

Books and Roses

Karl and Luzie Krolow remembered

VERA PROFIT

Until recently the evidence of a rather extensive correspondence lay scattered on my desk. Karl Krolow (11 March 1915 – 21 June 1999), his wife, Luzie, (10 December 1917 – 11 February 2009) and I wrote to each other during their last years. The first letter to Karl Krolow was dated January 1992, the final one to his widow, Luzie, December 2008. The over one hundred letters, appended photographs, newspaper clippings, books, complete with dedications, mementos of various sorts, all bear witness to a relationship, which began on such a cordial and affirming note that it could only have evolved into the warmest of friendships. If one paused long enough to reflect upon the essence of our association, it was obvious that we simply got along and did so from the outset. We reached out to each other frequently and without hesitation, as if we had known each other for decades and lived just down the street. Of course, we hadn't known each other for decades and didn't live just down the street. Karl Krolow would repeatedly marvel at the considerable distance between Darmstadt and Indiana. And yet he would add: »Wir haben Sie so deutlich vor Augen: Oh, ja, Sie sind anwesend, da!!« This utter sense of immediacy conveys so accurately the nature of the relationship that was ours.

Perennially interested in comparative literature, I had studied the Georg Büchner Prize winner's earliest poetry for years. 1991 marked the release of *Ein Porträt meiner Selbst: Karl Krolow's Autobiographical Poems (1945–1958) and Their French Sources*.¹ During January of the following year, I finally mustered the courage to send him a copy and enclosed a brief letter. There seemed little point in bothering with a longer one, as I seriously doubted an answer would be forthcoming. Besides if I managed to misunderstand his poetry, his autobiographical poetry no less, perhaps I preferred never learning of his disapproval, his disappointment. Karl Krolow's overwhelmingly positive response as well as an invitation to visit him in Darmstadt arrived by return mail. In July of 1992, I met both Karl and Luzie Krolow for the first time. More visits followed: the second

1 | Vera B. Profit: *Ein Porträt meiner Selbst: Karl Krolow's Autobiographical Poems (1945–1958) and Their French Sources*. Bern/New York 1991 (American University Studies. Series I Germanic Languages and Literature 74).

in March 1993 and the third June 1995. As would befit someone who dedicated his earliest endeavors to nature poetry, Krolow died on the first day of summer: June 21st, 1999. More than a year later during August 2000, I looked up Luzie Krolow in her home one last time. Each meeting only served to confirm the impressions the letters made; each letter only reflected the impressions gleaned from those visits. Each mode of contact reinforced the other and effortlessly so.

Perhaps more often than not, the intrinsic value of a particular moment can only be fully recognized and consequently appreciated much after the fact. However in this instance, I realized even then that associating with the Krolows represented an unparalleled experience. As individuals and as a couple they proved nothing short of remarkable: unfailingly thoughtful, generous, appreciative. Above all else, I remember both of them as direct, as genuine.

Each time I arrived in Darmstadt, flowers from Luzie Krolow's garden and her hand-written greeting welcomed me in the hotel room. I would have appreciated this sign of her thoughtfulness at any time, but after an arduous and undeniably lengthy journey, I did so even more. During my final visit to Darmstadt in late August of 2000, Luzie Krolow's caring attitude became apparent yet again. Before leaving for the Frankfurt airport, naturally I asked to settle the hotel bill. The receptionist replied simply: that's been taken care of for you. I was stunned. I should not have been. Once more Luzie Krolow's unparalleled sense of hospitality far exceeded the usual parameters.

As it had so often during the meals she prepared. The moment she realized I hailed from Vienna, Luzie Krolow baked a *Sachertorte*. To add this legendary Austrian confection to the already select menu struck me as all the more astonishing, as her diabetic husband could not partake of such or any similar offering no matter how well that time-honored recipe had been followed. We also feasted on quails' eggs and superb wines, *Tafelspitz*, raspberry tarts and excellent coffee, to name just some of the culinary delights.² Before we parted at the conclusion of each visit, Luzie Krolow offered me a package of coffee beans and some chocolates. At Christmas time, she would send her traditional poppy seed cake as well as her *Liegnitzer Bomben*, complete with a sprig of mistletoe. Despite her justified misgivings, her desserts always arrived in excellent condition and consequently lent her unmistakable touch to Christmas dinner.

