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Germans

A penetrating examination of the German mind, the culture and the complicated soul of modern Teutonic history by George Bailey

GERMANS

BIOGRAPHY OF AN OBSESSION

GEORGE BAILEY



A DISCUS BOOK/PUBLISHED BY AVON BOOKS

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GEORGE BAILEY is a graduate of Columbia College in New York City and Magdalen College, Oxford. He has spent almost thirty years in Europe, most of them in Germany and Austria. During World War II he served as an American army intelligence and liaison officer and as an escort officer for German generals. He was interpreter-translator in Russian and German at the surrender negotiations. He has worked since then as a liaison officer with the German police, a literary agent, and a journalist covering Germany and Eastern Europe for the *Reporter* and ABC. In 1959 he won the Overseas Press Club's award for best magazine reporting on foreign affairs.

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WHEN I WAS TWELVE YEARS OLD, IN THE SUMMER after my father died, I went to McNeil Island in Puget Sound for the long vacation. At that time, 1932, northwestern Washington was said to be the wildest part of the forty-eight United States: the Olympic peninsula was not fully surveyed and charted until the beginning of World War II. In this place, in the forest primeval, in the uncharted wilderness I met my first German and heard the German language spoken for the first time. The German was John Luhr, the game warden of McNeil Island. Luhr was a widower whose three sons had left to begin families of their own. He lived alone in a two-story wooden frame house that he had built himself. It was a finished, professional piece of work. It had a long, spacious front porch overlooking the straits, or "narrows" as we called them, between the island and the mainland, and a smaller back porch. Luhr had built a "mill" and harnessed a stream, by means of a wooden viaduct at least a hundred yards long, to turn a lathe and generate electricity for the house. He made his own furniture; I know because I once blew the arm off the sofa with a blast from his sixteen-gauge shotgun. I had been trying to flip the full shells out of the breech as I had often seen him do. Luhr went to the "mill" and made a new arm the same day. His workshop in the "mill" was simply but well equipped. The belts that turned the wheels were leather straps made from deer, elk, or moose hides. Luhr was also a well-versed electrician: he wound his own generators. In fact, Luhr had achieved autarky; he put up in Mason jars fruit from his trees, venison and elk meat from his hunting (this was before the availability of deep-freeze units), and the clams he dug from the beach in front of his house. He also occasionally smoked some of the fish he caught. All I ever saw him buy at the store (it was five or ten miles away across the water in

Longbranch—a long way to row; Luhr did not have a motor-boat) was coffee, salt, canned milk, and ammunition.

Luhr was a bounty hunter: he hunted cougar, gray seal, and even crows. He was not so much interested in fishing save for spearing flounder. This he did with a long bamboo pole with three steel prongs fixed to one end. His incentive was the delicacy of fried flounder. Luhr's house was furnished after the fashion of a hunting lodge, with one exception: there were no trophies, no antlers or products of taxidermy. Except for the usual field-and-stream calendars and one or two nondescript pictures, the single ornament of the large living room was the gun rack. It was magnificent. There were eighteen guns on the rack—six slide-action or automatic shotguns, the lever-action .25-.35-caliber Remington, and the rest of them bolt-action Winchester deer rifles of various bores. There was only one side arm on the rack, the first of its kind I ever saw: a Luger. The shape of the Luger fascinated me as did its spectacular action—the triple hinge outside and on top of the magazine and barrel. The guns on the rack were all oiled and polished, lock, stock, and barrel, until they glowed with a black and blue steel dark mahogany brilliance. I have seen a great many gun collections since then, both private and in the great military museums of Europe, but I have never seen the like of the sober splendor of John Luhr's gun rack.

Then, with the capacity for wonder of a twelve-year-old, as now, looking back over four decades, the impressive thing about Luhr and his friends was their matter-of-factness. They were in paradise and they knew it. Scions of a nation of forest worshipers, they were quietly devotional in their cathedral: they took what was granted for granted. There was never any fuss. In three consecutive summers I never saw anyone approach Luhr's place by land or sea unless it was some old familiar coming as a guest. There was no other habitation within several miles. Luhr's was the only house on the narrows side of the island, a place characterized by an astonishing discrepancy between high and low tide. In the evening the sea would come up more than a hundred yards of beach and climb almost to the top of the eight-foot sea wall not more than ten yards from the porch. As night came down the sea came up and closed around you quietly and soothingly, a solicitous approach. Then in the morning the sea was gone again and in its place a great shining blade of

beach naked in the sharp air and, far down, a run of water that looked brisk and narrow enough to be a river. It made for an extraordinary cycle of impressions, a brand-new deal in life every morning.

