

Writing the Autobiography of an Imperfect Stranger

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I am sitting in the lobby of a Catholic retreat center on the outskirts of Münster, Germany, waiting. After a while, I see an unfamiliar man ambling down the hallway from the interior, like a curious bear making its leisurely way through the forest. As he gets closer to the end of the hall, he notices me sitting there and suddenly brightens up. He increases his pace and greets me heartily, “Hans Kroeker!” I acknowledge Alfred’s greeting and we start up a conversation.

But I’m not Hans Kroeker. Alfred knew perfectly well that I’m not Hans Kroeker. I never met Hans Kroeker. He died when I was four years old. I don’t even know what to call Hans Kroeker. All the namings I can think of seem either too distant or too familiar. He was a person not talked about, except on rare occasions. Hans Kroeker keeps following me around, all my life.

Back in 2010, an exhibit designer contacted me looking for material to represent Mennonites as one of many known immigrant groups in Kansas as part of an exhibit she was preparing for the U.S. District Court that oversees citizenship and naturalization matters in Kansas for the Court’s 150th anniversary commemoration. I ended up using materials from my own family.

In the process of collecting material for the exhibit, I came to

realize, more than I had before, that my grandfather had left behind a wide variety of autobiographical fragments. I started thinking about putting the fragments into chronological order, and doing some annotations to identify various persons and situations. I realized, somewhat to my discomfort, that I'm the only living person who knows some of these details anymore. But I found what probably should have been obvious: the fragments don't all fit together neatly. They argue with each other and contradict each other. And I argue with and contradict them. As much as I feel some ethical obligation to allow him to say what he wanted to say, there are places where I find obscurity, tendentiousness, inane armchair philosophizing, and deception. "No, I can't let you get away with saying that." Does it work to write the autobiography of a non-self, someone I never met?



Figure 1. Kroeker family in Wernigerode, 1923.

Hans Kroeker was born in Hamburg in 1894, where his father Jakob was studying at the Baptist seminary. One way of recounting his life is as a long list of displacements. The family returned to Russia after seminary and then about 1910 back to Germany to Wernigerode in the Harz region, stepping outside of Mennonite circles to some extent.

Hans thus attended his later school years in Wernigerode. Then shortly before World War I he returned to Crimea to work in the office of his Langemann grandfather's factories. With the beginning of the war, he was drafted into the Russian military and

served first in the medical service in the Caucasus (he wrote about being on the slopes of Mt. Ararat) and later in some kind of quartermaster role on the European front.

With the end of the war, he was back in Crimea. He and Katherine Janzen were married in 1918, in the midst of the Russian Civil War. In late October 1919 Hans was briefly detained by some revolutionary faction and escaped, then left with his wife and baby daughter across the Black Sea and eventually, partly on the Orient Express, to Germany, making their way to Wernigerode where his parents and siblings were.



Figure 2. Kroeker family in Chicago, 1927.

After six years in Germany, some of that in Berlin, they decided to move to the U.S., where a younger brother was already living. As far as I can tell, this was an economic decision. I also have to wonder, however, to what extent the move maybe was prompted by a desire to get away from conflicted relationships. To speak in present-day terms, it seems pretty clear that Hans would have been diagnosed with PTSD. If he had been living in recent decades, he would likely have been in an alcoholism treatment program. (As it was, his problems were just casually condemned by those around him as a moral failing.) In Chicago, Hans started an import-export business; there didn't seem to be a particular focus; it included all kinds of smaller manufactured items, such as

the innovative Steer-a-Lite.

A picture from Christmas 1929, with the family in the parlour complete with an elaborately decorated Christmas tree, lots of toys for the children, and a small library, seems to show some prosperity. But the end was already in sight with the economic collapse of 1929. I don't know exactly when the business came to an end. It looks like it struggled on until around 1933, but it may have become sort of a sideline before that already, since at some point Hans started working for other larger companies in similar types of export-import work. His knowledge of multiple languages – German, Russian, English – seems to have been his major advantage in work situations.

In 1935 the family moved to southern Manitoba, but stayed only 9 months, before relocating to Newton, Kansas. In Newton, Hans had a lot of trouble finding any kind of steady work, both because of his personal problems and because of the economy in general. One thing he became especially involved in, which had started already in Chicago, was writing and translation. The most financially successful piece of this venture was translating materials between German and English for various Mennonite church agencies. But he put a lot of effort into writing various pieces for secular magazines and newspapers, both in German and English. He had some pieces, including a short story, published in places like the *Chicago Daily News*. A good number of his writings were published in Mennonite periodicals, both in North and South America, for which he wasn't paid. A lot of his material was published under pseudonyms.

