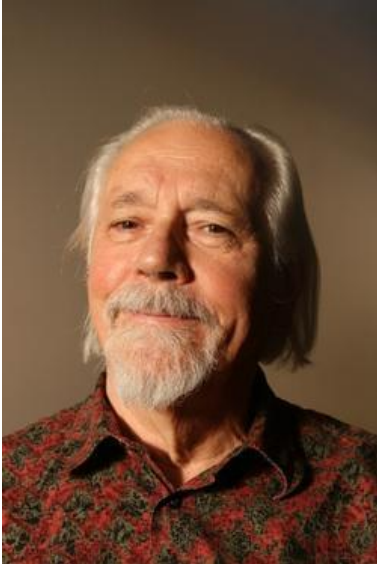




WRITERS IN CONVERSATION



Interview with the Canadian Poet and Playwright Henry Beissel

Heide Fruth-Sachs

In the summer of 2012 I received an email from Professor Norbert Schaffeld, head of the English Department at the University of Bremen in Germany. We are both members of the Association for Canadian Studies (and the Association for Australian Studies). Professor Schaffeld asked me whether I could organize a reading in Munich for a friend of his, a wonderful Canadian poet with a special ability to fascinate young students with his poetry.

Henry Beissel and I met for the first time before that Reading at the 'Amerika Haus' in Munich. I knew that he was 83, but here stood a good-looking, vigorous man who gave me a hearty hug which felt as if it came from a much younger person. Henry's reading was a great experience for all of us. The students surrounded him afterwards, asking questions. He read from his autobiographical poem 'Coming to Terms with a Child' where he gives an account of his childhood in Nazi Germany. In the meantime he has written a German version of the poem, and Marburg University Press is publishing a volume with both versions in December 2014.

Over these past two years Henry has been invited to more than 20 German (and Polish) universities for readings. He has the ability to make people love demanding literature; in fact the students of the Canadian department in Augsburg spontaneously founded a Henry Beissel-Fan-Club. This summer I organized a reading for him in the small village of Port Mouton, Nova Scotia, Canada, where Henry and his French wife Arlette were our guests for a while. (My husband and I have a summer house there.) Since I assumed that there would be those in the audience who had not had much contact with modern poetry, I was a little concerned that the program would not really interest them. On the contrary! All were so enthusiastic about Henry's Reading that they could not get enough of it. I had asked him not to read longer than 45

minutes, but in the end the reading lasted for an hour and a half. Nearly all his books were bought. We received private invitations for dinner where Henry was asked to read again. The churchwarden and his wife said: 'We have never been at a poetry reading, but now we go to every one we can.'

Henry is also a fine playwright. In September 2014 the Theaterstückverlag in Munich published his play Doppelgänger (The Noose) which I have translated. His most successful play Inuk and the Sun is translated into more than a dozen languages. Henry himself has translated some famous works of world literature into English, among them the works of Peter Huchel (one of the most important German poets since 1945), Ibsen, Mrozek, Dorst and Sophocles.

Other important poetic works by Henry Beissel are Canthos Northand Seasons of Blood. His most recent volume of poetry is Fugitive Horizons, where modern science is reflected. He has published more than 20 volumes of poetry, plus a number of plays, which cannot all be mentioned here.

In 2013 the University of Toronto founded a grant for promising young poets, the "Henry Beissel-Scholarship". Henry's poetry volume Fugitive Horizons was shortlisted for the Ottawa Book Award 2014.

More biographical and bibliographical information can be obtained at www.henrybeissel.com

H S-F: Today is 26 August 2014, and I am sitting here together with the Canadian poet and playwright Henry Beissel in the living room of the house my husband and I have at Stuart's Lake, Port Mouton, Nova Scotia, Canada. I am thrilled that this wonderful poet and playwright, and friend, is prepared to answer some questions in relation to his literary work.

H B: Thank you very much, I will certainly try my best. It is always easier to ask questions than to answer them. But let's go ahead.

H S-F: Henry, you are master of two languages, German and English. However, your poetic work is – with one recent exception – written in English. Did you ever have the feeling of being caught between these two languages?