I do not know whether John Luhr and his friends, such as the rubicund Adolf Apfel, a frequent overnight and weekend guest, were bootleggers. I do not know whether the term is appropriate in any case at that time in that place. I do know that there was hard drink on the premises. The first German sentence I can remember hearing was "Das schmeckt nach mehr!" ("That tastes like more!") in answer to the question—in English—"How does it taste?" As far as I am concerned, the fact of the home brew merely shows that John Luhr, in addition to making everything else in his paradise, also made the nectar to go with the ambrosia.

When my ear became enough accustomed to the language so that I could get the drift of what they were saying I wondered as the weeks and months went by why no one ever talked of the "old country." I asked Luhr about it. "If ever there was a homeland for the Germans," he said, "this is it." True, these were all more or less professional men of the forest, living within a double tradition of solitude, the old (German) and the new (American) frontier. In other words, "Germany is here or nowhere!" I was reminded—caught up short and reminded—of Luhr's words many years later in reading *Wilhelm Meister*. Goethe's Count Lothario, Wilhelm's patron-cum-brother-in-law, goes to America to take part in the War of Independence. Afterward he returns to Germany and fixes a large inscription over the entrance to his estate; "America is here or nowhere!" Reading Goethe over the years, I was frequently reminded of Luhr and that pristine beginning of my contact with Germans, especially when Goethe talks of the forest.

I drew my friend into the woods. While shunning the uniform fir trees, I sought those beautiful leafy groves which admittedly do not extend far and wide throughout the region but are still of such size that a poor, wounded heart can hide itself there. In the inmost deep of the forest I had sought out for myself a solemn place where the oldest oaks and beeches formed a splendidly large, shadowed area. The ground was rather sloping and rendered the contour of the trunks all the more noticeable. All around this open radius the thickest bushes merged together, through which

moss-covered crags loomed in their strength and dignity and provided a swift fall for a voluminous stream.

I had hardly forced my friend to this place when he, who preferred to be in an open landscape beside a river and among his fellowmen, laughingly assured me that I had demonstrated myself to be a true German. He recounted to me in great detail from Tacitus how our forebears had delighted in the feelings with which nature inspires us so magnificently and yet so unaffectedly in such solitudes. He had not held forth long when I cried out: "Oh, why doesn't this charming place lie in some great uncharted forest, or why may we not put a fence around it in order to sanctify it and ourselves and cut both off from the world! Surely there is no more beautiful way in which to revere the godhead than that with which no picture is needed but which simply springs from the heart when we commune with nature!"

But how awesome and terrifying it is to be utterly alone "in some great uncharted forest." Once in a while during those summers—fortunately not often—Luhr would row over to the mainland for a night's partying and leave me alone in the house. On one of these occasions while cowering in my bed I heard a cougar scream, nearby, and I was completely terror-stricken. I had heard somewhere that a cougar's scream sounded like the scream of a woman gone raving mad from some great grief. Ever since then I had dreaded the event in anticipation, and forecast it exactly as it happened—when I was alone on an island at night. If I could have, I would have fled the island then and there, but Luhr had the only boat. There was an additional danger on McNeil Island; it was also the home of the state penitentiary. This was on the other side of the island, but there were trustees said to be at large and there was always the danger of escaped prisoners.

