Ways of Looking at my Father-in-Law, Refugee and Paraguay Pioneer

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My father-in-law, Heinrich Dueck, died before I was part of the family, before I married his youngest son Helmut, so all I had were a few photos and secondhand stories by which to form him in my mind. What I cobbled together, initially, was – to use the visual of our conference program – an outline filled with fog and blur. I didn't realize until much later that I had become a biographer, informally and privately, that I had embarked on a version of his life. My paper is the bones of a rather longer essay about that endeavour, published in *The New Quarterly*[1]. It posits no theory; it's personal, my story as much as his, both of us winding through place and displacement.

Is it possible to truly know someone else? This is the question beneath the practice of biography. Probably not, but we keep trying so we must believe it is.

My first way in to knowing Heinrich Dueck was via his death, where biography usually ends, not begins. But since he died shortly before my husband and I met, it was the first story I had, and a big one. Helmut, who immigrated to Canada a few years earlier, got the news by short wave radio. There was no possibility of attending the funeral the next day. Details followed by letter.

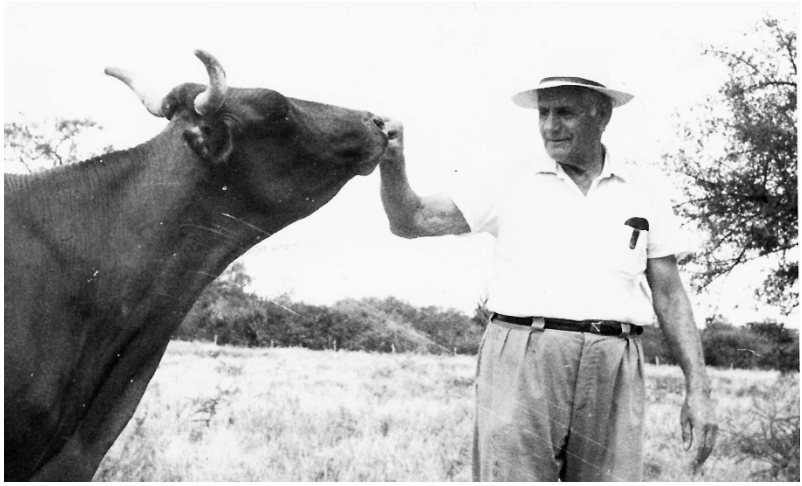

Figure 1. Heinrich Dueck at his beloved Chaco ranch.

Death fixes the essential outline. You read an obituary and imagine you've got the life wrapped up in your hand, whole. Heinrich Johann Dück. Born August 31, 1906 in the Crimea. Conversion, baptism in the EMB church, flight out of Russia through Moscow in 1929, pioneering in the Chaco, Paraguay with other Mennonite refugees of that event. Marriage in 1931 to Suse Rahn. Children, 9, and an adopted niece, for 10. Etc. Died January 10, 1974. Firm data.

But when the death is sudden and unexpected, as his was, when relatively young – he was sixty-seven – it looms over the life like an exclamation mark instead of a period at the end. The details determined my early sense of the man. Heinrich died alone. At his beloved ranch. He'd dismounted his horse to rest beneath a tree, crossed the reins neatly over the animal's back, was overtaken by a fatal stroke. A peaceful look on his lifeless face. Papa – as the family called him – had caressed Mama's back before he set out that morning and when she said, as always, "Lass gut gehen" (May it go well), he replied with "Thank you" instead of his usual "It will."

I filled the Heinrich shape with ideas like tragical and heroic. Carefulness. Tenderness. The masculine loveliness and loneliness of a man and his horse. But mostly I saw him through the screen of my young husband's loss of a father. I was moved by his sorrow, but Papa itself was a word, only relevant because of this other,

younger man. Since Papa had never appeared to me, how could he be as one who'd disappeared?

Place

The next way in was via the place Heinrich Dueck spent most of his adult years.

Figure 2. Heinrich and Suse Dueck house, Filadelfia, Paraguay.

Biographer Richard Holmes utilized for his work on the poet Shelley and others a research method he calls footstepping – following his subject physically through the geography of his story. I footstepped Heinrich's life, quite thoroughly I think considering I was a Canadian outsider to it. Helmut and I have visited the Chaco numerous times, and in the early 1980s we lived there for two-and-a-half years with our three children.

I was secretly working on a novel set in the Chaco during that time, researching and experiencing – intentionally – as much as I could of the place: its heat, the thick howling north wind, its strange and compelling beauty, the story of the Mennonite settlement. Fernheim Colony was barely 50 years old at the time, its history seemed close and accessible. I wasn't thinking of my father-in-law as much as my developing characters, but everything they lived, he'd been part of too.