H B: Well, it depends a little bit on what you mean by 'caught'. I started writing as a child, in German. It was more in the manner of a diary. I was an outsider and I entrusted my great secrets to my diary, and that's how I began to write. I began to write in German. But then came the war – I was ten years old – and the war experiences and what happened in 1945 when the Americans came on my 16th birthday and showed us movies about concentration camps, the existence of which we had known, but the incredible inhumanities and atrocities that were committed there were not known to us, certainly not to me. When I found out about them I was so revolted by everything German, because it seemed to me a betrayal of all the things that I believed in and that I have been taught to believe in too. I felt betrayed by everyone, my parents, my teachers, my priests, and I turned my back on Germany and on the German language. I couldn't get out of Germany fast enough. Germans weren't very

welcome anywhere in the world right after the war. So it took me four years to get out to England in 1949. In the meantime I had been an interpreter for the Americans and then for the British, so in a way I felt that I emigrated inside Germany already in 1945. I went to England and there I met, in a Philosophy seminar, a Canadian who induced me to come to Canada. I arrived in Canada on 1 April 1951, and in a way considered that a rebirth. In fact, I often refer to my life before then as BC – before Canada – and thereafter as AC – after Canada. Of course I had already flirted with the notion of writing in English, but that meant a good deal of reading and studying, to find my way into a tradition that was alien to me. So I went to a bookstore and bought myself a history of British literature, and I began reading every book that was mentioned, going back to Beowulf, where my progress was very slow. I decided a shortcut would be to go to university and take English as a subject. I had already sorted out what was important and what was less important, so I wouldn't have to read it all. That was what I did. I studied English literature at the University of Toronto. I had begun to write. I wasn't sure of my abilities in English, naturally, since I wasn't born into that language, but it seems that I acquired a certain facility because in 1958 I won a poetry prize at the University of Toronto with a sonnet cycle, actually a true sonnet cycle, which I called *The Trial*, and after that I felt if the jury of English Professors, who included Northrop Frye, chose my work then I was on my way. During those years I had cut myself off from all things German. It took me many years to reconcile myself to that past. It came as a result of a good deal of study of what had happened, not only in Germany, but also in the rest of the world. I did some research – when I was asked to write a play about Hitler, which I decided in the end I wouldn't do, although I interviewed a lot of people who knew Hitler personally. Slowly I began to see that some of the charges against Germans were perhaps a bit one-sided, because the same kinds of crimes, horrendous crimes, had been committed by human beings against human beings in many parts of the world. Germany, I felt, at least tried to accept responsibility for what they had done, and tried to atone, which is more than I can say for a lot of other countries, which have their own crimes to atone for. So I began to be reconciled to my German past, but it took me 30 or 40 years before I was able to assess this past in a more – what shall we say – balanced perspective. Not that anything I ever discovered could excuse the horrendous crimes committed against all kinds of people, especially of course the Jewish people. It is, and remains, a stain on German history and the fact that such stains, similar stains, are on other people's history doesn't excuse it, but I did understand better how this could have happened in a nation that refers to itself as a nation of 'Dichter und Denker' – poets and thinkers – and that makes me feel better about the world and myself. By the time this reconciliation had taken place I was firmly rooted in the English tradition, had published several volumes of poetry, as well as essays and plays that were successful on stage. It wasn't until that process was complete and I could go back to Germany and speak German and find that I could still speak it, that I began sometimes to wonder had I done the right thing in leaving Germany? Should I have stayed to participate in the reconstruction and recovery of a very severely damaged nation that had injured itself, as well as a lot of other people. That of course is entangled in questions of language, but I never felt trapped, I have

to say that after all these years I am glad that fortune and destiny somehow led me to Canada and to the English language.

Since I am familiar with and speak a couple of other languages, I know that English is the most versatile, most subtle, the richest language that I have ever come across. To start with it has twice as many words as most other civilized languages, including German and French, and of course for a poet the availability of a big vocabulary is very important, because you are always looking for exactly the right word. It has to provide the right meaning and the right music. So, now having written a kind of conciliatory poem about my childhood, under the influence of friends, written a German version which – it appears – is acceptable, we shall see. It will be published later this year by the University of Marburg. Anyway, that's a long answer to a short question.

