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Robert Schwanhausser's life has two big chapters: one as a man and now one as a woman

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There were days when a hungover Schwanhausser canceled meetings, and other days when Oemcke attended in his stead. When Frank Jameson, a Ryan executive vice president, derailed another drone project, Schwanhausser had a few drinks and then called the man for a brief, high-decibel, conversation.

Jameson was a charismatic man with solid political links. (He never became head of NASA, his ambition, but did become Eva Gabor's fifth and final husband.) Within Ryan, he could be a powerful ally or a formidable foe.

In May 1969, Schwanhausser was placed on "special assignment." His team was transferred to two executive vice presidents: L.M. Limbach and Jameson.

Within the secretive world of drone engineers, though, Schwanhausser's stock remained high. In 1971, the American Institute of Aeronautics and Astronautics bestowed upon him the Outstanding Contribution to Aerospace award. Two years later, he was invited to address the group's convention in Washington

As expected, he preached the gospel of the Remotely Piloted Vehicle (RPV): "When the weather is on the ragged edge; the flak a real thicket; the target too hardened; the approach too limited; then you are in RPV country."

The topic was national defense, not one man's struggle with his own gender. But throughout the speech, Schwanhausser relentlessly advocated radical, technologically driven change.

There would be, he predicted from the podium, a "new evolving form during the coming decade."

Personal time

In the 1970s, Schwanhausser's life took a series of sharp turns. He left Teledyne Ryan; formed his own consulting firm; wooed overseas clients for a third company; and returned to Teledyne Ryan.

He divorced Mary Lea Hunter, the mother of his two sons, in 1978.

He married Beverly Allemann in 1979.

All of this was public knowledge. His employers even knew about the 1977 stretch in rehab, which followed a nearly lethal overdose of lithium and booze.

Sober, Schwanhausser resuscitated his Teledyne Ryan career. He scouted new drone clients in Amman, Baghdad and Tel Aviv, cultivating friendships on all sides of the Arab-Israeli divide. But his private life was threatening to become public.

While living alone in Wilmington, Del., he assembled a wardrobe of women's clothes and wigs. He read about transsexuals and wrote for LadyLike and similarly themed publications.

His second wife stumbled across his secret; that marriage ended. A third began, to a woman whose business catered to cross-dressers. They shared that interest, but little else.

As the 1990s ended, Schwanhausser was no longer working or married.

"This is your personal time right now," he told himself. "You are not beholden to society or others. By God, I can be selfish for once." Schwanhausser saw a counselor. Started taking hormones. And called his kids.