



PHOTOS BY PETER WERNER

## Looking for love in 2018? Write to the tree

*Ancient oak in a German forest serves as a post office for love letters*

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Sometimes reality is as unbelievable as fiction. Sometimes, there are lucky coincidences in life that could not be written in a work of fiction because nobody would believe them. Peter and Marita Pump's marriage is based on such a chain of lucky coincidences. "There is no question; a higher being must have had a hand in this."

Dating websites advertise on TV, on the internet, and on big billboards, saying they will find the right partner for everybody. Algorithms and personality tests are said to show who will fit together with whom and they supposedly calculate the best choice of partner. Without any kind of calculations involved, Peter and Marita Pump met each other in 1958. How well they would eventually fit together was difficult to guess then and, viewed from today's perspective, nigh on impossible. This is because a lucky coincidence played the main role in bringing them together. It took the form of a sheet of paper in a tree. The couple is married to this day.

The tree that brought them together is an oak that is about 500 years old. It is situated in the Dodau Forest close to Eutin, the district capital of the northern German state of Schleswig-Holstein. The circumference of the oak's trunk is five meters and the top of the tree reaches 25

meters above the forest floor. It is an ancient, beautiful tree, but what really makes it special is a little hole left by a fallen branch. This small cavity serves as a letter box. This is where letters that are mailed to the "Groom Oak" end up. The tree has been called this since the daughter of a Dodau forester married a chocolate producer from Leipzig under the oak in 1891. Before that, the couple had hidden secret love letters for each other in the small cavity left behind by the fallen branch. Since then, people who are looking for a partner or friends send letters addressed to the oak.

Around 1,000 letters are mailed to the Groom Oak each year, and they are

delivered by a postman who places them into the hole in the trunk. Those interested can visit the oak, climb a ladder to the cavity and take out the letters. Anybody is allowed to open and read them, since "the privacy of letters has been cancelled for the oak," as Karl Heinz Martens explained. The 72-year-old delivered letters to the Groom Oak

until 1994 and calls his deliveries to the oak the "highlight of his job" as a postman. For years, Martens climbed a ladder and placed letters into the cavity – and explained to visitors what made the tree so special.

The tree, which has its own address, has even received international attention: TV crews from Japan, Denmark, Norway, the then German Democratic Republic and

**"The Groom Oak is much more romantic than the internet."**

– KARL HEINZ MARTENS  
FORMER POSTMAN



PHOTO BY PETER WERNER

Western Germany have interviewed Martens. Mail often arrives there from far across the globe. "After the Goethe Institute mentioned the Groom Oak in their text books, many letters came from China and from the U.S.," Martens said. Martens can report of successes: he knows several couples who met each other thanks to the oak.

One of these couples was Peter and Marita Pump. In 1958, Pump found a sheet of paper with her address in the cavity in the tree and the next day he wrote to an "Honoured Miss Marita." Peter Pump had been stationed in Plön as a young soldier and while he was taking driving lessons, he

A tree cavity in the Groom Oak has served as a letter box more than 100 years. Below, the steps leading to the ancient oak, where more than 1,000 letters are delivered each year.

got to know the region. The driving instructor showed the young soldiers something special: an oak with its own address. Pump put his hand inside the cavity and felt several letters. He chose one that only held a name and an address and decided to write a letter. Why exactly did he choose this name, this address? The now 76-year-old shrugged: "Just for fun, as a joke," he laughed. When Marita received his letter, she was very surprised. The sheet of paper with her address had been deposited in the oak by colleagues – without her knowing about it. "I used to be rather timid," she said. "They wanted to help me get a boyfriend." Even they couldn't have anticipated how successful their actions would be.

"I would be delighted if we could enter into a friendly word war with each other," Peter Pump wrote, somewhat formally, in his first letter. At first, Marita did not even want to answer the letter but her mother thought it was witty. "It is her fault that I wrote to him," Marita points out. At that time, chance had not yet been outsmarted by algorithms – in order that the pair could find each other, support from friends and family was needed. The couple wrote to each other for a whole year before Peter built up the courage to go and visit Marita. He had a friend who accompanied him and Marita had a female friend at her side. "They were there for support," Peter laughs.

After a short time, Peter Pump was travelling from Plön to Marita's place in Haffkrug every other weekend. "By bus, this used to be like a journey across half the globe," Peter sighs, as he looks back on their courtship. In 1960, they got engaged and in 1961, the two were married. Today, the Pumps have two children and seven grandchildren. In 2011, they celebrated their golden wedding anniversary.

How can a marriage, one based on so many coincidences, work out, launched from a sheet of paper with only a name and an address? "Our characters are different," Marita said. "But communication is key. We have always talked about everything together."

Peter and Marita Pump recalled that life hasn't always been easy – but between them it just felt right. "Many times, we did not have much," said Peter. "At least on the material side." For Marita, their meeting was fate: "It was just meant to be that we find each other. We had little and were rewarded for our modesty," she says. The couple weathered their economically difficult times together. "That created a stronger bond," Marita said. "We always discussed together, how we would take the next hurdle," Peter added.

It was a few years after their marriage that Marita first visited the place where their relationship began. She was

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