H S-F: Please, could you tell me more about the idea of writing a play about Hitler, and the people you interviewed because they knew Hitler personally.

H B: I should make it clear that my encounter with past Nazi figures in Germany was prompted not by any desire of my own to meet these people but, in 1967, by a request from the Director of the National Arts Centre, Jean Gascon, to write a play about Hitler for the national theatre. I was tempted to accept the commission, but decided I needed to find out more about what made that Nazi monster tick. Well, I was in for a surprise. I started with a visit to Winifred Wagner in Bayreuth. I was greeted by a tall, very dignified and cultured lady who proved to be quite willing to talk frankly and unapologetically about 'Herr Hitler'. She said that if he walked in the door today she would welcome him as a friend. He had always been a very considerate visitor who never came without flowers. When I brought up the concentration camps, she said she considered them shocking but she did not know if Hitler knew what went on inside them. When he came to Bayreuth they talked about music. Hitler was a great admirer of Wagner's music, she told me, and supported the Bayreuth Festival after he became Chancellor. In fact, he was so respectful of the Festival, that in the early 1930s, when he believed that the bad press of the Nazi movement might compromise the festival, he decided not to attend it. I was taken aback by the esteem in which this intelligent lady held a man whom I considered a monster. I began to catch glimpses of a human being behind this grim public image.

This impression was intensified on a visit to Albert Speer. No, he told me, they had never talked about the concentration camps, and he had never seen any photos from the camps in Hitler's possession or heard of any reports about conditions inside. Hitler had treated him like a son. He had liked his architectural designs and invited him to draw up plans to rebuild Berlin. 'I was a young architect and here was the leader of a nation offering me a chance to rebuild the capital city – how would you have felt in my shoes?', he asked me. Hitler himself had an uncanny talent for architectural design, Speer told me. He could draw a convincing sketch of a building on the spur of the moment with a few strokes of a pencil.

Speer too described Hitler as a caring and considerate person who could enjoy a joke and was fond of his dog.

Let me mention one last significant encounter that created a very different picture of Hitler from the one I had held for so long. It took place in Munich where I met Henriette von Schirach, wife of Baldur von Schirach, leader of the Hitler Youth – one of the only two men who denounced Hitler at the Nuremberg trials (Speer was the other). Henriette remembered Hitler as 'Onkel Adolf' from the time she was a little girl. He pushed her on the tricycle, she told me, and got on the floor to read her stories. He was evidently fond of children.

What was remarkable about her testimony was that while she described Hitler as a very nice man, she also found him out and condemned him. I think it was in 1942 that she went to visit Amsterdam. On that occasion she saw German soldiers marching Jews, among them women, children and old men, brutally through the streets on their way to the station to be transported to concentration camps. She was outraged and couldn't wait to tell Hitler about it. She was convinced that he had no idea of such inhumanities. On a visit to Berchtesgaden shortly thereafter, she told Hitler what she had witnessed. Hitler flew into a rage, screamed at her and told her that as a woman she had no business sticking her nose into the affairs of state. She and her husband had to depart from Hitler's villa in Berchtesgaden and were never invited back.

I talked to a number of other people who had known Hitler personally. All of them painted the picture of a kind, considerate man with many admirable human qualities. Some of them had also seen the monstrous side of the man who foamed at the mouth when he was crossed and who ordered the brutal murder of millions of innocent people.

When I met up with Jean Gascon after my return, I told him I couldn't write a play about Hitler because I saw him now as a human being as well as a brutal dictator. The world wasn't ready to accept Hitler's humanity, and I feared that such a play would be misunderstood by the ill-willed and the dim-witted as an attempt to excuse the atrocities that were committed by him and in his name. You know that as far as I am concerned nothing can excuse these, but I am more than ever convinced that unless we accept that the evil in him is incipiently in all of us, we will never be able to move on and become more gentle and compassionate. We haven't reached that level of enlightenment yet.

H S-F: Thank you, Henry. Your answer has been extraordinarily interesting. I also feel privileged to get this first-hand information from a 'Zeitzeuge' [historical witness]. However, let us come back to your writing. It is in fact densely connected with the experiences of your young years and World War II. You said you consider *Seasons of Blood* as your main work. A rather extensive part of it is already published; however, you are still going on writing it. Could you please explain why this long poem is still haunting you?

