

Christie Blatchford: 'I'm a broken person, I'm just broken.'



Christie Blatchford: A fire burning outside Caledonia's Douglas Creek Estates housing development on April 20, 2006.

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In the last of a four-part series of excerpts from her new book, *Helpless*, Christie Blatchford describes the ordeal of an immigrant couple set upon by native activists.

Maria and Dieter Rauscher came to Canada from Germany as immigrants. In 1978, Dieter transferred into a management position with Lake Erie Steel (now U.S. Steel Canada) at Nanticoke, a short trip south of Caledonia. The couple moved to a rambling old farmhouse on a small acreage on the Sixth Line, east of Six Nations.

On the morning of April 20, 2006, Maria and Dieter were still in bed when they heard police cruisers speeding by on the Sixth Line, heading east toward the train tracks.

“As we look out the window,” Dieter says, “there was a Suburban or something like that, a big one, stopped, and cops get out. They were standing there with hands behind their backs. Six or eight of them. And there were about three or four Indians who came out the back here.”

Dieter watched as one of the officers pulled out a piece of paper and began reading something — presumably the Ontario Provincial Police (OPP)’s warning to protesters — aloud.

“All of a sudden, there was a big kerfuffle,” he says. “Out of the bush came another twenty people ... there were already people coming from Six Nations down the road. And they all walked by our entrance to our driveway, they all had sticks, baseball bats.”

The OPP, seeing the crowd, just “high-tailed it” and took off.

“That,” Dieter says, “was the last police we saw.”

He doesn’t mean for the next few days, either, or even weeks: the OPP, by its own admission, did not police the Sixth Line for the next 47 months. As then-OPP deputy commissioner Chris Lewis wrote Haldimand County Mayor Marie Trainer in March of 2010, there had been “a verbal agreement” among the OPP, the Haudenosaunee and the Six Nations Police that, as “an interim measure,” Six Nations “would police the DCE property, as well as the 6th and 7th Lines.” That “interim” measure lasted one month shy of four years.

The Rauschers went outside again a bit later, when there was what Maria calls “a commotion” — residents of the Sixth Line use kerfuffle and commotion to describe the most harrowing events — just up the road from them at a little bridge.

“Before we knew it,” she says, “we see guys throw that [Chevrolet] Lumina over the bridge.”

“We saw it,” Dieter says.

“The thing is, people were heaving something,” Maria says, “but you don't for one minute think they're going to throw it onto a highway, do you? Oh my God, oh my God.”

The Rauschers didn't know the occupiers had already closed the bypass and that there were no cars below. “We were thinking,” Maria says, “what if that goes on a cop? So the next thing you see is flames, smoke.”

“That's when they set it on fire,” Dieter says.

What the Rauschers call “the victory parade” was next: a constant flow of cars and trucks up and down the Sixth Line, horns honking to celebrate the defeat of the OPP. In the open bed of one pickup, they both saw a young man coolly sitting with a rifle across his knees. Still a little later, Maria was in the kitchen, and when she looked out the window this time, the smoke she saw was close. She ran outside and saw her neighbour Bob Masecar's front lawn was on fire.

Dieter, who was in the house, dialled 911; Maria was outside, weeping, as dozens and dozens of cars passed by. “They all slow down,” she says, “and this is why I hate them [the occupiers], I hate them with a passion: they laughed.

“They were laughing because they thought this was my house [about to burn].”

As Dieter came flying out with a couple of watering cans, they could hear the siren.

“The fire trucks,” he says, remembering the relief that washed over him, and the crushing realization that followed.

“We can hear the fire trucks: okay. Hear the noise, hear the noise, wait and wait, and nobody shows up. They had closed it [the Sixth Line at Argyle Street] off already, with that tower and a truck, and they wouldn't let the fire department in,” he says.

