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Preface

This book is an attempt to summon my German grandfather, a socialist and anti-Nazi activist whom my mother once described as a “nobody.” I came to him at a time of personal need, wanting a mentor. I sought a friend who understood the challenges of trying to make a new world while keeping a home and family together. The problem with this conversation was that my grandfather died five years before I was born.

I started this project by collecting family stories. Then I found I needed background about the history of German social movements. Ultimately, this need sent me across the Atlantic, where I waded through archives and musty file boxes. Slowly I felt I was beginning to understand the world in which my grandfather Heinrich Buschmann Jr. lived. As a writer and a granddaughter, I used this research as my scaffolding, and I used the tool of intuition to listen for my grandfather’s voice. My strong desire to know about his life led me out onto a limb, which was in another sense a place I felt most comfortable as a writer: in the scenes of his life as I imagined them.

In these pages you will find a dialogue: scenes from my life, in my voice, alternating with scenes from my grandfather’s life. The scenes from my grandfather’s life are necessarily fiction. Each element of these scenes, however, is grounded closely either in research or in family anecdote, and at no point does the narrative veer into convenient drama merely for the sake of a story. The vast majority of the significant scenes are grounded in specific

or general fact brought to me through family story or representative of a probable occurrence as suggested by historical research (with one important exception described below). I have tried to stay as true to the large story as possible with regard to my grandfather's political activity and affiliations. The details, large and small, come from reality, and I have noted as best as I could in the text what is known and unknown. The act of inhabiting another period would have been even more arrogant an assumption, I believe, had I not taken great pains to read everything I could get my hands on about my subject. Still, I am sure only of one thing: that inaccuracies remain, and that the best term for this form may be a "nonfiction novel."

I wish to highlight a major departure into fiction in the text, which I hope I have also made clear in the text itself: I have no idea about the specific actions of my great-uncle Josef "Jupp" Buschmann during the war. He was a member of the Waffen-ss, Hitler's elite guard, but I have no proof that he committed any act of violence or that he aided in the destruction of life or in an eastward shipment of human beings. On the other hand, mere membership in the ss is shocking enough, and it would be naïve of me to assume that he was not involved in these crimes. Re-creating Jupp's consciousness in these pages is the fiction I am least comfortable with, because I fear I may have gotten him completely wrong. I don't know enough about him to understand his choice to shift from left-wing socialist to Waffen-ss guard. I fear I have "underimagined" the horrors this man, described to me as genial and amiable, may have committed, but I will probably never know the truth. Similarly, I have absolutely no evidence that my grandfather Heina Buschmann presided over the title transfer of the homes of Jewish residents of Marl and Recklinghausen. I fictionalized these scenes because the truth will probably never be known. But to pretend my family

was innocent would be a far worse fiction, in my opinion—and one that is too often seen as acceptable in our discourse about current and past events, where the disclaimer of “We didn’t know” is seen as subtle absolution.

Because of the ethical black hole presented by the Nazi regime, the choice to fabricate conversations and internal dialogue in this “nonfiction novel” may seem to the reader to be a dangerous or questionable choice for representing an era in which facts and truth must be indelibly protected, lest we forget. But for the same reasons, I felt drawn to inhabit these scenes with as much closeness as possible. My aim was not to create fiction for entertainment’s sake but to draw the reader into a world that would produce the sense of a lived experience—in short, to make it *feel* real. When reading history of the Third Reich, I felt tempted to dissociate from the perpetrators because in one sense of “fact” I am not one of them. However, in many other senses, this is my own history to unravel. And the logic of separation, of “I didn’t do it,” has also sometimes been used by subsequent generations of Germans, and the children of perpetrators of other acts of genocide, to separate themselves emotionally from the history and actions of their families and their people.

Some Germans and some families employ silence masterfully. At places where history stops and the record fades, it would be entirely possible for me to write, “And here the story ends,” and let this vagueness be my escape, a shoulder shrug. But the historical record gave me an entry point, a doorway, and also a challenge. In this book I am seeking a form that allows me to follow the thread of history in order to imagine the events that had an impact on the changing consciousness of my grandfather. Without writing his life in scenes, that consciousness would have been much less available to me.