H B: Well, I think you are quite right to say that – and I have slowly become aware of it – that the experiences of my childhood inform my writing in a more fundamental way than I am really aware of. I suppose it can't be otherwise. When I talk of *Seasons of Blood* as my

magnum opus, if that's not too presumptuous a title, it is a form in which I have finally been able to incorporate all of my talents: my talents in the lyrical mode, in the dramatic mode, my never-ending quest in the sciences. I am familiar with the basic issues and methods in astronomy, biology, physics – quantum physics is one of my favourite subjects – all of this I was able to pour into this poem that came to me uncalled. As a matter of fact, it began – I remember very well – when I was living in the country. I had a little hut that I had built myself, next to the house that I had also built myself, and I would go there every morning – I'm a morning person – and I would spend five or six hours alone in this room writing. At the time I was doing a translation of *Hedda Gabler*, Ibsen's play, and the director of the Bronfman Centre Theatre in Montreal was after me to get it finished because he wanted to start rehearsals. He didn't want the actors to read the other translations of which he didn't think very much. I don't know why he thought me particularly fit, but I did read Norwegian and I felt very close to Ibsen in some ways. So I came in the morning to work on my translation, and there was some presence in the room that disturbed me. I found it difficult to focus, it seemed as if a ghost was standing in the room. It was nothing visible, but it was irritating, it was disorienting. This went on for a couple of days, until I finally said: 'I don't have time. If there is something else I need to do I'll do it, provided you will leave me in peace thereafter.' The result was that I started a poem *El Salvador*. I thought, 'it will be a short poem and I'll get the thing out of the way.' Well, today, 30 years later, I am still working on that same poem. I did write a first draft of the first of these sections – I sometimes refer to them as *elegies* – but they are really more epic in character. It's a very Canadian poem and at the same time it is a very global poem. Perhaps, if I tell you a little bit about it more concretely you'll understand what I mean. It's a poem each section of which is connected to a month of the year. At the time I began I had no idea that this structure would emerge – but it did emerge as all things that I write emerge in the process of the writing. It went on and on and on – and, as you heard me say, 'I'm waiting to go back home to complete the next section.' Each month of the year has one section of the poem. It operates on four levels. One is the natural order of which we are all a part. It's the natural order as it surrounded me at Ayorama, the place where I wrote it, it's in Glengarry County, just a hundred kilometres east of Ottawa; that's the basic level. I had a critic once who came to write an article about me. He came to interview me, and he suddenly said: 'Henry, I see where all your images come from. Look out the window, there they all are, your trees, your grasses, your birds.' 'Yes,' I said, 'that's true, I had never thought about it.' I am very precise about the flora and fauna that I write about; I think that if ever the flora and fauna of Glengarry County is lost to the world you'll be able to recover it from these poems. So that's the basic level, but then I apply whatever political event happened in that month at some point in history. It doesn't have to be in that year. It was when I started, but as the poem developed I reached back to other events connected with the month, like, for instance, the Hiroshima bombing in August. The third level on which these poems operate is science. I am very interested in science and have tried to keep up with developments, as an amateur of course; I am a scientist manqué my wife thinks. The reason why I think this is a magnum opus is because of its epic scope. I've

been able to include all of human history, all of nature in its different seasons, because when you look closely enough at the nature that surrounds you, you very quickly open up to the processes that are universal, and in the same way the third level – or the second level, if you like – the political level, reflects what human beings have made of this world. So that's the basic pattern or narrative of the poem. Nature to which we all belong, what we have made of nature, which is history, politics – and now of course increasingly the environment – and science; how we now understand the world that we live in. Now to be able to do that in a poem you can't go any further than to enclose, embrace, embody the fatality of human experience and its constant interplay; it satisfies my dramatic urges. There are voices that are speaking, debating each other in the poem – in reality of course such a dialogue doesn't really take place. So the fourth dimension of the poem is the individual human mind that moves through this matrix. What I am trying to do is to find out what point in the evolution of Homo sapiens we have reached. How we got there, what it means, and possibly to find a viable road into the future, because I think we are at a crossroads; I think the disappearance of the human species is possible. I don't think it is probable, I don't think it's going to happen, but it's going to take a hell of a lot of application, courage, and intelligence for us to get over the problems that now face us which are for the most part our own creation.