These were distinct possibilities; their distinctness served by contrast to emphasize the nameless terrors of the unfathomable primeval. Who knew what phantoms, goblins, and monsters were lurking there? Who wanted to know? Moving through a great forest is like swimming underwater in the sea. In both there is the radical awareness that comes with complete envelopment. But it is an indistinct awareness. The solemnity of the forest, the spectral theatricality of breaking and bending light, initiates the intruder into the mystery of time, since space is relegated—confined and sorted—into sections of shadow and light. As a boy I knew a place in the great forest where, I was convinced, under the right condi-

tions and certainly only at midnight, time could be made to stop and eternity seized. Thereafter, I was equally sure, I could recapture eternity at will merely by referring to that moment of cosmic arrest. I could remain there, if I chose, forever, in a kind of nirvana. The forest world impels nature worship; it obliges to an obsession with the symbolic suggestiveness of the elements. The lack of horizontal line trims vision upward to the O altitudo.

This was the world of the Germans. Now France, said John Luhr, had no forests. France had well-spaced stands of trees that admitted unreservedly of light, that were airy and clearly defined. But immediately east of the Rhine the big woods began, and farther east lay the Teutoburg forest of Arminius, the primordial home of the race of gods and devils, monsters and giants, riddles and runes. The forest itself is a paradox: every tree earthbound, deep-rooted, yet pointing straight upward to infinity.

When I was sixteen years old I changed the scene of my summers. I got a job as fourth cook (scullion) on the Chicago, Milwaukee, Saint Paul, and Pacific Railroad by virtue of my father's past connections: he had been a dining car steward on The Milwaukee Road. The run was between Chicago, Illinois, and Tacoma, Washington, a distance of about 2,800 miles that required two days and three nights, going or coming. It was in the galleys of the C.M.St.P.&P. that I met the European community of nations as represented by the chefs, the second and third cooks of the various crews. On The Milwaukee Road the chefs were usually, but not always, Frenchmen or Walloons; the second cooks were almost always Germans (I remember one perfectly dotty Lithuanian second cook who never said anything in English except "On time, boys?"; the only other thing I ever heard him say was "thank you," in Polish); the third cooks were usually Hungarians, sometimes Poles. I met one German chef but never worked under him. The only native American I ever met in a galley crew was a chef, Richard S. ("Dirty Dick") Richards. He always said the "S" in his name stood for "son of a bitch" and he was right. I do not know whether Dirty Dick was a good chef but he was really feared, and with reason.

The chef's station is at the head of a dining car galley. The chef faces a charcoal grill and has at his back a solid complex of iceboxes as high as the ceiling. Beyond the iceboxes

he has a rack accommodating carving knives, one of them with a blade almost two feet long, and cleavers—an array of deadly weapons required by his function in the galley. He prepared and grilled the choice cuts of meat (he would occasionally also grill tomatoes, but I never saw a chef fry a piece of meat, or anything else, for that matter, except *crêpes à l'orange*). The making of consommé was also his province. The second cook was the heavy-duty cook—baking, roasting, and boiling (tongue, for instance); he also made the puddings and the mayonnaise. The third cook was the fry or short-order cook; in addition he made the coffee and the green salads. The second cook faced the stove and the ovens. I have forgotten how the range was heated but when heated its entire surface was evenly hot. The third cook had a piece of the stove and the steam table. The fourth cook, who faced the other way, had the sinks.

It is necessary to dwell on the topography of the galley because this was the scene of my first opportunity to watch the German in the concert of nations. The chef of a kitchen or a galley is probably the only absolute monarch surviving in the Western world. It is for the others in the galley to make and keep their peace with him. It is the cook's even more than the citizen's duty to keep the peace because a fight in a kitchen is a fearfully dangerous business. Not only because of the knives, cleavers, ladles, and rolling pins to hand, but even more so because of the presence and availability of boiling water and grease and red-hot coals.

For some reason Dirty Dick had taken a scunner at the third cook, Mike, a huge Pole. Axel, the German second cook, had done his best to keep the two apart or, rather, to keep Dirty Dick from pinking the third cook with his long carving knife. On the morning of our last day out, about three hours from the end of the line, we were about an hour late coming down the western side of the Cascades. It was then that the fight broke out in full fury between Dirty Dick and the third cook. Fortunately it was after breakfast and the range had been turned off. Even so it was still hot. Dirty Dick made at the third cook with his short cleaver. The third cook snatched the top off the garbage can and held it up as a shield. Axel made way by jumping onto the stove: it was either that or the sinks, and the sinks were within the action radius of Dirty Dick's right arm. The passageway in the galley was no more than three feet wide, so that veritable lists for mortal combat