I have not been able to footstep Heinrich back to the Crimea, but I've always felt that in Paraguay I touched the Russian Mennonite experience more tangibly than I ever could in Canada.

The place teemed with Russia stories by those who still remembered it. And, place is much more than landscape and weather, it's an ethos, a worldview, even a theology of sorts, and here the institutions of colony and church, village system and governance, were based on how things had been done in the old country, which they'd been desperate to leave. Every November 25 the entire colony commemorated the escape through Moscow in the dying months of 1929, an escape considered a miracle, though the majority of their co-religionists who clamored for release did not succeed.

Perhaps in my informal quest as biographer, place too was out of order, in that I worked to comprehend the stage upon which Papa's life had played before ever resolving him clearly as an actor. Yet place can say a lot about a person. Heinrich embraced the Chaco. Unlike many, including his relatives and eventually his own son, he did not leave the Chaco for Eastern Paraguay or Brazil or Canada. And he was a member of the EMB church, officially neutral in the V*oelkische Bewegung* of the 1940s, with its enthusiasm for Hitler and hopes set on return to Germany. According to Helmut, he never talked a "God brought us here" line (he left that to preachers), but he was a Chaco patriot nevertheless.

Lightning

I helped myself to another way in, a certain incident in Heinrich's life that fascinated me, a kind of family legend by the time I heard it. I may have fixed on it as too germane to his life – something we amateur psychoanalysts or writers like to do. Anyways, it happened March 18, 1931 when Heinrich was 24, already courting Suse Rahn, but living at home, the oldest of the unmarried children. His father had died of illness four months earlier, in December. That day, during a storm, lightning struck their wood and clay dwelling, found its way in through a bolt that held the rafters together, knocking Heinrich unconscious and killing his mother.

Once again there were juicy, telling details. For example, the lightning stopped the hands of the clock beside the mother and melted the chain into a solid rod. The clock itself has huge representational power, for it had been carried along out of Russia when hardly anything else was.

I could probably be indicted by Dominick LaCapra's warning against "appropriation of particular traumas by those who did not experience them" – typically, LaCapra goes on to say, "in a

movement of identity formation." I defend myself by saying I loved to watch lightning as a child, never dreamed though that it happened to people I "knew", and now it had, and besides, isn't appropriation what marriage involves? I wanted to belong in that family, I really did. I gave Heinrich's near death, the subsequent "parental" responsibility for younger siblings, and raising his own large family without the support of living parents a lot of weight.

Figure 3. Heinrich Dueck, centre, with four brothers.

Professional practitioners of biography say it's not the biographer's job to judge, but rather to observe how and what the *subject* may have judged. Increasingly, however – and here I'm jumping ahead a little in my chronology of the biographical process – I found myself recoiling against an aspect of the deep religiosity of a Mennonite community, namely the requirement that everything be attached to God's will. Already in 1931 the fledgling colony had a small printing press and regular newsheet called the *Mennoblatt*, and in its report of the lightning event, a poem followed that expounded on its pathos and referred to "this, which the Lord of the earth has done." It makes me see God's bent creative finger reaching downward in Michelangelo's "Creation of Adam" as a crook of lightning, I see the young man with his deep eyes and dark curly hair falling, the mother and the clock chain beside her stiffening in the millisecond wake of that formidable current. Two struck, one taken, and if deliberately ordained for that woman and her son, it seems cruel and unbearable.

Memories, Motives

Next, and further, I worked over the course of many years to form Heinrich through the memories of others, mostly his other children. I felt I'd exhausted Helmut's store of memories and became more deliberate about asking his siblings about their father. There were difficulties in this. Well, they said, he was hardworking, gifted at anything mechanical – in other circumstances, he might have been an engineer. For many years he was head of the colony's industrial plant, then built and installed pumps and repaired machines on his own. A strict boss, a strict father. Some shared uneasily that he had a temper. When forced to close the palosanto extraction operation that he'd poured his mind and time and money into because the colony authorities deemed it competitive to their own palosanto venture, he was embittered. He'd forgiven, he would say, but seemed unable to stop referencing the grievance.

It seemed nearly impossible, though, for these people who had known him for as long as they could remember to convey him in a rounded way. There were contradictions too, every new story a counterpoint. One praised, another spoke of the negative, as if my questions were a convenient outlet for processing their childhood. I became aware of unfinished business. I sensed too that I shouldn't push curiosity too hard, as if I didn't, after all, have quite the same right to him that they did.

