Chasing Udo

By Kenneth Kronenberg

I made Udo Kraft's acquaintance at an antiquarian book show in Boston in November 2001. A slim volume *Selbsterziehung zum Tod fürs Vaterland* was lying almost alone on a table in the underground garage that served as exhibition space for this display and more than a hundred better-stocked dealers. I took one look at the title and plunked down my $20.

The minute I opened it at home, the book grabbed me. "I don't know why I so seldom feel truly contented. There is always something missing." It's easy to see here the age-old lament of the misunderstood adolescent. But as I read on, I came to understand that the author was making me privy to a psychological development that would culminate in his death. How, I wondered, would he do it? How would he make the connection to dying for the Fatherland? The diary entries and letters reproduced in this volume had been selected by Udo's brother Friedrich. They include writings from Udo's adolescence, his time at the University of Giessen, his travels to South America as a young man, his teaching years in Büdingen, and his brief military career. The choices represent Friedrich's understanding of his brother and of his "self-education," and the book therefore tells us almost as much about him as about Udo.

My interest in this story arises out of my own history. My grandfather Ferdinand Kronenberg earned the Iron Cross fighting on the German side in World War I. This, of course, did not stop the Nazis from carting him and his wife Ida off to Auschwitz in July 1942. But I had personal knowledge of another side of Germany, too. I attended the Ecole d'Humanité in Switzerland from when I was twelve until I left at eighteen. The school had been founded in 1934 by the German educators Paul and Edith Geheeb. Paul Geheeb's previous school, the Odenwaldschule, founded in 1910, had been a model of progressive education in Germany, one of the jewels of the *Landerziehungsheim* [country boarding school] movement.[1] Geheeb was a humanist, pacifist, and early feminist. Unlike

[1] For more on the Odenwaldschule, see: Shirley, Dennis. *The Politics of Progressive Education. The Odenwaldschule in Nazi Germany*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1992; and Näf, Martin. *Paul und Edith Geheeb-Cassirer*. Weinheim: Beltz, 2006.

many of his compatriots, he seems never to have gone through a phase of enthusiasm at the outbreak of the first world war. And later, in 1934, when their school was targeted to be turned into a model Nazi institution, he and his wife left Germany for Switzerland. The name they chose for the new school they founded there was no accident: it was a direct challenge to the Nazi worldview. During the war, the Ecole served as a home for refugee children, many of them Jewish. Needless to say, the Germans that I met and came to know there were of a completely different sort from the Nazis who had destroyed my grandparents and so many others.

How could this have happened, I wondered? I had read a fair amount about the Nazi rise to power, the psychology of German authoritarianism, and the ideology of anti-Semitism. How did a society that embraced Hitler simultaneously produce humanists like the Geheebs? Would Udo Kraft and Paul Geheeb have made sense to each other? They were of an age; they were both educators. Geheeb was an early Wandervogel, and I suspected that Udo would have identified with this movement as well. What were the psychological and societal coordinates within whose limits the Germans of those years moved, and by which they recognized one another?[2] Perhaps Udo could serve as my guide in exploring this question.

I decided to translate Udo's writings even before I finished reading them. Translation is the best way I know to enter another person's mind. The first time I realized this was in translating the letters of Theodor and Bernhard van Dreveldt, two German brothers who immigrated to this country separately in the mid-1800s.[3] I found myself seated in these characters as I gave voice to their thoughts and feelings. So close was the identification that they became not only close friends, but seemed to be a part of me. The same happened—to my great surprise, I might add—when I translated about 400 letters written between a mother in Germany and her daughter, Marie, who worked as a governess in Constantinople from 1884 to 1888.[4]

On Geheeb himself: Näf, Martin. *Paul Geheeb. Seine Entwicklung bis zur Gründung der Odenwaldschule*. Weinheim: Deutscher Studien Verlag, 1998.