At some point he came into contact with Gerald Winrod, the Wichita evangelist and right-wing political figure. Winrod had a lot of Mennonite publishing contacts so it's not surprising they met each other. My grandfather became more or less a ghost writer for Winrod, with a European network and personal experience in early Soviet Russia that were probably an asset for Winrod's politically oriented publishing work. Hans followed political events in Germany closely. His parents and siblings lived there, of course. As with most Russian Mennonites, the anti-communist theme in Nazism was something they strongly sympathized with. His own interests and his work for Winrod put him into the far-right, anti-communist, Nazi-sympathizing network both in the U. S. and in Europe. So part of his work for Winrod was to harvest this material for Winrod's publications and put it together for Winrod's use. And much of my grandfather's writing for Mennonite publications came to focus on politics, defending the new Germany and attacking any hint of favorable attitudes towards the Soviet Union. He wasn't

alone among Mennonites in his sympathies for Winrod and Germany. Lots of Kansas Mennonites read Winrod's publications and voted for him when he ran for office.¹

In 1939 Hans was offered the opportunity to go to Germany along with a large group of other American journalists, teachers, and pastors mostly of ethnic German background for tours and propaganda, to see the new Germany first hand. I don't know what all went into the decision to go on this trip; certainly the opportunity to see his parents and siblings was part of it. Part of it also was clearly his own interest and sympathies for the purpose of the trip. Maybe it was also a long-shot search for better employment: maybe also an escape from conflicted relationships here.

So he left for Germany in late summer 1939. The way the oral tradition goes, the start of the war on September 1 meant he was unable to come back home to the U.S. It's not clear to me exactly how long he had planned to stay, or when he might have come back if the war had not started. I also don't believe it really wasn't possible to travel back after September 1, since the U. S. didn't enter the war until more than two years later. And possibly the problem was financial. Or maybe the problem was political; there are some hints that the sponsors of the trip wanted, as payment for the trip, that the participants go back to the U.S. and propagandize for Nazism, with material being fed to them from Germany. And there are some hints that he refused to sign up for this offer, even though he had already been propagandizing along these lines. If that is the case, then he had no ticket home.

In any case, he remained in Germany throughout the war. I can't really track down what all my grandfather did during his roughly eight years in Germany. He probably did some work with the Licht im Osten mission to assist his father. I do know that at some point he became a civilian employee of the SS. At first he was apparently in the press division, because of his ability with languages. During the war he had access to English-language newspapers and magazines; presumably he was supposed to report on their contents to his SS employers. Reading *Time* magazine in Germany during the war gave him a much broader perspective on the world than most Germans would have had. Later he went to work for the Volksdeutsche Mittelstelle, the Ethnic German Liaison Office, an SS agency that processed ethnic Germans who were being brought back westwards from the Soviet Union. Presumably his knowledge of Russian and his knowledge of Germans in Russia were the basis for this assignment. One of the tasks of this agency was to decide who of these people were really

German and who were lesser people, with dire consequences for those who were placed low on the list. My grandfather seems to have known, in general terms, what was going on with Jews and others in the Holocaust while it was happening, although I haven't found anything to indicate he saw such events in person.

At the same time, he had a son in the U.S. air force, stationed as B-29 ground crew chief on the island of Tinian right next to the *Enola Gay*. And a soon-to-be son-in-law in Civilian Public Service.



Figure 3. Refugee group at Viktoria-Luise-Platz, Berlin.

When the war ended, my grandfather was in Berlin, having survived all the bombing and reportedly having spent time in the hospital after being hit by napalm. He seems to have started collecting Mennonite refugees almost immediately. He commandeered an apartment building (Viktoria-Luise-Platz), some office equipment like typewriters, and started referring to himself as a “provisional representative” of Mennonite Central Committee. He didn't know that MCC even still existed. But his proactive approach of act first, ask permission later (if at all), probably saved a good number of lives. This was the background to the famous Peter Dyck story of the Mennonite exodus from Berlin. Once Dyck arrived in Berlin, some months later, the refugees were taken away from my grandfather and he was kind of shoved aside as unworthy (not entirely without reason), and the story has since then been told to highlight the heroism of Peter Dyck and sweep under the rug the roles of several others.²

Somehow he managed to persuade U.S. authorities to give him permission to return in 1947, something a lot of others in Germany would have wished to do. He must have been a master of spin. His wartime experiences obviously gave him a lot more material for psychological maladjustment and difficulty fitting back into normal life. Eventually he left Kansas and moved to Rhode Island, maybe in the early 1950s; apparently some friends he had made in the U.S. occupation in Berlin lived out there. He died there in 1964. Surprisingly, he acquired U.S. citizenship in 1952; presumably he had been stateless since 1919.