H F-S: Henry you've already answered half the next question I wanted to put. I've heard you say more than once that you would prefer to study modern science instead of literature, if you had the chance to begin your studies again.

H B: Yes, you are right. I studied English in order to enter into the tradition of English literature. I wanted to know what had been written, and everything you can find out about poetry, about writing, structures, images – I can't go into all the details, it would take me an hour –but the turning point came when I needed to decide what kind of profession to follow. I realized that my kind of writing could never be popular. For that the populace would have to live at a level of education that is not common – sorry to say that, but I had to make a living in some other way, preferably in a way that would not interfere with my writing. I decided that teaching English literature and trying to contribute to it by writing it, well, that was like living in the same house with a woman you are trying to bed. Well, that was a mistake. I found that the analytical approach required of me in the classroom – I became a Professor of English –in fact alienated me from the writing, it interfered with the writing process ; at least – I can only speak about myself – when I write there is a sense in which I don't know what I am doing .It's happening on the page. The words, the rhythms, the images draw me on and on, and I follow them. I cannot be sitting there saying, 'Oh, well, Milton used that image and if I twisted it a little bit?' This doesn't help – or, 'How do you use a metaphor?' It happens. I know these things, but they have sunk into my subconscious, and having to face them consciously all the time when I taught – students want to know constantly what, why, how where? – I found it interfered with my writing. I had to go almost through a brainwashing experience when I got home, before I could sit down to write and to

forget all this stuff. That's why I now feel I would have preferred to have studied and taught the sciences, because I would have studied literature anyway. I am a writer, I need to know what others have done. So that would have come to me one way or the other, but the sciences didn't. I have to struggle now with fundamentals about mathematics I am not particularly well enough instructed in. So, had I studied the sciences I could have gone home, closed the door and written. Nothing in the sciences would interfere with my writing, it would enrich it. Besides I feel today the sciences offer the most ecstatic possibilities to the human imagination, because where we are at now in the sciences – in the understanding of the behaviour of subatomic particles, or the evolution of galaxies and the universe – or possibly several universes – this is poetry. Some of this cannot be demonstrated. They are mathematical constructs really at the same level as a poem. We don't know ultimately what they mean. But I find it exciting to follow the possibilities that are there. They are attempts to explain the world we live in, but I don't think there will ever be a final explanation. There will always be the search, the quest, the journey of the mind.

H F-S: Henry, you are a successful poet who has published over 20 volumes of poetry and at the same time you are a successful playwright. Where is – as you see it – the connection between these two artistic possibilities to express and explain patterns of life?

H B: Well, poetry moves with images of sound, taste, sight, etc. – the five senses. A lot of poetry today I do not consider poetry; they are sometimes very intelligently constructed 'wordwebs', as I would call them. But the language of poetry is metaphor. The poet sees the world for what it is, but also realizes that it stands for something else. It is this ambiguity that is inherent in all reality that the poet can catch most effectively.

The Drama speaks in very different terms because it speaks in character and plot. They too can become metaphors, but they must be acted out in terms of a narrative between a set of characters. In fact Wilfried Watson, the Canadian poet from the prairies, said to me in 1963 on a staircase of the University of Alberta in Edmonton, 'Henry, you are going to end up a playwright,' and I said, 'why?', and he answered, 'all your poems are written for voices.' I was quite astonished to hear that, but later on I realized that he was right. Why? : Because I see the world in terms of contradictions, in terms of conflict. This is why I always have conflicts, in a way, with monotheistic religions. For me, if there is a God there has to be a devil and they are both equally powerful. It's one of the paradoxes of the world, and the drama lives off conflict, it lives off paradox, it lives from the clash of opposites, just as the world does. Electrons are dependent on the presence of protons and neutrons. If that conflict, that contradiction, if that dynamic weren't there in that moment the entire universe would disappear without a trace. The drama on stage is a drama of life. The drama form really attracts me, but I made a decision in 1975 to leave the city of Montreal and live in the forest, because I wanted time to think and to write without being disturbed while I continued my profession at the University of Montreal, Concordia University by then, and that was a good decision. I published a book every year during this period. However, it took me away