[2] A number of years ago I toyed with the idea of translating the letters in Walter Schäfer's *Paul Geheeb – Briefe* (Klett Verlag, 1970). I was discouraged in doing so by the director of the Ecole because the authoritarian streak they evinced, particularly in the area of sex, would "give the wrong impression."

[3] See *Lives and Letters of an Immigrant Family: The Van Dreveldts' Experiences along the Missouri, 1844-1866.* Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998.

[4] When I asked the owner of the letters for a photo of Marie, she replied, "Now Ken, don't you go falling in love with Marie. She's been dead for more than 60 years." She certainly had my number!

Of course, translating the writings of a man whose entire trajectory is a rush toward death poses issues for a translator whose method is identification. I found myself in conversation with Udo. I was counseling him, shaking my head, listening to his rationales for this and that—in other words, doing what one good friend would do for another. But what does one say to a friend whose consistent response to the "shame" of a setback or defeat is to try to subsume himself under something that cannot fail him—a Fatherland, for which he would gladly die?

But for a friend I knew remarkably little about Udo—his book is a scant 75 pages of large type and, as I've said, is pretty much limited to what his brother wanted the reader to know. So I Googled him. I identified half a dozen contemporary Udo Krafts, and emailed each of them on the off-chance that they had been named in his memory. Many of them actually responded, but none of them could tell me anything about my quarry. Giessen University, mentioned in a number of letters, confirmed that Udo had indeed been a student there, but could tell me nothing to advance my search.

There matters stood for more than a year. At the now (sadly) closed Roseway Books in Jamaica Plain, I found a new book to satisfy my translation itch and my desire to understand Udo's era. It was a small novel, its distinctive cover decorated in the deco style with a hand holding an upraised scimitar: *Die Hand des unsichtbaren Imam* [The Hand of the Invisible Imam]. I had never heard of Paul Farkas, the author, but the book was set in Constantinople in 1908, "contemporary enough," I thought, with the letters I had just finished translating. And it was a bargain at $7!

Though a terrible novel, it was nonetheless a fascinating read—a cutting satire on German imperial pretensions in the East, with mordant character sketches and descriptions of events that sounded like first-hand observations—which it turned out they were. As usual I got very curious about my subject and tried to find out more about him, but I could find almost nothing about Farkas on the Internet, other than that he was a Hungarian Jew, came from a publishing family, and had been politically aligned with the nationalist leader Istvan Tisza. At a loss, I discussed the problem with my sweetie, a psychiatrist with a library degree and a burning interest in research. Always up for a challenge, Eve set out to find German-language databases, looking for old runs of

newspapers. For several days in December 2003, I was deluged with URLs which I immediately started trying out.

One of them paid off immediately: Magazine Stacks, which provides "tables of contents of historical journals in German, English (and a few other languages too)." It wears its principles on its cuff: "The use of 'Magazine Stacks' is and will remain gratis." Originally hosted by the University of Erlangen, it is now located at Fordham University, in New York. To put it to the test, I entered "Udo Kraft" into the search engine. To my utter astonishment, up came the following:

- Volkmar STEIN, Udo Kraft. "Ein deutscher Mann", in: BüdingerGbll 13, 1988, S.247-259

"Udo Kraft: A German man." Now, the *Büdinger Geschichtsblätter* is not a major historical journal. I complained about the problem of getting my hands on a local hometown bulletin dedicated to the history of the small Hessian town of Büdingen. Shortly thereafter, Eve sent another URL, now apparently defunct, with a note: "This is a German union list of periodicals."[5] And sure enough, when I entered "Büdinger Geschichtsblätter" I got a list of all the libraries in Germany that hold that periodical. But because of a legal dispute, however, German document delivery services were forbidden to send articles outside of the German-speaking countries! Early in January I finally made contact with Volkmar Stein through a friend in Berlin who got his phone number through directory assistance (how come I never think of things like that?), and he was more than happy to email me a copy of his article.

