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My Father's Ache

JEAN JANZEN

“Don't Go”

Cousins meet at last after
decades of exile and silence.
I am asked, what compelled you
to seek us out after all these years?

My father's ache, I say.
Like Joseph “his bowels did yearn
after his brother.” I have never
seen my father cry except

in the pulpit when he tells
of little Daniel and Willie clinging
to his legs. Don't go, they cried,
as he pried himself loose and sprinted

to hide behind the barn, their wails
echoing, Heinrich, Heinrich, across
the Atlantic and over the plains
where he leans over the Holy Book

and into my yearning for him,
child of his ache for the other—
the self released to run to
the waiting one and be held.

July, 1989, and I am stepping out of a bus in front of an Intourist hotel in Karaganda, Kazakhstan. Louis and I have flown from Moscow with a group of Mennonites exploring our history. The welcoming group stands on the concrete steps of the hotel searching the faces of those exiting the bus, hoping a cousin or uncle

has come to hear their stories, maybe to help them. And there he is, my Cousin Heinrich with his wife and two youngest children. I recognize his face from a family photo. The short letter in German said, yes, please come. We will welcome you.

We had ventured into the USSR once before, in November of 1975, flying Aeroflot from Los Angeles with doctors and spouses from California. In that Cold War atmosphere we gathered courage to see the country my father had once claimed as home, and from which some of our grandparents had immigrated. I knew that my cousins would have to travel a thousand miles to meet us in a hotel arranged by Intourist, and I did not have the courage to make contact at that time. When we witnessed tearful meetings of Jewish doctors and their relatives, I regretted my hesitancy. Now, fourteen years later, I was ready.

Would we be able to understand each other? I had practiced the Dutch dialect known as Low German, the language we were assured would be our best communication, testing it with my mother who at ninety kept slipping into English asking, why are we doing this? For Dad, I would tell her. And here we were embracing a young couple with a child in their arms and another running around. "Eck sie Heinrich Wiebe," the man announced, "und dit es miene Fruh, Valya." (I am Henry Wiebe, and this is my wife, Valya.) Gentle, handsome, named after my father, he is holding Baby Heinrich. I swallowed hard to keep from sobbing, then tearfully laughed at my broken speech. We understood each other. The words continued to pour out, like a small version of Pentecost, I thought later.

My father had said his last goodbye in 1909 to Willie, the youngest brother, this man's grandfather. Now eighty years later I was the first of our family to greet my father's grand-nephew, and soon, his nephew, Willie. We had flown from Moscow over the barren steppes of this place of exile, over the railroad tracks where Aunt Margaret and her children were pushed off cattle cars, stories we would hear in the privacy of their homes. This was the time of Gorbachev and glasnost. In another two years the Iron Curtain would fall, and most of my cousins would immigrate to Germany.

My father had begun his journey to Canada in the company of his brother Jacob and his oldest brother's family of in-laws. This brother, Peter, had immigrated the

year before and had arranged with several farmers to sponsor the boys as laborers. Because of glaucoma the two boys, ages fifteen and sixteen, were left behind in Liverpool, England, where they received medical care and exams. He told about the room they were able to rent, but when they ran out of money, they stood in “soup lines” with an English family who claimed them in pity for them. The boys promised each other that whoever first received an “okay” from the doctor should journey on alone. My father spoke of this trip across the Atlantic as one filled with hope and excitement. He never was seasick and often stood on deck to enjoy the wind and salt spray. Then the train ride from Quebec, and he stepped off in the little town of Dalmeny, Saskatchewan, that May morning, and asked for his brother. He was directed to a field several miles away, where Peter, who was plowing, saw this boy in Russian clothes approach him, then ran to embrace him.

We had flown into Karaganda, but the train stories dominated. The ones in the Ukraine that carried the fathers away to war camps, the ones that took the women and children to the steppes. The government officials asked Kazakh people to pick up the exiles and put them to work feeding and herding animals, sometimes offering shelter, but more often they had to dig their own mud shelters. In Cousin Willie's home the stories poured out, the ones his father could not put into letters, how mother caught rats in the cowbarn and brought them home for supper, hiding them under her skirt, and how they watched her divide the morsels among them. Because my aunt's sister was jailed for gleaning in a field, her children lived with them, adding hungry mouths. They carefully watched her divide the small, cooked portions. “She was always fair,” they said tearfully. And when darkness fell and they had no lamp, their mother sang hymns to them, her voice like a rope to which they clung. “Gott ist die Liebe,” “When I'm lonely and defenseless,” her sweet voice releasing “Heilig, Heilig,” Schubert's soaring melody in the crowded hut, the winter wind howling through the cracks.