At last, a pickup stopped, and two young native men got out and, with Dieter's watering cans, some water bottles and a lot of stomping, put the fire out. The Rauschers decided to go into town, but with Argyle Street closed, the only way was the long way around, through the reserve. There were already sentries on the bridge, checking every car that came through; there was also a checkpoint on Oneida Road.

“They were way better organized than the police,” Maria says.

In town, they headed straight for the fire department to ask why they hadn't come. “This guy was livid,” Dieter says. “He was the assistant fire chief; he said, ‘They wouldn't let us through.’”

The chief called the OPP, and two detectives showed up to interview the Rauschers; Dieter reminded them of the tank cars that passed by every day carrying liquefied petroleum gas.

“By this time,” Maria says, “we know already it's out of control. We know already. We looked at each other and we said, ‘Oh, we lost. We have lost.’”

The couple now live in a two-bedroom apartment in Burlington.

They had the house up for sale for two and a half years; it took that long even to get an offer. The deal closed on May 20, 2009. They got \$215,000 for a property that, according to what real-estate brokers call a comparative market analysis, ought to have been worth \$420,000.

I noticed there were no plants on the balcony. Maria nodded in confirmation. Just two days earlier, at her behest, they had driven by their old place so she could see the flowers coming up. She burst into tears as she told me that.

There were times in Caledonia, Maria said, “when I really thought I was going to do myself in, and I said so. Because, yeah, we will never really be the same people anymore. I had the papers to become a Canadian citizen; I ripped them up. I will never be a Canadian citizen. If I was younger, even 50 years old, I would leave this country.”

Dieter said in his quiet way, “You heard sympathy; you heard empathy. You hoped something is going to happen. Nothing.”

So they moved, because finally they got an offer and because, finally, they had to leave.

Maria said of the apartment, "All you see here now is — I live here. I do it for him. For me, I could live in one room. I could care less. I just do it because, well, I guess life goes on. But my heart is not in it..."

Maria remembered a day in the Zehrs supermarket in Caledonia when she saw the ex of a friend, a native man. "I said, 'Peter, we shared meals together. We were like families. Your kids were in my house, my kids were in your house. In all those times, you never came once to tell us that we didn't have to be frightened for our life, you never inquired how we were, and I just want to ask you why.'"

The man looked down, then looked back at Maria, and "all he could say was, 'I should have.' And I said, 'That's good enough for me.'"

Months later, Maria ran into a relative of that man. She went over and sat down at his table.

"He goes to me, 'Your house is for sale.' I said yeah. He looks at me and goes, 'I wouldn't have to pay for your house,' meaning because he's native, he could just take it.

"So I'm thinking, 'Did I hear this?' I said to him, 'Over my dead body.'

"You know what he responded? He said, 'This can be arranged.'"

She was still shaking when she got home.

As shattering as it was to talk to the Rauschers, my hunch was they'd made the right call.

In January of 2010, on one of my trips to Caledonia, I had picked up a copy of the Turtle Island News, the Six Nations paper. It was the Jan. 13 edition.

Inside, on page 7 and clearly of no particular import, was a small story headlined, "Six Nations band council wants to buy land nearby." It turned out, as the lead paragraph said, that Chief Bill Montour said the idea wouldn't fly because the council didn't have any money.

What was startling was the following passage:

"Why would we buy it, why wouldn't we just take it?" asked councillor Helen Miller.

Councillor Melba Thomas added, "Shouldn't we do that too, with the house that's been vacated? At DCE?", referring to the house that was owned by Dave Brown and Dana Chatwell as part of the settlement of their lawsuit against the provincial government.

In a later interview, Montour said that council wouldn't "just take" land held by a third party. "We've always said we would never dispose third-party interest in land because it's not their fault," he said.

However, asked about Thomas' comment concerning the Brown-Chatwell house, Montour said "something" should be done.

Two days after the publication of the paper, on January 15, 2009, the government did something, all right: bulldozers moved in to raze Brownie's old house.

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