Whenever I remembered them with a token or two, neither Karl nor Luzie Krolow ever tired of showing their appreciation. It goes without saying that the many sets of botanical notecards, the cushion, quilt, towels, whatever it was,

2 | Unfortunately we've all experienced the host and/or hostess who, while urging us to sample this or that dish, make us painfully aware that we should feel beholden, we should recognize the efforts being put forth on our behalf. Not for a moment, not once did I feel that way in the presence of the Krolows. No matter how elaborate the preparations and they qualified as elaborate, their signature graciousness seemed as natural to them as breathing.

these were acknowledged in a letter or phone call, but more often than not, the occasional tablecloth and runner were photographed and subsequently the exact event when they had served their purpose was described in exquisite detail.

As for our exchanges whether at the dining table, in Karl Krolow's studio or elsewhere, they ranged far afield and afforded a closer look into their professional as well as personal lives. Both Karl and Luzie Krolow would comment on the current literary scene (the intricacies of working with the Suhrkamp Verlag) or recall that of decades ago. They mentioned the enthralling stories Friedrich Dürrenmatt would tell or how, despite his diabetes, he never adhered to a diet, how Paul Celan managed to stay with them, and consequently on German soil, for but a single night and then insisted on leaving. They spoke lovingly of their family: the two granddaughters, their son, Peter, and daughter-in-law, their new house in Burgundy. They never neglected to inquire about my family and my work at the university.

During the interview, which evolved in the course of the three visits, (later published as *Menschlich: Gespräche mit Karl Krolow*)³ Karl Krolow answered every question and, despite his precarious health, dutifully read the transcriptions as quickly as they reached him. In the evenings or early afternoons, we relaxed on the terrace, ambled through Luzie Krolow's exemplary garden with its vast collection of exotic plantings or strolled around the impressive floral displays of the *Rosenhöhe*. While doing so, she elucidated the diverse characteristics of the assorted trees, shrubs, flowers, and herbs with a wealth of detail only a master gardener would command. I knew that I would only remember a fraction thereof, but would forget neither the visual splendor nor the intoxicating fragrance of such prized roses, as Sutter's Gold or Fragrant Cloud. Though I must confess I'll never understand, why both of them fancied the araucaria or monkey-puzzle tree, ultimately stolen from their property in the dead of night. Be that as it may, their outrage at its loss was palpable. In his *Epitaph für einen geraubten Baum* dated October 10, 1996 and penned shortly after its disappearance, Karl Krolow concluded his lament with »du reit Wunden.«⁴ And in her lines of October 27, Luzie Krolow noted: »Ein Raub und Mord, denn die geht nicht wieder an. Wir sind ganz traurig. Es gibt sie nur noch im Buch.«⁵ Clearly Luzie Krolow tended

3 | Vera B. Profit: *Menschlich: Gespräche mit Karl Krolow*. Bern/New York 1996 (Studies in Modern German Literature 78).

4 | Anton G. Leitner: Abschied von Karl Krolow. Der Wortschatz einer poetischen Jahrhundertbiographie: Von den Nebenwirkungen und Folgen der Gedichte Karl Krolows. In: *Das Gedicht. Zeitschrift für Lyrik, Essay und Kritik* 1999, H. 7, p. 14. – In early October of 1994, Leitner interviewed Krolow; the transcription of the conversation can be found in Anton G. Leitner: »Existenz im Konjunktiv«. Gespräch mit Karl Krolow. In: *Das Gedicht* 1995, H. 3: Drei-Länder-Ausgabe, ²1998, p. 121-129.

5 | Luzie Krolow: *Gartenzauber: 32 Blumen- und Kräutermminiaturen. Mit farbigen Fotografien*. Frankfurt am Main 1995; idem: *Das Jahr meines Gartens. Mit farbigen Foto-*

her garden with both love and an enviable level of expertise, devoted to its care as she was to her husband's. She stated quite frankly that as his mind was always and solely focused on his poetry (and the professional obligations it engendered) without her unwavering sense of the practical and her steadfast commitment to his welfare, she doubted he would have lived as long as he did. I cannot imagine that anyone, who associated with the Krolows on a regular basis, would challenge her belief. By the same token, she also wondered, whether their marriage would have lasted, had their earliest years during the war not been so fraught with difficulty.