What should I do with these stories with which they entrusted me? How should I hold them? What kind of vessel holds pain with respect? I had been driven to seek them by my father's ache and longing, and in return I was entrusted with the litany of their sufferings, their voices, and their survival.

Cousin Willie met us at the hotel in Frunze, Kirghizia, south of Kazakhstan,

where he now lived. In front of the hotel he stood with his family, wearing a three piece suit and hat. I announced to my friends in the bus, there is my father! Son of little Willie, the orphaned, clinging boy, his education interrupted by war in second grade, he was employed by the coal mines, as his father had been. But he was also a soloist and choir director in his church. And there was his sister Lena who was sent to Archangel, Siberia, as a teen to pull logs out of the icy harbor, then forced to pull wagons in the coal mine, “like a pony,” they said.

Intourist allows a visit in their home, to their surprise. The world is softening. We eat watermelon and zweibach, the double buns of our Dutch ancestry, tasting exactly like my mother’s. We sing and laugh and wipe tears in the wonder of this meeting. Our son, Peter, just graduated from high school, takes videos and waits for translations. The children cling to him, this blonde cousin from America. I demonstrate my two phrases of Russian: “spasiba” (thank you) and “da svedanya” (goodbye) and they roar with laughter. We have brought photos of our families, their uncles Jake and Peter, Aunt Katherine and their families in Canada, also the photos my father received from their parents before the war. The stories continue, maps are pulled out, we sing another hymn. Bare survival—Uncle Willie beaten, then thrown into a morgue, but he is still alive. Someone walks in and he raises his hand, that hand which said “I am alive,” and he was given permission to walk home. I tell them my father’s story of saying goodbye, and Lena offers, softly, “Oh, that is a story we also heard.” The broken circle is mending.

In 1966 when we took our first trip to Europe, a tour that was to include a flight into Moscow for a few days, my father was excited about writing his brother to meet us there. “I know he would travel all that way to meet you,” he told us. When that part of the tour was cancelled, he was disappointed. In his last years my father lived close to his sister for the first time in his life, and he visited her almost daily. During our visit to their home in British Columbia, he arranged for me and my family to visit Aunt Katherine, my first contact with her. She brought out the photo of the family I had never seen. I gazed in awe, seeing an image of my grandparents and their children, as my own children stood around me.

The stories continue—Uncle Daniel, a trained veterinarian who becomes ill in the “Trud Army” camp, and is thrown off a train alive, and then his wife walks

railroad tracks for the rest of her life, looking for him until she is hit by a train and dies. Abram, one of their children, survives, and comes to meet us in his cousin's home. My three aunts starve to death in the Stalinist famine.

The stories find their way into poems, questions of home, and who is my brother. We leave our families to marry an "other." I exist as one born out of the "ache for the other," this gift from God, the Other, that moves us out of self toward the good of another. I carry my father's yearning, and so am linked in the mix of his journey.

I recognize this ache in my everyday life and in my study of literature as the best authors, as Shakespeare said, "speak what they feel, and not what they ought to say." Shakespeare asks his audience to see life as both tragic and comic at once. In *King Lear*, written near the end of his life, he invites us to feel along with him that this constant mix is what makes life rich and terrible and beautiful. The tragedies threaten to overwhelm us, yet, as Frederick Buechner writes, "in every scene of great suffering, he has someone enter from the wings to relieve it . . . and the last word, like Albany's, is a word of mercy."

In the early morning of our departure, my cousins Willie and Abram came to the city to see us off. Willie told me that he hadn't slept well because he was excited by this contact. "I felt like Simeon," he said, "who proclaimed that 'he had seen the salvation of the Lord.'" I knew that Willie didn't expect me to rescue him, but in the events of the following two years, he was able to move to Germany with all his children where a new life began for them. We have embraced them in their new home, and a few of them have found their way to ours in joyful meetings.

Abram continues to live in Siberia with his wife and two married daughters. Somewhere in the Urals the bones of Daniel are washed into a ravine or river. Uncle Willie and Aunt Margaret's graves lie in the crowded cemetery by the Orthodox Church outside of Karaganda, the only cemetery allowed for burial. We visited a Wednesday morning service in that church, the priest in full regalia, a small choir singing the story of the incarnation, incense rising. When we returned to the car, cousin Heinrich, a Baptist/Mennonite said, "well, when it comes down to it, we believe in the same story." This story of yearning for the other and the Other, and to be held.