I believe my grandfather’s consciousness to be one small piece

of a puzzle: how is it that any human can endure repression and make small and large decisions during a period of political tyranny and fascism? Memoirs and personal accounts of those living at the time were invaluable to me during the research for this project, yet I found myself wanting a deeper understanding of the daily choices made in a normal life during a horrifyingly abnormal time.

A bit of historical background: when I researched the period of my grandfather's childhood, I was shocked to discover a rich socialist universe in Germany that existed both before and after World War I. My grandfather grew up in revolutionary times. Bavaria at one point declared itself a socialist Soviet-style republic, and the northwestern industrial Ruhr area of Germany was an autonomous socialist zone later invaded by the German government. The upheaval and the sense of community ownership of the political process are both almost unimaginable today. For this reason as well I wanted to allow the reader and myself the chance to step into this world and to feel this alternate existence. Within this world, too, are the seeds of the Nazi era; I wanted to wrestle with, if not understand, some of the causes of the Nazi horrors. My research showed me that socialism came to Germany first, and National Socialism (Nazism) was a parasite of this movement. The Nazis used socialist language and terminology because they were speaking to an audience for whom these ideas were essential. This was also the root of much exploitation and confusion of workers, some of whom were drawn to the populism of Nazi rhetoric without seeing the movement's true aims of division and destruction.

Herr Heinrich Eppe of the Archiv der Arbeiterjugendbewegung (the Archive of the Worker-Youth Movement) in Oer-Erkenschwick was absolutely essential in helping me to understand the

world of my grandfather. Herr Eppe explained the importance of former socialist working-class youth in the reformation of Germany's democracy after World War II. "No one studies this subject now," he said. "Not even in Germany." At the time he was compiling a database to track the numbers of those in leadership positions who had been members of the Arbeiterjugend, or Worker-Youth. In some ways, he argued, the ability of the country to reemerge from Nazism had much to do with the prewar socialist youth movement. Herr Eppe helped me trace my grandfather through the archive's collections of activist newspapers, none of which were searchable electronically. He also connected me with Herr Gustav Hackenberg, who gave me what would be the last day of his life to tell me stories about my grandfather.

Historian Detlev Peukert's *Ruhrarbeiter Gegen den Faschismus* (Ruhr Workers against Fascism) was essential in my research. This book presents an amazing array of details about the anti-Nazi resistance in the Ruhr. I wish also to thank the staff of the Archiv der sozialen Demokratie der Friedrich-Ebert Stiftung (the Archive of social Democracy of the Friedrich Ebert Institute) in Bonn, where I was able to look at many flyers and pamphlets related to my grandfather's political work. Through the Stadtarchiv Marl (City Archive of Marl) I found evidence of my great-grandfather's and great-grandmother's political roles, their campaigns for public office, and their involvement in the local socialist Weimar government. Staff members at the Kreisarchiv (County Archive) Recklinghausen were also very helpful in providing information about my grandfather's work life.

The International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam has a wealth of materials, both online and in its collections, tracing the existence of social democracy in Germany. Its materials allowed me to hold in my hands flyers and newsletters made by Nazi resisters during World War II. This archive's collection of

postwar labor materials in Germany was also very useful. I am tremendously grateful to the PEO Foundation and the American Council on Germany, both of which provided funding for travel and for the year and a half of research prior to my trip. Professor Alan Beyerchen of the Department of History at Ohio State University allowed me to take his survey course on modern German history as a graduate student, met with me individually, and made valuable suggestions for planning my research trip. The Ohio State University MFA program in creative writing provided me with a wonderfully supportive environment in which to grow as a writer.