were provided. I made my escape over the counter into the pantry from where I was able to watch the unequal contest. The third cook could not follow me because he was too big to squeeze through the opening between the counter and the drop cupboard. Also my escape had been covered by Mike, the third cook himself; there was nobody to cover for him. I was almost distracted by the spectacle of Axel on the stove: he was cowering and shifting from one foot to the other as the heat from the stove came up through the soles of his shoes. Dick drove his cleaver smack into the middle of the garbage can top which the third cook held with both hands by the rim. The cleaver stuck and there ensued a tug of war, each combatant holding grimly to his own. Meanwhile, Axel by turns appealed to the chef to leave off—"Dot's not a fair fight, chef, chef!"—and berated the third cook for doing what he had no choice but to do—"You must be crazy, bick-ing a fight vit a man who hass all de hardvare!" As the train pitched and rolled down the steep grade and around curves, Dick managed to pull his cleaver free. As he did so the third cook turned the garbage can top around much as if it were a visor, so that he could see Dick through the gaping slit left by the cleaver. "Peek-a-boo, you son of bitch!" said Dick and set himself to have at him again. At that moment the dining car went into a curve and the roadbed dipped rather sharply—the engineer was trying to make up lost time; the door of the upper icebox swung open swiftly and caught Dirty Dick in the back of the head. He fell face down on the floor of the galley; the cleaver went into the sink. Axel jumped off the stove and knelt down to examine the chef. "He iss oudt colder zan a clam," he said.

In three years on The Milwaukee Road I worked my way up to the exalted position of third cook (every position above scullion in a kitchen is exalted), but I was happy to work my way down again. The pay was only twenty percent more than that of a fourth cook and the work was far more difficult. In short, I had no aspirations to a career as a cook; nevertheless I was fated to remain in kitchens. Even when I went to Columbia College in New York on a scholarship I applied at Alumni House for a meal job and was sent straight to the Jewish Theological Seminary to work in the kitchens as a waiter-cum-shabbas-goy. I was more than a little disgruntled at this dispensation. After all, I came to Columbia as a scholarship student. Moreover I was in the Classics Department, a student

of Greek. My disgruntlement did not last long. The kitchen of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America at 122nd Street and Broadway was an extraordinary place in 1939. Like the rabbinate, the kitchen was full of immigrants of more or less recent vintage, most of them from Germany, all of them from central Europe. Most, of course, but not all Jews. The chef was a Berliner, the second cook was a huge sub-Carpathian Russian who spoke not one word of anything except Russian and his name. His name was John Adams. The third cook, in this case the pastry cook, was, as so often, a Hungarian, Samubácsi (Uncle Sam).

But the major domo of the kitchen, the man who ran everything, was a German. And what a German! He was Franz Menz of Stuttgart. He looked like a Nazi statue, a neoclassical monument to German manhood. Moreover, he had two brothers, Max and August, who were in the German army. I can see Franz standing there in the middle of the entrance hall of the refectory, his legs wide apart in the German fashion, arms akimbo, grave but not pompous, entirely self-possessed but without a trace of arrogance. Indeed, considering his background and his family connections, the very fact that he held the position he did in the seminary was a tribute to the man. It is not easy to describe Franz's situation in the seminary. In 1939 a good many of the student body, the faculty, and the service personnel were either themselves victims of the Nazis or had relatives who were or would be victims of the Nazis—or both. And there was Menz, undeniably, indissolubly German, yet above all an advertisement for himself, with all the instinctive tact, sympathy, and humor required to master a hideously difficult situation. Menz had acquired a formula for handling the Jews, perhaps without knowing it. When I met him he had been employed in the seminary for some ten years. He had stayed on by choice: Franz was one of those Germans who measured up to the traditional national ideal of *factotum*; he could turn his hand to anything. He once explained to me: "I like these people very much; it is pleasant working for them and working with them; they have always been very kind to me." I never heard of anybody in the seminary who took exception to Franz. On the contrary, he was respected and much liked. There were more than a few who adored him. He managed cooks and waiters with an evenness, firmness, and discretion that were exemplary.