I need to also mention motive here. Essayist and journalist Janet Malcolm is more skeptical than many of her peers about biography, saying its "transgressive nature" is "rarely acknowledged." She's on the hook herself, of course, when she complains about the meanings biographers foist on their subjects and how they hide their motives as they write – revenge, she suggests, being one of them.

I wanted to know Heinrich, as mentioned, for my own entry into the family, but also for our children's sake: to foster their knowledge of him, convey his ethic, accomplishments. Perhaps protect them in the dangers of genetic flood. Warn them at least. But I'm humbled by the possibility of treachery within my endeavour. Helmut usually spoke admiringly of his father. As younger children often are, he was probably treated more leniently than his older siblings. Sometimes I used the flaws I'd discovered in Papa against him, brought them out to say *his* biography of his father was hagiography. My sister-in-law told me she'd seen Mama crying in the *Kammer* on Papa's account, so I told Helmut that if I felt he wasn't being fair to me or the children I certainly wouldn't

hide in the pantry and cry. "Biography has so much to do with blame," says noted biographer Hermione Lee. "It is not a neutral zone."

I'm humbled too by my neediness. In my middle years, I found myself desperate for a father-in-law. My family of origin was full of women, strong women, but not many men. I'd scarcely known my grandfathers, for example, or uncles, the few there were. "Do you think he would have liked me?" I asked my husband. He said Yes. Added with a smile, "But he wouldn't be able to express it, just as many of us can't." I'm slightly ashamed that *father-in-law* actually mattered one way or the other. Surely the role carries no psychic or cultural significance. Jethro might have been wisdom for Moses, but generally, is a father-in-law even necessary?

Strangely, as my knowledge of Heinrich increased, what enlarged was absence, not presence: frustration that he escaped just before I stepped into the family picture. The person the others could see in memory was a space that attracted my constant eye by its emptiness. Or was it the space where *I* should have been? It had been obvious to me much earlier when Helmut and his mother wept beside the uprooted quebracho tree set as memorial at the spot on the ranch where Papa died, that I would not be in that picture. I stepped back and took it. Now I wanted to be in the photo too. Perhaps both empty spaces represented my failure to become a *Chaquena*, to become totally assimilated as I'd once hoped into Chaco-belonging and the clan. Me and the Chaco, I'd hoped but not realized, a mutual story of unrequited love.

Diaries

That stage passed. People come and go, or never come; missing is common to human experience. Helmut and I visited Paraguay again, Mama also dead by now, and one evening as we relaxed with our hosts, Helmut's oldest sister showed up bearing a coil-bound book of typed pages. "Papa's diaries," she said, handing it to me. Diaries? She'd been transcribing his notebooks into the computer, she said. These were the years 1929 to 1932 and would I like to have a look? *Oh my.* I'd finally arrived at the place biographers usually begin. First "you get to know the archive," advises Hermione Lee. "You go through the whole archive."

Now here was this archive I'd never seen, or even known to ask about. I recalled vague mention of some notebooks, but the extent of them had never registered, nor that they'd been saved all these years in a wardrobe. Helmut said casually, "Oh yes, I remember as

a boy, evenings, Papa sitting and writing." As soon as I could, I stole away and began to read. My excitement would not abate. I read as if struck, not by lightning, but by enlightenment. For the first time, I was hearing his voice!

The diary opened in the refugee camp in Hammerstein, Germany. "Because I tore many pages out of my diary in order to prevent problems while crossing the border from Russia to Germany," he began, "I will now think back and record again." He recapped the Moscow piece, the crossing by ship, the settling in, then day by day. Short notes. My research about the early history of Fernheim Colony as he'd lived it, day by day. I jumped ahead to March 1931, the incident of lightning that had riveted me. His entries here were long, they verified, deepened, added, subtly shifted my emotions, felt now not as *my* reach into him but as *his* outward to me.

Diaries, letters, any personal text, is biographical paydirt. Papa's notebooks were often simply a record of his work that day, and there's a gap in them because his accounts of his years at the industrial plant remain with colony records. Later I assisted in transcribing to computer the remaining notebooks, up to 1934 and about eight years of the 1950s and 1960s. And I kept hearing his voice. It was profound, rewarding, sometimes almost too intimate. I became enmeshed, long past, in the dispute over the palosanto *Kocherei* (cookery), which involved unreliable partners and also betrayal.

Now, do I know Heinrich Dueck, my father-in-law? I'm not sure. But definitely better than at the beginning of my quest. My version of him, at any rate, is fuller. Some kind of satisfaction has been achieved. And this is also true: he and I, as biographers and their subjects always are, are now intertwined – in this narrative.

Notes

[1] "Return Stroke," *The New Quarterly* 139 (Summer 2016): 58-69.