

OSKAR, THE HUMAN GOOSE

Chapter I

The One-Way Correspondence

"Did Oskar send me a message?" my five-year-old friend called down from his bedroom.

"No, Ralph," I replied, "I didn't speak with him tonight."

I couldn't bear to tell the seriously ill boy at bedtime that Oskar had been kidnapped. Besides, who would believe that anyone would kidnap a goose?

That is what Oskar is - a very individualistic, rambunctious, persnkeky, fearless (except for snow!), highly personable, smart-as-the-devil, fetish-ridden White Emden goose. But to people, as young and younger than Ralph and as old as the grandfathers who sent him Christmas cards, Oskar is people.

"Do you think you could teach Oskar to write?" Ralph then asked.

I didn't answer because the sick boy was quite serious and, strong as his feelings for Oskar were, I feared if I said the wrong thing he'd lose the night's sleep his frail body required.

After a short silence, Ralph queried, "Could you put a pencil in his mouth and let him scratch on paper?" Another brief silence and then, "I would know what his scratches mean."

"If he could write with his head sideways, I suppose so," I suggested. Then, to try and get away from the painful subject, I wondered aloud if we might locate a bent pencil, so Oskar could keep his head straight and still see what he was writing. Ralph took this thought to his bed.

It may seem hard to believe, but to hundreds of people, to diplomats and their children who had their pictures taken with Oskar, to scientists, professional people, businessmen, military careerists and ordinary everyday folks of every kind and station in life and to their children and grandchildren - to at least one CIA man, too - Oskar was a person. Not just a personality - that indubitably he was. But human beings actually regarded our feathered friend as a real person, and spoke to and of him that way. No baby talk, no incomplete sentences. Actual conversation. And often you could seem to understand his reply, even though it always came out, "Honk, honk, honk," in some form or another.

People called up and asked for Oskar. Retired military people, including colonels and generals, bought fresh bread on their way to our farm - the stale bread I kept on hand wouldn't do. It had to be strictly fresh, fit for people. We received letters addressed to him, presents for him. Reading his mail and his cards or overhearing phone calls and conversation, one would never dream Oskar H. Pumpernickle was an Emden rather than a human.

But by his life insurance policy and his pictures we can prove it!

To humans, Oskar was another human. Especially to children, who regarded him as an equal or a superior. Little Mark/Loeb began

referring to him as "Mr. Pumpernickle" when Mark first began to speak. Two years after the kidnapping, he still asked if we had heard anything from "Mr. Pumpernickle".

To Ralph and his three-year-old brother David, Oskar was an equal and possibly their very best friend. He was part of their childhood, a very real part of their everyday activities and thoughts. They felt a responsibility toward him. They worked for him and regarded their labors as completely unexceptional, the kind of thing you do for friends but don't do for others.

Ralph is an unusually bright youngster. His matter-of-fact inquiry about any message his friend Oskar might have sent him was as normal to him as if he were inquiring about word from any other person in his life. Neither he nor any of Oskar's many other juvenile friends ever in any way indicated the even remote possibility Oskar might have been anything but another homo sapiens. Certainly not a pet, or a goose. The attitude and relationship was as matter of fact as the day following the night. The question of Oskar's species never arose in either word or attitude.

In this Oskar was in full accord with his multitude of friends of all ages. Oskar also regarded himself as a human, a little more than equal to all other humans, and above all, not a goose. From the day he was born until the last we saw of him, in everything he did, everything he said, and in all his acts and activities, Oskar made clear he certainly was not, in his own concept, a goose.

More even than Oskar's loss, Ralph's question that bitter night in February 1963 was a sharp pain for me. It was, in fact, but the night after Oskar was kidnapped. We felt his loss almost as though

he had been a blood-bound member of the family. But much as we loved him, we loved Ralph more, and it was because of Ralph's health that his questions hurt. We feared the effect upon it of the disappearance of Oskar from his life.