Two more considerations. They served as the undercurrents, the palimpsests of the letters, of the appended materials as well as the visits. They presented themselves at the beginning of the entire relationship and remained interwoven throughout its duration. As stated much earlier, both Karl Krolow and his wife were in their latter years, when we met. For decades, he had suffered with diabetes of the hard to control brittle variety, developed cancer and had submitted to surgery and consequently an extended hospital stay just prior to my first visit. On a markedly slender individual like Krolow, these physical exigencies took their toll and didn't affect only him. »Uns geht es beiden nicht gut. Es fällt schwer zu leben.« »Und auch meine Frau merkt inzwischen, dass wir alte Leute sind!!« Though admittedly more robust than her husband, Luzie Krolow contended with cardiac issues, advancing macular degeneration as well as incessant bouts of Lyme disease. For a passionate gardener like herself, those ticks spelled unadulterated misery. Despite these ever increasing hardships, Karl as well as Luzie Krolow made a concerted effort to maintain the almost torrid pace of the correspondence and during my visits I lacked for nothing. Whenever I showed even the slightest interest in a photograph or a recording, for instance, no effort was spared in making it available. (In fact, a tape of Paul Celan reading *Todesfuge* had to be rerecorded in a sound studio and mailed a second time; while in transit the first one had been lifted from the package.)

In the course of his first letters and in many throughout the years, Karl Krolow would ask, if I would have time, would have the inclination to reply. The fact that he would pose such questions left me incredulous. Who wouldn't wish to answer him or visit him, for that matter? In another letter, he attempted to disabuse me of the notion that he, and not my relatives in Vienna, would occasion the next European sojourn. Of course, any travel plans would first and foremost revolve around his schedule, so often dictated by his declining health, and all else came thereafter. How often did he encourage me to come just once more! Why Vienna seemed just around the corner from Darmstadt. The signs of friendship were everywhere. Such phrases appeared over and over again: we eagerly await your arrival, we can only hope that our visit will materialize de-

grafien von Luzie und Peter Krolow. Frankfurt am Main 1990. Both of the above feature photos of the beloved araucaria.

spite the odds, when I recall our conversations, it was like a film, a wonderful, wonderful film, if at all possible, please, come again, come again, you may be far away and we know you have your work at the university, but you seem so close to us. »Immer, immer denke ich an die Stunden, Tage unserer Gespräche. So sind Sie bei uns in Darmstadt *immer* geblieben.« Yes, he was aware of his stature, but he never allowed that to get in his way of being Karl Krolow. He had no need of artifice. A sense of deference, of innate, of unmistakable shyness, these always made themselves felt and made him so dear. Their warmth, their spontaneity made them so dear.

ADDENDUM

The entire aforementioned correspondence now belongs to the German Literary Archive in Marbach and scholars will be able to access the materials on site. To facilitate this process, transcriptions accompany all the handwritten letters, whether these originated with Karl or Luzie Krolow. The contents of the letters, supported by the ancillary materials, encompass several large categories: 1. literary issues: the situation that young poets faced immediately after World War II, Krolow's role in Germany's literary life throughout the decades, working with the editorial staff of the Suhrkamp Verlag, (e.g., S. Unseld, E. Borchers), preparations for his 80th birthday celebration, its scheduling difficulties, his forthcoming publications, thoroughly nuanced responses to both my books about him, 2. recurring health concerns: diabetes, cancer, hospital stays, the frustrations of growing older exacerbated by failing eyesight, Lyme disease, vertigo, etc., the illness and death of the immediate as well as extended family members, 3. proposals regarding the feasibility of various travel arrangements, inevitably contingent upon health matters, 4. from both an emotional and intellectual perspective, their recollections of my first as well as all subsequent visits, 5. detailed acknowledgements of various gifts, greetings, phone calls, 6. descriptions of family and seasonal celebrations, challenges of daily life before and after Karl Krolow's death, coping with widowhood, 7. gardening successes and travails, Luzie Krolow's joy in contributing a bi-weekly column to the FAZ, the promise and eventual publication of her second book, concerning her legendary garden: *Gartenzauber*.

