

# AUF WIEDERSEHEN MÜNCHEN

By Max Neiman

## I

*Unable to resist, I sink through my bed and crash onto the floor and continue into the earth below. Sounding like a giant drum, my heart pounds as I descend. I can see the disappearing light through a slowly closing opening above.*

*Please don't take me. Please give me another day. Please, oh please, oh please. I cannot breathe. There is nothing left but the terror and the prospect of the darkest of all darkness.*

*Suddenly a glass frame is in front of me. An image fades in of a big white horse, and as the dust spreads out in a cloud behind it, the horse comes closer and its rider becomes visible.*

*He stops the animal, and the silver ornaments that adorn the horse's body jingle and shimmer and then explode in light as the dust dissipates and the high-noon sun beats down on the earth. A hot whiteness causes the arid landscape to shimmer. The horse snorts and throws its head about and then rears on its powerful hind legs and reaches for the heavens with long, elegant forelegs. A sudden stream of cool air calms me, and the flashing, white-hot landscape gives way to pink and tan rock. All around the earth is garnished with bright green*

*desert plants.*

*The rider settles down his horse and dismounts, walking slowly away from his stallion, which stays proudly behind. As the rider comes closer, a bit of his dazzling white hair stands out, accentuated beneath a towering black, cowboy hat. A thin, black leather strap comes down from the hat's brim, dropping along the rider's smooth, high-boned cheeks, and comes together in a small, tight knot below his strong, chin. Gleaming white, ivory-handled guns stick out from two holsters, and a soft jingling rhythm is heard with each of his steps. The black-clad cowboy moves toward me like a bandana-draped god adorned in leather and silver until all I can see is his face and his determination. "Don't worry, son," he says, "Don't worry, don't worry, don't worry".*

## II

I wipe my face and notice the time. It's nearly two a.m. I hear the trilling of birds and their insect prey outside. I open the door to our home to look at the night. It is so warm that everything in the air seems to be held up by the heat that is still rising from the ground. The hot air brushes against me and fills my nostrils as it floats towards the palm trees just to the left of the walkway to my home's front door.

I hear kids next door, gathered at the streetlight just between our house and the neighbor's place. Their cars are parked, resting after cruising along the streets

of my city at the edge of the desert. I hear them peeling-out from somewhere in the vicinity on most weekend nights during the summer. The only time it really annoys me is if the noise doesn't stop or some damn fool deposits fast-food litter and beer or liquor bottles on my lawn or out in the street.

Despite the hour and oblivious to how their racket is destroying the neighborhood's late-night tranquility, the young men and women laugh and exchange tall tales about some party to which they'd been. Together they work hard at making sure that any chance of sleep is washed away by a stream of hilarious exaggerations about sex and booze.

Man! I would love to be with them. Maybe that's the real reason they get on my nerves. I'm just jealous of their youth, the time they have, the fun and sweaty summer excitement of teen-aged irresponsibility in the SoCal mountains, beaches, and sun.

Car doors thump and engines roar as the night's young speed off to their next rendezvous. Their noise recedes as they dart out of the neighborhood. It strikes me as funny and even reassuring that the current crop of youth conjure up the same wished-for stuff I did when I was in my mid-teens, when I listened to juke box songs in my dad's joint back in Germany in the late 1950s.

A song in the juke box – oh yeah, now it comes again, that song, Patsy Cline's best juke box song –

*Crazy, I'm crazy for feeling so lonely  
I'm crazy, crazy for feeling so blue  
I knew you'd love me as long as you wanted  
And then someday you'd leave me for somebody new*

*Worry, why do I let myself worry?  
Wondering what in the world did I do?  
Crazy for thinking that my love could hold you  
I'm crazy for trying and crazy for crying  
And I'm crazy for loving you .*

I want to call Benno and tell him about my memory, since he was the owner of the place where I heard that song. He was the one who let me use the bar and restaurant as my personal sometime-playground with my buddies, to play poker, to even have parties. Oh man, did I ever impress my high school buddies! They got to play the jukebox for free and some of the barmaids would join in and dance with us. Older women – *experienced*, older women. Experienced, sexy women, who pushed up against your chest while slow dancing, who instantly agitated the boys' hormones, susceptible, as they all were at that age to endless excitement. I really impressed those guys, and I needed all the help I could get, because at first, when I got to town, I just wasn't all that popular.

