

# Tributes to Hannes Kalisch

**Gundolf Niebuhr, Lanto'oy' Unruh,  
Miriam Rudolph, and Richard Ratzlaff**

**Obituary for Hannes Kalisch<sup>1</sup>**

*By Gundolf Niebuhr*

On Sunday, July 23, 2023, we received the sad news of the parting of a good friend, Hannes Kalisch. He had succumbed to cancer, which he fought bravely for about seven months; many of us had hoped for a full recovery.

Although he was born in Germany as the son of Oskar and Heide Kalisch (May 20, 1969), his life is closely linked to the Chaco. In February 1973, the family came to Filadelfia, where Oskar began work as a German language teacher. The family stayed in Fernheim up to the end of 1978 and is still fondly remembered by many. Hannes experienced Kindergarten and the first years of school here in the Chaco.

When the family moved back to Germany, a piece of his heart apparently remained in the Chaco, because ten years later, when he was due for military service, he decided to do alternative service and chose Yalve Sanga to do so. In 1988, he found his job in the tree



nursery run by Cornelio Froese. His gift for language learning soon became apparent, as he moved among the Enlhet during the day, asked questions, memorized words and sentences, and wrote them down neatly in his notebook in the evening. It didn't take long before he started speaking the language. The fact that his sociability was almost exclusively directed at the Enlhet, with whom he also took his meals, occasionally caused somewhat raised eyebrows among other employees working with the Association of Indigenous-Mennonite Cooperative Services (ASCIM) in Yalve Sanga, but that didn't bother him.

By the end of 1989, when his term of service was over, he was fluent in the Enlhet language. Back in Germany, he enrolled directly into the University of Cologne to study linguistics. His plan was already clear: as soon as his studies were finished, he would go back to the Chaco, to live among the Enlhet people. He didn't allow himself the time to do his doctorate. In October 1994, his basic studies were finished and he booked the next flight to Paraguay. Ernesto Unruh (Yalve Sanga) had, for all practical purposes, adopted Hannes as a son, and he found temporary accommodation there. Soon he took up a linguistic project that had been started by the first teacher training students in Yalve Sanga and continued to trace out a plan for a dictionary of the Enlhet language. Three years later this project was finished. However, his real interest lay not in linguistic work exclusively, but also in the long history of encounters and the question of Indigenous existence in the Chaco.

In 2000, he married Erna Ramírez from Campo Largo and moved there. With the support of friends in Europe, he began systematic interviews with older people across the Enlhet settlements, as well as among the linguistically related ethnic groups of the Toba, Sana-paná, and Guaná. For this purpose, the Institute Nengvaanemkeskama Nempayvaam Enlhet (Helping our Language to Grow) was founded in 2001. This work soon led to a significant repertoire of audio, audiovisual, and printed materials. The elder generation's reports of their experiences during the Chaco War are particularly moving. Reports of experiences with the newly immigrated Mennonites often have a sobering effect. Our story as German-speaking Mennonites here in the Chaco comes to light from a completely different perspective—in part a somewhat harsh correction to the story of the encounter that is common among us. What was initially a series of articles in *Mennoblatt* over time became a massive book, *How Beautiful Is Your Voice*. In the last two decades, Hannes became known nationally and internationally as a linguist and anthropologist. He wrote for scientific journals, took part in conferences, and was welcomed everywhere.

At the end of last year, he became paralyzed in one leg, went for treatment, and was soon diagnosed with a form of cancer. Despite surgery and prolonged treatment with chemotherapy, the tumor could not be contained. During the months of treatment, he completed a dictionary of the Guaná language, which he had been working on for several years.

In 2019, following the advice of national academic friends, he applied for a doctoral program at the University of Buenos Aires. Although he completed his dissertation, there was not enough time to receive his doctorate.

He is survived by his wife, Erna Ramírez de Kalisch, and two adult adopted daughters, Fenicia and Ulrica. The Enlhet community in the Chaco declared several days of mourning for all schools. His colleagues within the Enlhet community have already expressed that the work must continue, because of what he has contributed to “helping the growth” of the language and culture of this Chaco people. We will remember him gratefully.