My family, of course, receives the lion's share of thanks for giving me stories about my grandfather. My uncle Klaus Buschmann unearthed stunning documents in his cellar and patiently carted me around the Ruhr. Klaus set up interviews and generously gave of his time and affection. My aunt Christa Buschmann translated documents and combed her memories. Oliver and Katrin Buschmann and Christiane and Udo Krolczyk provided levity and hospitality during this research trip. Thanks also to many others who took the time to speak with me and share their memories. Evidence about my family's activities during the Third Reich was difficult to come by. My grandfather's massive personnel file was essential in piecing together the outline of his activity, but efforts to find information about my grandfather and about his brother during the Third Reich through visits to the Berlin Document Center, which contains an archive of Nazi Party activity, were unproductive; these documents are just now becoming more widely accessible.

Thanks to my husband, Donny Humes, for his support and understanding, and deep thanks to my son, Ivan, who makes all of my questions more necessary and urgent. Deep thanks also to Lee Martin, mentor and friend, whose confidence in me made

any outlandish project seem reasonable. Sincere thanks also to Jenny Young, Kathy Bohley, Trish Houston, Monica Kieser, Brooke Davis, Bill Roorbach, Jovan Karcic, the staff of the University of Nebraska Press, and all the organizers for their constant support and encouragement.

Above all, I want to thank my mother, Gerhild Heidi Huber, who told me the first stories, the family stories that change shape over time and transform into something multifaceted and yet still true. She mined her memory for every scrap of family history and made long-distance phone calls to hunt down recollections and rumors. She examined photos with a magnifying glass, sat through long interviews, read several versions of this manuscript, and gave generous comments. Ultimately, her most wonderful gift was that she surrendered her opinion of her father and allowed her relationship with him to change and grow as she let me into the circle of his love.

And thank you in advance to the reader for coming along on the journey to imagine my grandfather through this perilous terrain.

1

The Intuition of History

Why try to change the world?

Dear Opa, Grandfather, Heina Buschmann: I knelt down in the reference section of a midwestern American library, beat-tired, already late for another damn political meeting at a cheap Chinese restaurant. I tried to conjure you from a volume on German history. Come on, socialist, anti-Nazi, German, man I'd never met. Appear and tell me how to live without fear. "Life-long activist" reads so cool in the history books. But the family hardly mentions your name now, so bitter toward the man with the agendas and the pamphlets stuffed in his pockets, the distracted look on his round, sleepy face. You were no inspiration to me as I grew up in a Republican small town, a south side Chicago mallrat turned shaved-head anarchist. I didn't even know your stories, but then I seemed to turn weird and angry as if an underground tide pulled my blood in that direction. But we don't believe in those blood stories, do we, Opa?

There is no answer. I know a few stories: where they lived, the

coal mines, the organizing, the coal dust, the sickness, and the political turmoil. And so I imagine his beginnings, the seed of him.

Heina, you may have opened your mouth to cry, but your chest folded up like a wad of paper and wouldn't release. Heina let out a thin noise between his teeth. His mother, Lina, bent over her pregnant belly and reached for Heina in the cotton blankets. She sat down heavily as she felt his forehead. The child's face was red and flushed.

"Verdamnte," she said. Damn it, damn it all. She wiped the mucus from Heina's nose and saw in the handkerchief the green of wild infection, flecked with the black dust that coated their lungs, their apartment, and their lives, the coal dust that lined the window sills, grayed the wash, and powdered their skin. No wonder the babies died.

My great-grandmother Lina, a fiery woman with black hair and dark eyes, takes the name "the Dragon" in family lore, *der Drache*, repeated with a solemn shiver. At the time of her birth in 1880 the newly formed country of Germany had outlawed socialism. In 1898, not even twenty, she fled her home (fled why? What drew her and what chased her?) and moved three hundred miles from Germany's southeast to the northwestern city of Köln, a bold step for a working-class girl. She found work as a maid with a colonel in the Reich military. In that household she met my great-grandfather Heinrich Sr., a young stable hand who had already launched his grand career of rabble-rousing and getting fired.

