



INTERVIEW
WITH KLAUS
MATZDORFF

Tenerife shaped my grandmother's life

By Sabine Virgin

More than a century ago, Luise Schmidt from Halle in southern Germany spent three and a half years on the island of Tenerife.

At a time when travel was not as common as today, this was an unusual place to journey to and a very courageous move for a 20 year old woman. Interestingly, the lady in question carefully documented her time here caring for the children of German hotelier C.H. Trenkel, a record which has now been published as a book.

The diary that contained all her notes was not discovered until after her death. Fascinated by the contents, grandson Klaus Matzdorff decided to produce a copy of the diary in order to preserve the story for his family chronicle. "It was written in the old Kurrentschrift (a medieval-based style of writing). I can read this script, but my children cannot. That's why I wanted to copy it so it would not be lost", explained Matzdorff.

Verena Zech, from the Tenerife-based Zech Editorial publishing house, became aware of the manuscript and soon saw its potential. Thanks to their collaboration, the diary is now available in book form, in both Spanish and German, with illustrations.

We spoke to Klaus Matzdorff about his grandmother's reasons for coming to Tenerife and how it has affected his family's life since.



Klaus Matzdorff (r), pictured here in the Mundo del Mapa bookshop with Antonio Mas (l) and Bettina Matzdorff (m), has revived the memories of his grandmother Luise

How did your grandmother come to journey this far?

"It was quite common at that time for daughters to take a position within a household until they later married. My grandmother did not come from a wealthy home. Her father was a mid-level railway officer and her mother a housewife. They had three daughters: my grandmother Luise was the middle of the sisters. She was an excellent housekeeper, cook and, above all, seamstress. She was very fond of sewing and kept up her stitch work well into old age. I think my grandmother was already a bit ahead of the times as a young girl. She was well read and knowledgeable,

even reading Alexander von Humboldt's complex books. She had previous experience of working in households before applying for the job in Tenerife, which was published in a local magazine. A family of hoteliers was looking for a teacher and nanny for their children. She sent off the application without the knowledge of her parents, and introduced herself to the brother of the hotel owner, who was in Germany. She was offered the position and set sail for Tenerife on February 5, 1904, on the Lucie Woermann steamer. Her mother was obviously reluctant to let her go, and was very frightened for her, especially as the contract was for a minimum of two

years. Her father travelled with her to the ship in Hamburg. There were mainly soldiers on board at first, being transported to German South West Africa in order to crush the Herero rebellion which started in January 1904". The Herero people rose against German colonial rule but were drastically defeated over a period of a few years.

Your grandmother was one of the few civilians on board?

"Yes that's true. She writes of some of the gentlemen who made advances to her or talked to her. Later, she also mentions that most of the soldiers who were on board were killed in service in the area they

were on their way to, which is now known as Namibia. One of the ship's officers, called John Behrmann, made a very special impression on my grandmother and they maintained contact by letter. She said he had indicated that he

and a half years because she always hoped that Behrmann would come for her. But he did not. Exhausted, as the job was very hard work, she travelled back in 1907. Further down the line, at the age of 28, she married a teacher called Rich-



A photo of the Trenkel family from the year 1906, with Luise in the middle. Property of the Trenkels, the photo was kindly provided by Christa Tams from the Zech publishing house

would visit her in Tenerife and make her his wife if she was still single at the end of her time here. Luise had to work for at least two years, only then would the Trenkel family pay for the return trip to Germany, which she would never have been able to buy on her own. Ultimately, she stayed three

ard Sonntag and lived with him in Löbejün near Halle. She had two daughters with him and 11 grandchildren, and she said it was a happy marriage. However, it turned out that a secretary had her eye on Behrmann and did not pass on his letters to Luise (she was consequently dismissed). There

was a reunion between them later, with Luise accompanied by her husband, which she herself described as harmonious. I don't really know whether she was sorry to be married or not".

In Tenerife your grandmother worked for the Trenkel hotelier family. Did she ever speak about it?

"We mostly learned about it from records. At the time, the family ran the Quisisana Hotel in Santa Cruz, plus the Agüere in La Laguna and Martínez in Puerto de La Cruz. Mrs. Trenkel was English. She was very hard working and supported her husband professionally; she possibly had little interest in the children. My grandmother always described having a beautiful relationship with the children, how much she treasured them and was, in turn, loved by them. She spent the summers in La Laguna and the winters in Puerto de La Cruz, something she obviously enjoyed. There were social occasions to which they were sometimes invited to, and even short excursions on donkeys or to local festivals. She recorded all her impressions in her diary. However, on her return, she also noted that she felt worn out, always

being responsible for the children and coping with the constant heat".

How much was Tenerife present in her later life?

"She didn't talk about it at all, at least not in her grandchildren's presence. I remember that in her living room she had a photograph of a dragon tree (from the Santo Domingo priests' seminar in La Laguna), which she liked very much and which fascinated us. Also, there was a decorative oil painting on which a hotel and surrounding landscape could be seen. Nevertheless, she wrote in her memoirs that those three and a half years shaped her very much. She experienced things that only a few had the opportunity to at the time, at least within the middle classes from which she came. Having to stand on her own two feet gave her a certain self-awareness. I always found my grandmother to be a warm-hearted person, who was very candid, sensible and cosmopolitan. She was religious, but not in the exaggerated way some could be.

I visited Tenerife for the first time in 1993, with my wife as part of a package tour".

Even though she spoke little about those times, it seems

the connection with Tenerife was preserved?

"Yes that's true. The Trenkel family had a total of seven children, though one sadly died of leukaemia. On several



occasions some of the younger children stayed with my grandmother in Germany during the holidays. After the First World War, Carlito and Prilli stayed with Grandma for six months

because the parents were busy with the hotels in Tenerife. In return, Grandma and her family visited the family in Neudorf / Harz in the summer. Prilli and my mother, Luise's old-

often. Luise gave the children a lot of maternal love during the three and a half years of her life here, as well as later on, which was apparently never forgotten. It was important for me to keep her memories alive for our family. The fact that other readers want to participate in it is all the more beautiful."



♣ **The Matzdorff family in 2017, sitting on the same bench as Luise Schmidt did 112 years before (see other photo)**

♣ **The Hotel Martínez is unfortunately no longer open. Luise always liked to stay there**

♣ **Luise with one of the Trenkel children in Plaza Adelantado, La Laguna**

est daughter, grew up together almost as peers. The two developed a real friendship. After the Second World War we were in East Germany and I can remember we regularly received a package from Prilli at Christmas. To this day, we are still in touch with her children Christa Tams and Jürgen Heinrich. They remember their parents talking about Luise

The book, entitled *Canarias 1904 – 1906, El Diario de Luise Schmidt*, is currently on sale at the Mundo del Mapa book shop in Puerto de La Cruz,

where the entire Zech range is available. (Also, find it in other stores via the ISBN number: 978-84-938151-9-6).

It is a fascinating story, beautifully illustrated with old photographs, postcards, brochures and facsimiles, and provides a touching insight into the soul of a 20 year old in that period

of time. Luise Schmidt's courageous step not only shaped her own life but also those of other members of her family. Conclusion: Absolutely readable. ■