## **I Did Not Realize the Pain His Absence Would Bring<sup>2</sup>**

*By Lanto'oy' Unruh*

When I was young, every morning I went off to school, and at noon, when I returned home, I always found Hannes and Dad sitting in the shade, transcribing the recorded accounts [of the Elders] as they digitized them.

He taught me many things. I came to understand more about what I am, who I am, because in school you only learn to speak Spanish and other things, but not about the origins of our people. The books that Hannes has published have helped me connect more and more with my Enlhet roots. For me, Hannes was a native Enlhet and his linguistic skill led him to be recognized [as one of us] by many in time.

Despite his absence, I will not be able to forget him. For everything he did for [www.enlhet.org](http://www.enlhet.org) and for the work we built together. Hannes was a brother to me, and we didn't want this to happen. Every time I visited him in the hospital he was very happy. We talked about continuing the work of building up our people, to make their history known, and I would embrace him from the bedside. I will never forget what he told me in his last days:

“Take care of our parents in their old age.”

“I love you all very much. You, as a brother to me, will always be in my heart.”

These were his last words and they filled my heart with a great sorrow. He knew that I also loved him very much, but I am left with an emptiness, a void, of not being able to see him again, to listen to him. There are times when I cannot hold back my tears, because I remember he told me that if someone is gone, it is goodbye, it is forever.

I hope that in another dimension I can find him again. But I don't know this for sure. My grandparents are no longer alive. The Elders taught us that there is another place, another world. Those wise Elders communicated this. They were not like those of us who remain. Those are my words.

### **In Memoriam: What Hannes Kalisch's Work Meant to Me**

*By Miriam Rudolph*

Hannes Kalisch, linguist and author, passed away on July 23, 2023, after a short but cruel battle with cancer in Paraguay. He advocated for the rights of the Indigenous Enlhet; he lived and worked with the Enlhet to find their voice and reconnect with their historical experiences and cultural identity. Hannes lived with the Enlhet for over thirty years and was adopted by Enlhet Elder Ernesto Unruh. He married Erna Ramírez, an Enlhet woman, and adopted two Enlhet daughters.

I met Hannes Kalisch for the first time at my father's funeral in 2014, heartbroken to have lost a dear friend. My dad had spoken to me about Hannes before with great fondness and admiration for his work, but he wasn't of any particular interest to me until I took one of his books along on returning to Canada where I began graduate school that fall. *Wie schön ist deine Stimme (How Beautiful is Your Voice)* is a collection of accounts by Enlhet Elders from the Paraguayan Chaco that recount life prior to contact with European settlers, when the Enlhet still had autonomy over their territories and lives, followed by the great changes brought by the Chaco War, the smallpox epidemic, and the arrival of and encounters with the Mennonite settlers.

For over thirty years, Hannes recorded audio and video footage of Enlhet Elders talking as part of his work as a linguist living among the Enlhet. He wanted to preserve the language and make it accessible in schools. Over the years he transcribed these accounts and published them, giving the Enlhet a voice to share their history and knowledge. The accounts are accompanied by thoughtful and thoroughly researched commentaries and endnotes written by Hannes

that give a historical and cultural context for the non-Indigenous reader. Once I started reading, I couldn't put the book down and its contents have stayed with me to this day. Growing up, I didn't know that Mennonite settlers in the Chaco built their roads across the fields of the Enlhet, dispossessing them of a vital source of food. I didn't know that the Enlhet had goat herds before the settlers arrived as a secure source of meat and that the Mennonites forbade them from keeping goats because they destroyed the plantings of the settlers. Reading this one book, which I followed up with other articles and publications by Hannes, opened my eyes to a reality of my own history that I knew had been incomplete. It made me see my entire life experience in a different light; it challenged me and made me think; it has helped me grow as a person and an artist in ways I never thought possible.

Hannes was generally not well liked or respected by most in the Mennonite population in the Chaco. His work criticizes the settler community, especially the focus on missions (a sacred endeavour to most local settlers), which led to an immense cultural loss among the Indigenous communities and settlement in what he calls labour camps. He criticizes their exploitation as cheap labour, the system of poor Eurocentric education that further eradicates Indigenous culture and knowledge, and the lack of self-determination in communities dominated by settler decision-making. He also calls into question the settler perspective of history and events. He did all this in a quiet, humble, gentle manner through his publications. Though he was respected and celebrated in national academic circles, he was not a public figure and he shied away from any spotlight.