I can taste this much from the intuition of history: Lina ran, the way we dark-haired, nervous, stunned, and skittish women of our clan do, and she found a man with the sun in his eyes and the laughing confidence that revolution and a better life were

right around the corner. She married Heinrich Sr. on October 25, 1900, in a cloud of disapproval, a Lutheran girl marrying a Catholic, a runaway marrying a socialist wild man. No one from her family attended the wedding. Two young miners, twenty-four-year-old Karl Ermshaus and twenty-three-year-old August Rehm, stood as witnesses.

The year after their wedding, Lina's strong man went down in the mines, which exploded and flooded and smashed men's hands and feet and took their lives and didn't pay nearly enough. The miners stood shouting on the picket lines, and strikes spread like brush fires from one mine to the next—in 1872, '89, '90, '91, '93. Heinrich Sr. learned the trade of riling up a crowd as he dug black hunks of coal. As a child I knew none of this, had been told only that he could bounce knives by their points on his biceps and that he ate raw onions. I had imagined him as a weird German clown, standing up at Thanksgiving to grab the carving knives and marching around the table in a tank top with muscles bulging like Popeye, an onion in his mouth and eyes streaming happy tears.

Then Lina was pregnant, and I am sure there were moments of sunlight and the springtime smell of red heather as the couple went riding with the socialist workers' bicycle club through the paths of the Haard nature preserve. A century later, my uncle Klaus carefully handed me a thick red bundle of cloth, tinged with the warm glow of age. I unwrapped it to see that it was a red flag, embroidered with an ornate yellow S for Sozialismus surrounded with the spokes of a bicycle wheel and the logo for the Marl-Hüls chapter of the biking club. I imagined the revolution proceeding forward joyfully with every push of the workers' pedals. This flag and other signs told me that my grandfather Heina was born into a Red universe. There were workers' stamp clubs, drama clubs, hiking clubs, chess clubs, first-aid societ-

ies, women's clubs, and gymnastic clubs; there were socialist newspapers, cooperative grocery stores, and bars. After the Kaiser outlawed socialism in the mid-1880s, the movement's roots went underground, stretched deeply and broadly into the German soil.

In a Red universe Lina and Heinrich Sr. must have lain in bed and shared the pillow talk of strategy and political arguments, whispering about possibilities as if exploring a grand hall with windows and doors waiting to be forced open. Oh, those horizontal political meetings, filled with the drug of being loved for your body and your mind, your instincts and your skills, all tinged with sweat and pheromones and hope.

I knew those meetings. Lying on the floor of a dorm room at an organizers' training in Washington DC, I wondered how to drop my Boston activist fiancé because I'd fallen for the organizer sleeping next to me. I moved with organizer number two to Chicago and pushed him to propose marriage so we could get the future going. I left chaos in my wake as I sketched an action plan and a campaign for my personal revolution. When I failed I simply chose a new short-term target. I fell in love with organizer number three, whose eyes snapped with light as he talked about anarchism and the Chicago radical labor insurgency. We stood on a street corner, arguing about how I wanted to have a baby but couldn't sketch a viable strategy while working fifty hours a week for a nonprofit and barely getting by. He did not kiss me then; he gave me a speech about allegiance to the working class.

In this Chicago winter, with my personal life in ruins of my own creation, I began to wonder if anyone could successfully love both politics and a partner. That was when I first heard the rumor that Heina's father, Heinrich Sr., was a raging rebel.

Mom brought the sentences from a visit to Germany: “Heinrich Sr. hung a red flag on a mountainside. Uncle Klaus told me he organized a union.”

I held onto the phone. My must-do, what-now life dipped into a moment of complete stillness.

I was exhausted; changing the world had stopped being fun. I fell easily into another century, seeking some imagined comfort. I could picture the romantic scarlet flap of a red banner in the breeze, but I could not imagine the feeling of having one’s father hang that flag. Having an organizer rebel for a daddy, I imagined, would provide a source of guidance, a North Star. I gradually submerged myself in family history, collecting stories and asking questions. I learned that Heina’s mama, Lina, was a sharp woman torn between misery and elation; I paired time-lines to life stories and felt the knife-edges of deprivation that must have accompanied the glorious and simple story of rebellion. I learned that a lung infection almost killed young Heina at the same time that coal miners’ strikes tore through Germany. And if I wanted my grandfather, my new rebel family, I had to start with that two-year-old, who reached for a pained, distracted Mama and a Papa aflame with change.