Benno was dead. He died on a day early one January years ago. How long

was it going to be before I stopped wanting to call him about something that I know he would have wanted to hear about?

Mom died nearly twenty years before my dad, who had remarried and was living in Florida. I always called him up about something new or cool in my life -- anything that could be passed off as good or interesting news. I really wasn't bragging or trying to make more of my little accomplishments or those of my family. It's just that Benno's life was very tiny in the past few decades, having centered entirely on his family, making a living, surviving and getting over his Breyna's death. He just liked hearing from me, and hearing about the kids and talking about politics. He really loved hearing about "the boys", my sons.

*Hey, Pop, Josh is going to Northern Ireland to play in some international soccer tournament. . . . Yeah, I know that there are nothing but Catholics and Protestants over there, so what's your point? They're throwing bombs at each other and shooting at each other? Well, don't worry about it pop, just imagine that he's in Jerusalem with the Israelis and the Palestinians. Ok, ok, I know it's not funny, but Josh is going to be ok. David's finished another movie script. Nope, hasn't sold that one either, but you know that he's going to make it some day and get us all a big beach house in Malibu. So are you ok? The legs are ok? Man, that is good news! Don't forget to catch the Cubs game and tell Paula hi and Sarah sends her love. I'll come to*

*Florida in a couple of weeks after my Thursday class and stay through Monday, ok Pop? Make sure you have popcorn in the house, right? See you then.*

No more. Not going to see Benno any more. I should have gone to see him and be with him a lot more. Never going to see Benno any more.

### III

Benno is preparing for sleep in our Munich apartment during a winter, just a few years after World War II. My parents' bed has large, covers, filled with feathers. My father playfully throws me into the bed with his command, "Warm up the covers!" To comply with these marching orders, I slip completely underneath the billowy material, allowing the heat of my expelled breath to warm the spaces below. I can even now feel the seemingly damp, chilly covers as I land on them after being hurled there by my father. In mock panic and desperation, I scurry beneath the soft coldness, move my legs frenziedly to hurry the thermal magic of friction and discharge my warming duties in the bed of my parents. Once in a while, I wake in the middle of the night, realizing that I am asleep in my parents' bed, nestling there in the warmth between them. Munich. Cold beds. Cold and Winter. Winter and Christmas. Christmas, Christians, Christians and Catholics, Catholics and Nuns, Nuns and St. Boniface, St. Boniface and kindergarten, and Santa Claus.

At the time, my parents owned a restaurant, and running the place kept them very busy for most of the day's twenty-four hours. In the space of a couple of years after World War II, my parents had, at various times, already owned a grocery store, a butcher shop, and then the restaurant, somewhere on Möhlstrasse in Munich. I was a bit on the mischievous side - actually I was damned mischievous - and my parents had only half an eye on me. So I had lots of opportunity to produce my own Munich crime wave. It's not that I required red-alert vigilance by the city's security forces, but the pets, windows, food, toys, and other children of my neighborhood did suffer the ravages of Max Neiman, Five-Year-Old Bavarian Marauder.

One of the chunkier, blond-haired *Junge* of the area was the object of particular attention from me. After once calling me "shitty Jew", whenever I saw him I would try to grab from his head as much hair as I could. As an additional feature of my assaults, I would twist his ears and bite his fingers as he fought to loosen my grip around his little skull. I do recall destroying his scooter, breaking it into some pieces against the wall of his home. His parents loudly and often complained to my father. "*Ihr Sohn ist gefährlich und wenn Sie nichts unternehmen, um ihn zu kontrollieren, rufen wir die Polizei* – Your son is dangerous and if you don't do something to control him, we will call the police," they would warn. My father would cluck sympathetically and assure them he

understood what a crazy kid I was and that they should only know what a burden and horror I was at home and how fortunate they were to have such a beautiful, golden child and that when he found me he would try once again to punish and civilize me. He would then give them some money for a new scooter or for whatever other damage I inflicted on our Munich neighbors. As for punishing me, Benno would “talk” to me and then buy me some ice cream or another treat.