That Ralph is alive is a tribute to modern science and his own very manly and determined attitude toward life. Only a few years ago, there was not the slightest chance his friendship with Oskar could have so matured, for Ralph was recovering from an until then always fatal disease, a Wilms tumor.

A country boy born of city parents, Ralph fit the countryside as naturally as his father fit the government desks he had occupied for about thirty years. Both boys were late arrivals in a second family. Ralph enjoyed whatever he did, and whatever he did he did with a zest and the fullness of his little heart. Doing was his life. What kept him from doing things - like bad weather, midday naps and the inevitable fall of night - were special blights in his existence. Every object he saw enthralled him. The soil, the stones, the trees, flowers, cows and horses were as important as breath to him. No punishment was as severe as confinement to his inside toys, which he nonetheless enjoyed. But he had a special, extra existence in the outdoors, in which his marvelous mind built special personal meanings into all the animate and inanimate objects it encountered and even into those it only imagined. Every stone was a very special stone, with an existence and significance all its own, and a purpose to which Ralph would apply or assign it. The animals were all very special animals, in his imagination Ralph's animals, even though both he and the law regarded them as belonging to the Wilcoms, his neigh-

bors. All the wonderful objects and mysteries of life were special to Ralph, as though they were his alone and understood by him only, and he saw in them things that even other bright little boys didn't know were there.

During the preceding fall, this active and wiry boy had suddenly become listless and without energy, as though he had expended it all in his unending activities. Medical checks revealed nothing. Knowing and loving the boy, in whom he had observed the fine intelligence and sensitivity those close to him had always respected, Doctor Powell, the pediatrician, ordered hospitalization. X-rays revealed widespread cancers. The local surgeons would not operate.

"It would be a brutality," they said. "There is no chance of his recovery at all."

Ralph's cancers were distributed through his entire body. At least one kidney was gone, and at least a lung and some of the skeleton were involved.

Less than five years old, yet about to die from a disease normally associated with age! We wondered, was Ralph to be a sacrifice to man's contamination of his own environment? In those days the refuse from atomic and nuclear explosions were widely discussed in the papers and magazines and on radio and TV. Learned scientists were divided, but most people feared the carcinogenic properties of the nuclear fallout, especially among children, whose growing bones require much calcium. Whether because the younger bones absorbed the radioactive materials the cows had grazed from the grass, magnified and built into their milk, or whether it has other origins, this particular type of cancer is restricted to children and is increasing in its incidence.

Ralph was returned to his parents to suffer through the very few remaining days the doctors gave him. He suffered severe pain, but he suffered even more his inability to romp and play and visit.

We knew he wasn't well, but the nature of his disease we didn't learn until the Saturday of the week the doctors made their diagnosis. Ralph's parents were trying hard, in the few remaining days, to indulge his every whim, so that, to the best of their ability, he might have whatever his little heart desired.

That afternoon he had wanted to visit his friend Oskar. The prelude, to Ralph a minimum necessity, had exhausted him and delayed the visit. It just was not possible for Ralph to visit Oskar without a gift. That day it had been apples, prematurely dropped by the trees. Picking them up and toting them to the car had completely exhausted his meagre energy. His father and mother brought him and David as soon as Ralph recovered some of his ebbing strength.

The wan face broke into a wide but weak smile when Oskar came running up. One by one, the boys fed him the apples. Oskar took one bite from each and then demanded and got a fresh apple. This was a never-ending delight to the boys. First Oskar took a bite and then the apples were thrown over the fence to our many other geese, who lived like and thought they were geese. While the boys were occupied, their unhappy parents, in whose faces the terrible news was only too apparent, gave us the details.

(film clips - Pictures of Oskar, Ralph, David)

But Doctor Powell, credit to Hippocrates that he is, had not given up. Three days later he told the wards, "Go to Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore immediately. Don't stop for a phone call or anything else. Ask for Doctor Katz."

Leaving just as they were dressed, the family reached the hospital at 2:00 p.m.