That was when things really got interesting. I learned from Stein's paper that Udo's brother Friedrich had been a "director" (incorrect as it turns out; he was a teacher) of the Odenwaldschule. "Must be a different Odenwaldschule," I thought. But when I Googled "Friedrich Kraft" and "Odenwaldschule," up popped the researchers' aid page of the Geheeb archive at the Ecole d'Humanité! I started to read, and was flabbergasted. I ran upstairs to Eve's office. "You're not going to believe this! Udo and Paul Geheeb were cousins!" Not only that, I learned as I went on, they grew up together, seeing each other frequently at Udo's home. Paul Geheeb attended Giessen University just as Udo had, and they belonged to the same fraternity there. It also turned out that Udo's sister Anna taught

[5] The main German union catalogue is called Zeitschriftendatenbank (ZDB).

at the school. In short, that cultural and psychological split that had been perplexing me had developed in microcosm within this one German family.

I wrote to Martin Näf, Geheeb's biographer, whom I had come to know, and asked him whether the current archivist could pull out and copy any pertinent correspondence for me. No way, he replied. Armin Lüthi—Geheeb's successor, now retired from the headmastership and curating the archives—"would be standing in front of the copier from now until First Advent next year." The best thing would be for me to come over. I wanted to be sure I understood him. "Are you telling me that I'll find enough material relating to the Kraft family to make a trip to Switzerland worthwhile?" A few days later the answer arrived that, yes, they thought I might—if I took a broad view and didn't expect specific answers to specific questions.

After a year or more of fruitless searching, suddenly an embarrassment of riches. "You know, Martin," I wrote back, "this whole thing has something of the quality of a cosmic joke. I undertook this translation in part to understand something about the world out of which a person like Paul Geheeb emerged. And where does it lead me? Straight back to the Ecole. With a joke like that, can I really afford not to laugh along?" And so early in February 2004, I flew to Switzerland and spent a week in the Geheeb archive, one of the few archives in the world where, unaffiliated as I am, I wouldn't have to jump though hoops to gain access—and certainly the only one where I would be housed and fed and people would be glad to see me.

What I found at the Ecole was certainly worth the trip. Among other things, I found original mimeographs made by Friedrich of selections of Udo's writings, a photograph of Udo surrounded by his nieces and nephews, another of the Udo-Kraft Hütte, a youth hostel built in his honor by family and friends, and personal letters between Udo, Friedrich, and Anna and Paul Geheeb. I have added one of these threads to the material in the book because it so encapsulates the sense of humiliation that Udo must have felt.

One of the realities of earning one's living as an independent commercial translator (I specialize in medicine and patents) is that it's unpredictable. Arriving home I had to put Udo on the back burner and concentrate on "work" for a while. I also suspect that after the initial "rush" wore off, I found the project intimidating.[6]

[6] At times I got the sense that Udo was chasing me. One of Eve's and my favorite bookstores is the Old #6 Depot, in Henniker, New Hampshire. Once, while looking through the World War I section (which I hadn't

What was I to make of this man? Did I know enough about his period? How would I integrate the purely historical with what I knew to be in essence a psychological story? Udo was a perfect illustration of Wolfgang Schivelbusch's "culture of defeat."[7] He traced his hatred for the French to the humiliation of Prussia by Napoleon in 1806. But Udo's sense of humiliation and failure manifested in his very first diary entry at the age of 16 and clearly had nothing to do with Napoleon. If anything, his preoccupation with France was inextricably intertwined with his own emotional peculiarities, as the following passage from a 1907 letter makes clear:

> Along with German accounts I have read the work of the Frenchman, Laurent, a Napoleon fanatic who defends the impossible, and Erckmann-Chatrian's *The Conscript of 1813* and *Waterloo*. No age has engaged my soul as vibrantly as this powerful epic. My blood boiled as I read about the humiliation of the German Volk. I felt once again the shame of it, and my rage at the tyrant.… Then I read with throbbing heart about the Wars of Liberation, and once again, as often happened in my younger days, I wished, "O, if only I had lived in that great age and had found a beautiful soldier's death!" Theodor Körner was the happiest of men; his greatest joy was in his own death.

