968. Their four sons all became successful businessmen and are living with their families in Germany.

The story of Eva and her life is central to this history so I deal with her separately.

### **Tina**

Together with Eva the youngest daughter was sent to Hohensalza in 1916 to attend school there. While the older sister studied diligently, Tina spent much time looking out of the window as she hoped to attract the attention of young men walking by. I don't know if she graduated but a few years later she was married to a Lutheran pastor, Ernst Kienitz. I think he must have come from that part of the world i.e. the previous German part of Poland. He had a theological lectureship at the university in Posen and was rector of a small parish in a nearby town. There we visited them in 1939. They had a large family of seven children – two boys, Wolfram and Malte, and five girls – Barbara, Erdmute, Monica, Irmela and Hildburg.

In the early years of her marriage it was a blessing for Tina to be so near to her mother. She was frail and as a young girl had suffered from TB when she spent some

weeks in a sanatorium. After the birth of Wolfram she had been warned not to fall pregnant again – it would cause her death! It obviously didn't but her health was delicate and as a result she often sent her children to Polanowitz. The children would be accompanied by a nursemaid, but it would have been quite a burden on the household and responsibility for grandmother to bear. We met the older children there in 1933 and again in 1939 – then accompanied by four younger sisters.

In September 1939 Ernst was killed by the Poles who were fearful of German domination. The Poles had only so recently won their independence after the Treaty of Versailles. They so much resented Hitler's arrogance and at the outbreak of war a number of Germans were arrested. It can therefore be said that the members of the Kienitz family were also victims of Hitler and his politics. The then not quite five-year-old Monica claims to remember the night her father was arrested. Ernst was subsequently executed in the town together with other victims of that fatal September day in 1939.

Tina was paid out some compensation by the German [Nazi] government in 1939 and with that money she was able to buy a house in the area near Posen, as she naturally had to vacate the rectory. There she lived with the children during the war years but eventually had to flee as the Russians approached in 1945. Abandoning the house and its contents they caught the last train that was leaving the area. Eventually they landed in a town, Ansbach, in central Germany. There she and the children found a home and managed to exist.

Wolfram was conscripted into the German army and died of a typhus infection in an army hospital on the front in 1944. Typhus, a louse-borne infection, is rare today and curable with antibiotics. He was barely twenty years old. His grave has disappeared with the spread of urbanisation.

Malte too was conscripted but being younger only had a year of active service. He survived, although the trials and deprivation of the war years took their toll on his health. This together with a hereditary disease meant that ill health haunted him. He did study and became a successful paediatrician. As a professor he and his wife Waltraut and their three children lived in Frankfurt. After many years of suffering he

died in 1992. Waltraut visited South Africa twice after his death. It had been his wish to see Africa but he was too ill to travel by the time retirement would have given him the opportunity to do so.

The fate of his sisters, some of whom also suffer from the hereditary disease, is fairly typical as to what happened to many who grew up in post-war Germany. Tina herself lived in Cologne in a comfortable flat. She was strong enough to visit her second daughter in the USA and subsequently came to see her sister in South Africa in 1973. It was good that she saw Eva before the latter's death in 1974. We South Africans visited her prior to her death in Cologne in 1982.

Tina and Ernst Kienitz obviously both carried the recessive gene for *Ankylosing Spondylitis*, a disease when most of the joints in the body seize up, causing a great deal of pain. Of their children Malte, Barbara and Irmela suffered from this disease. At the time of writing Irmela is the only one of the three still alive.

### **Fritz**

The youngest of the Polanowitz children grew up in what had become Poland and naturally learnt to speak the language fluently. He too wanted to farm and acquired a property *Novy Dwor* very near the German border. Once the Nazi army had overrun that part of the country in 1939 the property changed its name to *Weidenvorwerk*.

Earlier in 1939 a careless remark landed him in prison as he was accused of war mongering. His mother, Luise, came to his aid and looked after the property for a while. We visited him there in prison when we came in 1939. My memory of him is that he was treating the whole episode as a joke. Was it to hide his embarrassment because his sister was visiting him in prison?



*Painting of Luise von Gierke, probably done at the time of her 70th birthday in 1938*

He was drafted into the German army and once again his mother came to look after his property. This was most opportune as she had been forced to flee from Polanowitz. She lived there throughout the war years and such

letters that she could send to Eva in Windhoek through the Red Cross reflected her satisfaction that she could be of use there. She passed on news of the other children especially Konrad and Tina. When Luise too had to leave the property with the advance of the Russian army she found a home in Werningrode in Germany with Willa Wegener, the 1<sup>st</sup> World War widow who had often made use of her hospitality in earlier years. There she died in 1949 at the age of 81.

Fritz experienced all the horrors of war but survived with relatively light injuries. He landed in Russia at the end of the war and there he married a Russian woman, Nadia. They lived in very poor conditions in Poland after the war. A son, Walter, was born in 1964. He recently acquired German citizenship and could now insert the 'von' in front of his surname. His father has died, but his mother lives with him and his wife and two sons. Now that travelling in Europe is no longer a problem he comes to Germany where he is a guest in Frankfurt and stays with Waltraut Kienitz. He is very welcome as he is a very handy worker and with money earned he could buy a car, which makes travelling so much easier. On a recent visit he brought his elder son with him so that he too could meet his relatives.

Waltraut Kienitz and Walter von Gierke (son of Fritz) together with Monica Kienitz recently visited Polanowitz and they could establish that it still existed and that the buildings are in good condition. It was they who spoke to a labourer who remembered the days when Loli returned and took up the reins during the war years.

It would be wonderful if eventually Walter von Gierke could take over what is left of the original Polanowitz estate so that the dream of the first Walter von Gierke could be realised.

**NOTE:** In a collection of notes on his father Konrad von Gierke revealed that he had been in contact with a Polish labourer who had kept his father's grave in good order. In 1973 the circuit officials gave the order that the whole very neglected cemetery and the little forest should be liquidated. But because the grave had been kept in good condition it was ordered that the earthly remains of Walter von Gierke should be exhumed and transferred to the Polish Catholic cemetery in the vicinity of the main house as well as the Catholic church, so that he would finally be laid to rest in sacred grounds. He felt that perhaps the labourers who would have remembered their 'old master' wanted him to rest in peace in their cemetery.