Hans Kroeker left three larger autobiographical pieces, all unfinished, and numerous shorter items. One is an untitled text running to a little over 400 typed pages, in English, probably written in 1948. It begins with "Four hundred and seventy air raids on Berlin have spared me." It breaks off in the middle of a drawn-out recounting of a theological discussion with a rabbi on the western front of Russia's World War 1, presumably somewhere in present-day Poland or Ukraine. As you can tell by the use of the word "spared," he uses, at least in the first few pages, the trope of "I have been fated for a special purpose." I have to roll my eyes. Also causing irritation are numerous digressions into ill-informed armchair discussions of political theory, theology, and history.³ The concluding conversation with the rabbi would be one example. There are frequent oblique, off-hand references to incidents that a reader would like to hear spelled out. For example, on the first page: "Already as a teen ager, when caught in the gears of a milling machine, I had been miraculously saved from being crushed." Well, tell us that story! You were the only one who knew it, and now it's gone forever except for this little mysterious sentence! I also wonder about the fairly limited coverage of his early life, family, siblings, etc. These themes seem under-represented. It's really disappointing that he didn't continue this writing project further, although if it went on at the same level of detail it probably would have run to 2,000 or 3,000 pages.

A second large text has a title "Ein Erleben des Grossdeutschen Reiches" ["An Experience of the Great German Empire"]. It is about seventy pages in length (hard to tell because there are multiple drafts, both typed and handwritten) in German. It starts in July 1939 when he left to go to Germany, and it looks like it was supposed to run up to the end of the war, but it is unfinished and mostly just covers the summer of 1939. Again there are many vague references to incidents that he never elaborates.

A third large segment is a handwritten diary covering in some detail the time period from November 23, 1944, to August 28, 1945,

with many fragmentary entries running to 1949 and a few from earlier than November 1944 including one from April 4, 1944, which refers cautiously to the Holocaust. Unfortunately the period of his most active refugee work in Berlin has very few entries. Presumably he was too busy and too stressed.

There is also a substantial text titled "Lived History" under the pseudonym Ivan Barin, which he used at other times. It seems to be more an attempt at history or journalism, with much less of a personal angle, but I have not yet examined it in much detail. It runs to over 200 pages. The use of pseudonyms was another of his affectations, one he shared with many contemporaries, such as Dedrich Navall or Fritz Senn.

Then there are quite a few shorter sketches, most of which were written to gain some benefit, such as permission to return to the U.S. from Germany in 1947. Stories and dates slip and slide, and spin becomes much more prominent.

Then there is all the fiction. As with his other Russian Mennonite contemporaries (Hans Harder, for example), most of the time he chose to cloak his writing in thin fictional veneers rather than straightforward memoir. "Corporal Yurov's War," for example, covers much of the World War I experience. I have hardly looked at this material, there is so much of it.

In a letter written from Tübingen by Hans' brother Immanuel (must have been a difficult name to have during the Nazi era) to their brother Nick in Chicago dated July 13, 1945, Mani reports on various family members and their fates now that the war is over. He had no news yet from Hans other than that he had remained in Berlin. Mani remarked on the suffering in the city and Hans's personal difficulties and said of his brother, "Er trägt ein schweres Leben mit sich herum." [He carries a heavy life around with him.] I might also say, "Ich träge sein schweres Leben mit mich herum." [I carry his heavy life around with me.]

Notes

- 1 On Winrod and Mennonites see James C. Juhnke, *A People of Two Kingdoms: The Political Acculturation of the Kansas Mennonites* (Newton, KS: Faith and Life Press, 1975), 137-143.
- 2 T. D. Regehr, "Anatomy of a Mennonite Miracle: The Berlin Rescue of 30-31 January 1947," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 9 (1991): 11-33.
- 3 That's not a very nice way to talk about your grandfather.