Lina’s rage sparked from ordinary flint and steel. Maybe Heinrich Sr. worked a night shift down in Auguste Viktoria shaft number 1, and Lina curled her body around her baby son Heina and her belly, pregnant with a second son. Tonight she didn’t want to hear any of Heinrich’s stories about handing out the pamphlets from the miners’ union, tacking up the posters in the miners’ washroom, or treading that fine line with the bosses.

Heina felt his mother’s hand on his chest and believed the terrible pinch in his lung would fade away any minute now. He drifted into sleep and dreamed of a black dog biting him in the

side and shaking him like a toy. Heina rolled in the thistles of heat, cut by the dog's teeth. He didn't hear himself described in his father's speeches as Papa cursed the mine owners who didn't pay the miners enough to feed their families. Heina felt bright lights and dreamed he was in the mine shaft under his father's lamp, but didn't see the scalpel the doctor used to cut through his pink two-year-old skin, the metal fishing like a hot stab into the delicate envelope of the lung through an ooze of warm blood and then tearing the flesh-paper, letting out that hateful green bile as infection drained into a metal bowl.

Days or weeks later, footsteps scuffed on the stairs up to the third-floor apartment, and Lina glanced at the breadboard to estimate how much she could spare for dinner. Heinrich Sr. slammed open the door, and four men with mussed hair and wild eyes crowded in. They had scrubbed at the mine washstands, but without much soap the dust became a paste that stained their hands and etched black lines into their wrinkled faces.

"Heinrich," Lina whispered, jutting her chin to the corner crib where Heina slept. "I can't feed these men. All I have is soup and bread. And they're so loud."

Heinrich grabbed her forearms. "Lina, don't worry about the bread," he said, his pale blue eyes wild and tinged with red. "You're going to remember November 28, 1904. The next strike's coming—I can feel it!" Heinrich narrowed his eyes, trying to catch a thread of excitement in his wife's look. Why wouldn't she cheer him on like last year at the picket line?

During the early strikes I imagine Lina stood with Heinrich. Wild girl, you had your heart in your throat. There might have been smoke in the air from a bonfire but also the eerie calm of the mines at rest. Oh, those lovely picket-line jitters, history itself and power, too, giving off an electric charge. You took your place on the line in a phalanx of miners' wives. I read how the

women used their children in carriages as decoys to ward off police, smuggling illegal pro-labor pamphlets during a strike, or even filling the carriages not with children but with stones to hurl at the scabs and the cops.

These stories about revolutionary baby carriages held a strangely familiar echo. When I was young, Mom told me a story: she said adult Heina had pushed a baby carriage containing anti-Nazi literature hidden under a baby. As an adult I had never asked about this tale, and I think I held back because I sensed pain there as murky as truth. The anti-Nazi pamphlet story wasn't told with pride; Mom's voice pinched with resentment and fear.

The story became a nugget of history suspended like an insect trapped in amber. Nothing to know. And if you tried to know your way into it, you had to shatter the shiny bead to get at the truth. It remained a sentence in the back of my mind, a marker for all the things I could not ask. That shallow locket of my inheritance held a hinged and two-part tale with a mirror image that pulled me to Germany. I rubbed the story until it shone, my hard proof that Heina risked his life to stand up to the Nazis. It made me want to know the man who would do such a brave or stupid thing.

I imagine Heina in my mother's story—a slight man, short, with forward-thrust shoulders—tightening his grip on the handle of a baby carriage, feeling the smooth wood slide under his fingers as he pushed the buggy down a sidewalk in Marl. The carriage held my uncle Klaus, a sickly baby with an ever-present smile who didn't know World War II had exploded all around him. The baby's body and the blankets in the carriage hid a stack of crudely printed anti-Nazi flyers, most likely smuggled in from Holland. In my vision of the story Heina pushed the carriage down the