In the spring of 1940 Franz's brother Max was killed in action in France. In the fall of the same year Franz's second brother, August, fell in Norway. I heard of both bereavements not from Franz but from students in the rabbinate who, to my astonishment, went to Franz to offer their condolences. I think that Franz's success with the Jews at the seminary was due to his straightforwardness. He tried neither to conceal nor to demonstrate anything; he was neither talkative nor taciturn, neither hearty nor lugubrious; he kept an even middle course and held just the right temper in his dealings with everyone. Those of his friends I met were of the same character, one family in Yorkville in particular that lived conveniently close to the Eighty-sixth Street pleasure strip. My fascination with anything German was my calling card. Franz and his friends would give or lend me magazines from Germany, but they were careful to tear or cut out anything that had to do with Hitler or the Nazi party. When I asked why they did this Franz said, "Hitler is no good—for anybody." At the same time Franz took some pride in the exploits of the German army in the fall of France. I remember his taking me to a Yorkville movie house to see *Sieg im Westen* (Victory in the West), the official Nazi documentary of the German conquest of France, Belgium, and the Netherlands. A police cordon had to be provided to secure thoroughfare to the box office and entrance. Of the film itself I remember the panoramic shots of the endless rows of German soldiers, standing at attention in full field pack at first light and being addressed by an invisible commander: "Kameraden, Soldaten—die Zeit ist gekommen!" (Comrades, soldiers—the time has come!). I remember the footage of the Stukas diving with their sirens screaming. I remember most vividly the scenes where German infantry marched along French roads, singing. The song they sang began with the words "Comrades, soldiers—the time has come!" When we came out of the movie house the crowd of protesters was gone. "The Germans are good soldiers," said Franz. "They are good at anything where there are strict rules and when everybody sticks to the rules. Otherwise they are not so good."

I went to a good many German movies in Yorkville. Most of the films were harmless enough, light comedies about good-natured barflies, the sort of role that Robert Montgomery played so well. Montgomery's equivalent in the German

films of the era was Gustav Fröhlich. Nomen erat omen: "fröhlich" means "happy." But somewhere—for I never attended a rally of Fritz Kuhn's "Bund" or, for that matter, ever met a German or German-American in those days who openly harbored Nazi sympathies—I had learned the "Horst Wessel Lied," the battle song of the SA, the storm troops of the Nazi party. Horst Wessel was a young Nazi thug, a platoon leader in the SA, who was killed in 1932 in a street brawl in Berlin, allegedly by Communists. It is just as likely that he was killed by his competition in pimping. The "Horst Wessel Lied" was nevertheless a rousing song; set to the tune of an old German student ditty it ran:

The banner high, the unit in close order,
The SA marches with quiet, solemn tread;
With comrades killed by Red Front and reaction
We march in spirit with the honored dead.

One Saturday afternoon—that is, in the quiet time of the Jewish Sabbath—I was sweeping the floor of the refectory. Without realizing it I was singing the "Horst Wessel Lied"—I hope not at the top of my voice, for I was a basso in the college chapel choir. The door burst open and in rushed Rabbi Anselm of the faculty. Rabbi Anselm was a little, kindly old scholar whose chief joy in life was singing at the meals taken on the Sabbath. He took me by the arm. "Do you know what you are singing?" he asked. Then he sat down with me at the nearest table and lectured me for a full hour on the fate of the Jews in Germany. In that hour he gave me the only motivation I ever had for going to war against the Germans.

There is a Jewish joke that serves as a good introduction to the mystery of the shabbas goy. Two Jews meet on a train in Eastern Europe. "Where are you from?" the one asks the other. "From Czernowitz." "Is that a big town?" "Oh, about five hundred souls," is the answer. "How many goyim?" "Well, let's see, there's the gendarme, the gendarme's wife and two children—that makes four goyim; where are you from?" "I'm from New York." "Is that a big town?" "Big? It's an enormous town!" "How many Jews?" "Oh, about two million!" "Two million Jews! And how many goyim?" "About seven million." "Seven million goyim!" "That's right." "But what for?"

A shabbas goy (literally "Sabbath gentile") is a gentile ser-