And Alice Miller[8] makes extensive use of the copious material relating to the psychological effects of the shame-inducing German pedagogical techniques of the 18th and 19th centuries (made available by Katharina Rutschky in *Schwarze Pädagogik*).[9] In the letter quoted above, Udo continues:

> Now I want to tell you about my dream of the past night:
> Emperor Napoleon had announced a conference of all the European princes. King Friedrich Wilhelm III of Prussia says to me, "Would you please represent me at the conference, as I have to take care of some business in the city." The conference took place in the assembly hall at the Giessen Gymnasium. Napoleon climbed to the podium, took out a piece of paper, and called out: "Emperor of Russia!" — "Here!" — Emperor of Austria!" — "Here!" — "King of Bavaria!" — "Here!" And each rushed eagerly to the podium and took his

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combed through before), I found a commemorative regimental history. A chill went through me as I realized that it was of Udo's regiment. It was as if he were calling out, "Don't forget me! Tell my story!" There must be hundreds of regimental histories out there, but his was the only one on the shelf. Udo is not listed in the honor roll of fallen officers, but Lt. Malzan, who informed his brother of Udo's death, is listed among the wounded. Glory denied.

[7] Schivelbusch, Wolfgang. *The Culture of Defeat*. New York: Metropolitan Books, 2003.

[8] Miller, Alice. *For Your Own Good*. New York: Farrar, Strauss, Giroux,1983.

[9] Rutschky, Katharina, ed., *Schwarze Pädagogik*. Frankfurt: Ullstein, 1977.

> position in a semi-circle in front of it—just like when the sergeant calls the squad leaders together at roll call. — Then he called out, "King of Prussia!" — But instead of saying, "Here!" I strode purposefully to the podium, stood at attention, and declared, "His Majesty the King of Prussia has charged me with representing him, and so I must appear here. But if I were King, I would not have come at all, as we do not respond to such an imperious tone!" (verbatim; I recited it to myself several times and reviewed the proceedings when I awoke.) I have forgotten what was talked about subsequently. But I do remember hurling a curse in his face. The little yellow Corsican stared at me for a long time and his face turned fire-red. I returned his stare resolutely with steely eyes, and thought, "He is going to have you arrested now. But it doesn't matter; you finally said it to him!" — But Napoleon did nothing of the sort. He turned away and continued with the conference as if nothing had transpired. Then I thought—in my dream!—"How strange!" It was just like back in secondary school with "Bapsch." We were translating Xenophon's "Anabasis" with him just after he finished his practicum. The Greeks had come upon a herd of ostriches, and Xenophon writes, "but when we approached—ἐνταῦθα ἀπώχοντο (literally: they were gone). During the break we prepared the translation with a crib. I said, "The best way to translate this is: 'they evaporated', and when it's my turn, that's how I'll translate it."—And it came to my turn. I felt a bit uneasy because class honor was at stake. So I translated, "they evaporated." And "Bapsch" stared at me, and his face turned fire-red just like Napoleon's. I returned his stare and expected a box on the ear—but Bapsch did nothing of the sort. He simply turned away and corrected me: "ran away"—whereupon I continued to translate. I see this episode before my eyes as if it had happened today, and now it comes back to me in a dream…

As a translator, I appreciate Udo's creativity. Clearly, his teacher did not. The question is: Under what sort of educational system do students flinch for what amounts to little more than boyish exuberance? Black pedagogy, indeed.