Our paths crossed again over the past few years and we both valued our recently formed friendship. Through an art-response project with the British Museum we exchanged frequent emails and calls, because I incorporated a lot of content from his books in my work. In recent years, I assisted him in the translation of his newsletters into English to broaden his support base. Not being affiliated with a university, he depended on funding from NGOs and private donors for his work. Last fall, while he was in Winnipeg to present a paper at the Centre for Transnational Mennonite Studies' "Departing Canada, Encountering Latin America" conference, I had the pleasure of hosting Hannes and his daughter Ulrica in my home in Winnipeg. This visit and our extended conversations deepened our friendship further. I came to know Hannes as a kind, thoughtful, critical, humble, wise person who was deeply at peace and at home with himself. Before his death, I worked with Hannes on a funding application for a new project that would see a selection of his video recordings exhibited in conjunction with a public lecture series in

Asunción and in the Chaco. Perhaps this might still happen in the future.

Hannes's work has changed the way I see my world. It has allowed me to grow as a person and shaped my work as an artist as I explore the complexities of colonization through my work. He left an immense legacy for the Enlhet people and for people like me, descendants of settlers who try to understand our colonial history. His work will be crucial to any attempts at restructuring Indigenous histories in the Chaco, as well as justice and reconciliation processes. Much work remains to achieve a consciousness of past and present injustices, racism, and a more equitable encounter between the Mennonite settlers and the Enlhet.

### Hannes Kalisch: A Tribute

By Richard Ratzlaff

I first encountered Hannes Kalisch about twenty years ago when I discovered his website and began reading his work. This consisted mostly of the few articles that he was able to make available online and then the book *Wie schön ist deine Stimme* (2014). When he announced that *iNo llores!* was forthcoming, I contacted him about the possibility of publishing it in English translation, and our conversation began. We emailed regularly, met via Zoom occasionally, and were finally able to meet in person in Winnipeg in October 2022 at the Centre for Transnational Mennonite Studies conference. This was a few months after the appearance of *Don't Cry: The Enlhet History of the Chaco War* in English.

As an editor at a university press, I had to justify the book to my colleagues and our academic board on scholarly grounds. I made the case that the book contributes to scholarship in four important ways: as an example of history from below, in its use of oral sources for historical reconstruction, as history from an Indigenous point of view, and especially as a rare case study of a first encounter between settlers and Indigenous peoples that is grounded in living Indigenous testimony. Moreover, Hannes did not have time to develop the insight, but I know of no other case of a sustained encounter between one Indigenous community and one distinct settler community with very little outside involvement or interference for the first fifty years of that encounter. In these two books, Hannes and his colleague Ernesto Unruh have laid the foundations for a study of that extended relationship; both books should therefore be of special

interest to all anthropologists, sociologists, and historians of settler colonialism. And because of the rich and varied oral histories that Hannes has recorded and preserved, there is more and better data for the Indigenous side of that encounter.

Hannes also made indispensable contributions to Indigenous linguistics and language preservation. Already in 1997, he had produced a full-scale Enlhet dictionary (*Moya'ansaeclha' Nengelpayvaam Nengeltomha Enlhet*); his *Alhpeema vana, Las palabras de los guaná: Diccionario básico de la lengua guaná con traducciones al guaraní y al castellano*, based on years of conversation with the last remaining native speakers of Guaná, was published in spring 2023.

I had personal as well as professional reasons for wanting to see *Don't Cry* published in English: Penseem-Pophehek (Abram Ratzlaff) was my grandfather. He helped establish the Enlhet mission at Ya'alve Saanga where my mother was born; I grew up in Abbotsford, BC, on land that had a few decades earlier been Sumas Lake, the homeland of the Stó:lō people. One thing I respected and admired about his books and Hannes himself was his irenic spirit, the invitation to dialogue between Indigenous people and settlers that motivated the books and his continuing hope that that invitation might yet be accepted. Listening to the Enlhet voices in his books could be a way to prepare for that dialogue.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> This obituary originally appeared in *Mennoblatt*, Sept. 1, 2023, 11, and is reprinted with permission. Translated from German by the author.
- <sup>2</sup> Translated from Spanish by Ben Nobbs-Thiessen and Miriam Rudolph.