We learned of all this when Ted phoned us at 10:45 that night to say that suddenly they were bathed in the light of a bright new world, like a midday sun at midnight.

"There is reason for hope," he summed it up.

Eight of the country's best surgeons had made their own tests and examinations, decided what to do and had done it. By means of massive surgery, equally massive X-ray and a new use for an old drug, a fungicide whose marvelous properties when applied to this particular cancer had been discovered by accident, Ralph was still alive. But his spirit never left his worn little body, though the vital spark seemed to dim in his usually bright eyes, and the intense interest in everything around him ebbed periodically with his flagging strength. Gradually, though, he recovered.

The night he inquired for Oskar's message, his entire history, both tragic and miraculous, came flooding back upon us all. All feared telling him of the kidnapping of his good friend, for the boy needed all the rest he could get in his then still continuing struggle for survival. But the next morning his mother did tell him what had happened to Oskar. By nightfall, Ralph, who had already lived through suffering beyond the comprehension of his years, had reconciled himself to the loss of a friend.

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So great had been the attachment of these two children to Oskar, so strong their feeling of responsibility, that daily they foraged in the winter stubble of the cornfields, gleaning the ears missed by the picking-machine and the nubbins it had rejected. No matter how cold the winter wind blew, cutting through their garments, icing their little hands with numbing redness and bringing tears to their eyes, a day was not a happy one for them unless they had laid in at least a slight store of corn for Oskar. Nights before bedtime, days when storms confined them to the house, and in all the few minutes they could snatch from the many pressing obligations that beset boys approaching three and five, Ralph and David shelled the corn, by hand. Other geese could eat the corn from the cob, they explained, but Oskar was their friend. His corn had to be shelled.

For farm-toughened hands, shelling corn is a blistering chore that wears through the toughest fingertips. When the ripened grain hardens, it is like stone. Growing in tight parallel rows, each grain shields those adjacent to it from even adult fingers. Each grain clings to the cob from which it grows and in which it is partly embedded. The cob, meanwhile, has also toughened, and it grips the grain tightly, as Nature intended. Shelling corn is painful work. In recent generations it has been turned over to machines.

But Ralph and David had no such machines. Their ^{uncomplaining} little fingers worked away at the grains and ears with a dedication that defied pain. It was a rare demonstration of the persistence and determination with which loving boys ignore hardship and discomfort to serve their friends. Their production was unbelievable. One day and night

their efforts yielded seventeen pounds of shelled grain. Sometimes when a week elapsed between our mutual visits, they would have as much as a five-gallon pail of what, from all the animal stories that had been read them, they just knew would delight Oskar.

Only Oskar didn't know it. He is the only goose - in fact, the only one of thousands and thousands of fowl we raised - who would have nothing to do with corn. Corn was for geese, not for Oskar.

Each time the boys brought their own corn to feed their friend, we had to lie.

"Wish we'd known you were coming," my wife or I would inform them. "We just this minute finished feeding Oskar." whatever time of the day or night they came, that just happened to be the time we had fed Oskar. Thin as the explanation seemed to us, it satisfied the children. On the few occasions they questioned us, we said, "Johnny Jones just left, and he fed Oskar," or "Three children from town were here, and Oskar is full."

Thus, the children never realized that their friend spurned their gifts, the fruit of so much labor and pain, of so many freezing days spent seeking the ears and dragging them home through the hard and sharp stubble that is tough as wood and on which they were always cutting themselves and tearing their clothes.

If vigorous exercise was helpful to Ralph's recovery, his efforts for Oskar certainly supplied it. If his critically low blood count could have been raised by the work his blood did as the little fellow manfully trod the fields seeking the wasted ears of corn and lugging them home by the bucketful, it would have soared. But virtue was its own reward.

There certainly was none from Oskar. But that was Oskar,
superior, disdainful, and entirely without ^{Gratitude} ~~thanks~~. Whatever he
got, he made clear by his manner, was only part of what was due
him.