In Friedrich's brief selection, Udo talks about dying for the Fatherland in one form or another about a dozen times. The first time (Udo was 17) is definitive:

> My grades really are a dreary sight! If only I understood what it all means, whether I can even manage it. Since Easter I have done my duty to the fullest extent possible, and still…it really must have to do with a lack of ability. What will ever become of me? — I have often contemplated that if war is unavoidable, O that it may come now! Gladly would I die an honorable death on the battlefield for my beloved German Fatherland. Then I would have amounted to something, and my life would not have been in vain.

This goes beyond mere chagrin; there is something existential about it. Shame pervades Udo's experience. That semester, for example, Udo's teacher had humiliated and taunted

him for supposedly fobbing off as his own ideas that "could not possibly represent his own intellectual property." The way to expiate shame, Udo seemed to think, was to prove his physical heroism, even to the point of erasing himself.

I could not help thinking as I read the Geheeb correspondence that Udo might have reacted similarly after he was fired from a position as private tutor by the publisher August Scherl. We learn about this in a letter from Udo's sister Anna Raiser to Geheeb in October 1911. The firing, she said, "hit Udo where he is most sensitive, and it will take a long time before he gets over this matter." Perhaps he never did. And except for a brief excerpt from 1912, that is the last we hear from or about him in the book until the war. In that excerpt he wrote:

> If it did come to a world war, I could not allow myself to be shoved into some garrison as a reserve militiaman [Landwehr II]. That would eat at me and destroy me. I wrote you during a break, incidentally, that in this respect I am like a young man of 17—even today! In short: I would have to go to the front!

When the war did come, Udo was far from the only man approaching middle age to volunteer for the front. For example, the völkisch writer Hermann Löns enlisted at the age of 48. As did the right-wing politician Diederich Hahn, who took to the field at 55.

But the inevitable failures of life may not have been the only source of the shame that led Udo to enlistment. Another may have had to do with what Udo himself viewed as a lack in his life. In no letter is there mention of a relationship of any kind with a woman. Instead, we get passages, like the following from 1905, that evidence a preoccupation with an exaggerated masculinity:

> When my saber wound was closed and people said, "He took it like a man!" and one of the fraternity brothers pressed my hand and said, "Our fraternity looked superb!"—when I was sitting on an unruly horse in the field, and my friends commented, "That Udo, he isn't afraid of anything!"—those were the most exalted moments of my life.

Speculation is cheap and usually dangerous. Still, I am reminded of a section in psychiatrist and sex researcher Magnus Hirschfeld's *Sexual History of the World War*

(1934) about the painful results of Paragraph 175 of the German Criminal Code, which criminalized homosexuality:

> Among the causes which drive homosexuals to war perhaps the most tragic one is that wish or hope, expressed by more than one of their number, that a bullet might put an end to their life which they regard as being a complete failure from the point of view of the present conditions and notions. Driven by this feeling, many [a homosexual] officer exposed himself to the thickest rain of bombs and the most deadly attacks. Only recently a flier whom I had congratulated on his distinctions replied that in truth, his disregard of death was nothing more than disgust with life. Many other homosexuals felt exactly the same way. Here, for example, is the letter of a simple bomber:
> "Every evening the boys would go out for some girls. This would probably give them a great deal of pleasure. Many times I was asked why I didn't go along. I was too embarrassed to give any answer and turning away sought to find some task which I could bury myself in.... It is my greatest wish to get into the field as soon as possible and to meet an honorable death for otherwise I will be compelled later on to make an end of my rotten life due to my homosexual tendencies for which I am not at all responsible. It is better that my mother should be able to say, 'My Fritz died a heroic death for his fatherland,' than that people should say, 'So! A suicide, eh?'"

Udo was killed on August 24, 1914, near Anloy, Belgium, in the first combat he saw. His enlistment may well have been a suicidal gesture—one that he had been rehearsing since adolescence. We can never know all we might wish about his psychological coordinates, the shape of his society, or his particular obsession with death for the Fatherland. We can nonetheless learn something about them. And for that reason it is well worth contemplating the path taken by this one very German man.

Self-Education for Death for the Fatherland