from the theatre, from the living theatre, and I think a playwright needs to be around actors and directors and the theatre-scene. There is one important thing a writer has to learn: it doesn't always take words to communicate states of emotion or even ideas. It's amazing what a fine actor can do by moving his hand or by squinting with an eye or by turning on the heel of his boot. It would replace a hundred words. Where, of course, the writer is inclined – because the world that he talks about doesn't exist except in his head – to put it all on paper. I have learned when I write for a theatre to leave space for the actor, for the director, for the set designer, for the lighting designer and so forth. Leave them all a creative space to fill in where I left the words out deliberately, because the theatre is a cooperative creation.

H F-S: Henry, do you think that poetry can somehow change the world?

H B: Every poem you write changes the world just by being there. Everything in the world is related to everything else. When people talk about changing the world they have notions about establishing utopia where all the people are happy and there is love and justice and kindness. That's not what I am talking about. However, maybe that I am slowly coming to the conviction that the burden of being human is indeed to overcome the cruelties, indifferences, injustices of nature, not – as some of the romantics think – to be like nature. If you look closely at nature it is a cruel, murderous phenomenon. We have the ability to recognize it and go beyond it. For me that transcendence can happen through art. That's the business of Art, to transform the world. Whether you can measure that, as in how many members of the liberal party are elected at the next election, I don't think. I know that this conversation that we are having now changes the world because it is in the world. It is already changed and therefore affects things. Everything that affects will affect something else in ways we will never know, but that's all right. We know now that a butterfly fluttering off in Borneo can cause a hurricane in the Atlantic Ocean, because everything is interconnected. Blake was one who saw that very clearly. I don't expect when I say, 'yes, my poem changes the world', I don't think of myself as a great world-changer, no, it is simply anybody's effort that brings about change. That is what people don't realize. When they act negatively, dishonestly, unethically they too change the world negatively, and everything positive we do changes the world positively. So, yes, I do think poetry changes the world, not in the political way in which most people think, but in a much more fundamental way that will ultimately manifest itself in human civilization.

H F-F: Henry, you are a wonderful performer in readings. How is it that you come into contact with your listeners so effortlessly, as it seems?

H B: Oh, that's a tricky question. I have last year and also this year done a number of tours of German universities at their invitation, and I am surprised to find I have fans and I could go every year. I could even stay there and go on giving Lectures and Readings. I asked one of the Professors why it is that they are so eager for my poetry. He said – and it may even be true – 'you are a perfect communicator.' I went away and thought 'what does that mean?' I think

for one thing we live in a world today in which language is mostly used to deceive. Whether it's politicians trying to use language to conceal what they are really up to, or it is the commercial world which is trying to sell you something that you don't need and trying to suggest that it is better than it really is, etc. We are surrounded by the abuse of language. When somebody comes along like me –I don't abuse language, I do not say what I don't believe, I am frank. People, especially the young people, realize that I am sincere and I mean what I say. I am not there to show off. That must be part of the reason why I communicate. They listen: suddenly there is a voice they can trust. That is fundamental to the writer – that he be trustworthy. That is an important point to make. It is not the function of the writer to create followers and ideologies that they can follow, no. It is the writer's function to present a kind of x-ray of the world that people live in, saying: 'Here it is; now you decide what you do about it, and in deciding you become who you are.' I am not there to sell the audience anything, not even myself. I am there to open their eyes, their ears, their hearts. I want them to see the world for what it is, and become free individuals. A writer leads the audience to freedom. How? By showing them what the possibilities are and leaving them to make the decision, because you have your freedom only at the moment at which you surrender it by committing yourself to this or that mode of life, mode of living. I think my audience does realize that I am spreading out before them a map, telling them what's on the map, where various roads may lead, but I leave it at that. It is possibly this sense of trust, opening possibilities of choosing in full awareness. Maybe that is the background of my success as a Reader.

H F-S: Thank you, Henry, for this interesting talk, which has given me a lot to think about and more understanding of your writing.

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