Anyway, my parents' business preoccupied them, and they could not supervise me in the way responsible parents are supposed to, especially since there was a lot of evidence that I was expressing outlaw tendencies. Keeping me at their restaurant was not desirable, because the clientele was raucous and belligerent. I remember the loudness of the restaurant and the boisterous crowd that gathered there on the weekends, with drunken men and women passionately kissing and caressing one another and standing and singing and dancing on the tables. I remember the blue haze that issued from all the unfiltered cigarettes and the smell coming from the food and the curious scent that resulted from the miasma of cheap cognac, *Eierlikör*, whiskey, wine, and beer.

The smells, the noise, and the smoke – any one of those can produce clear images and echoes of people talking Yiddish, laughing, and shouting, cursing in Polish, Russian, Hungarian, German, and Slovak, and the sounds of melodies from the musicians who would sit among the evening crowd playing their accordions,

clarinets, violins, and zithers. The Harry Lyme Theme from the classic film, “The Third Man,” was often played by musicians in the restaurant – Da-da dee-da-dum, da-dum, da-da dee-da-dum da-dum, da-da de-da dum-da-dum, dum . . . . dum.

So, even if I had been a more obedient son, I suspect the general tempestuousness of my neighborhood had inclined my parents to place me in a more secure, civilized environment. To accomplish this objective, Benno and Breyna picked the Catholic kindergarten at Munich’s St. Boniface Church to nurture and monitor me and, hopefully, civilize me.

The kindergarten was run by nuns. I was the only Jew there. The nuns were very nice and tender. At lunches, they dished out warm, hearty, tasty soups, eaten with bread and large spoons, followed by long naps in the afternoon on small platform beds. There was a garden where the children spent much of the time looking for slugs and snails and frogs. The nuns respected my Jewishness, and as a consequence they would leave me alone when the rest of the children went to church for prayers. Whenever a matter of religious practice was involved, I would be put in the playroom or sent to the garden to wait for the little Catholics-in-training.

Although I haven't bothered to pin down the details of the folklore surrounding this, evidently in Bavaria, perhaps in all of Germany, as part of the Christmas season celebrations, children are told that there are two Santa Clauses.

One Santa Claus comes to punish, torment, even kidnap, "bad" children. This "evil" Santa Claus, *Krampus*, was supposed to be easy to spot, since he was alleged to have a frightening, devilish face, perhaps even a tail, and did his job of rounding up guilty children while dressed in dirty clothes, covered in soot. Instead of toting a bag of toys, this vengeful Santa Claus carried around a raggedy bag of presumably bad children. To dramatize this, the bag often would have what appeared to be the legs of children hanging over the top of the bag. Of course they were doll legs, but it was all very appropriately grim, terrifying, and, dare we say it today, German.

The other Santa Claus, the good one, was the conventional, gift-dispensing, jolly fellow whom we all know, with a cottony, white beard, dressed in bright red and white. Well the sisters of St. Boniface had decorated a *Tannenbaum*, a Christmas tree, with little presents for the kindergarten children. On the day of Christmas Eve, my little colleagues went off to do some religious business. True to the drill, I was relegated to the playroom to await the return of the Christians. I must have decided that since Christmas was not a Jewish event that I would not be participating, as was the case during other Christian events. I guess I believed that I would not receive a gift from the tree. I took advantage of the absence of the Christians and went to the Christmas Tree, carefully slipping off a toy from one of its branches and slipping it down my underwear. I then faked taking a nap,

executing a convincing, bear-like yawn and stretching and dramatizing a phony awakening upon the return of the other children and nuns.

It became clear at some point to the nuns that one present was missing. They summoned the entire kindergarten population to the center of the playroom. It was gravely reported that a toy from the Christmas Tree was missing, and that if any of the children had it, the guilty party should immediately go to the tree and hang it up there again. Naturally, I was not disposed to confess. It was, after all, Christmas not Yom Kippur.

As the moments passed with no return of the missing present, the nuns announced that before we went home, we would be visited by the Evil Santa Claus, *Krampus*, who might even take away the child who had sinned, after stuffing him into his bag. Only by returning the present to the Christmas Tree could this be avoided, the gathered throng of terrified kindergartners were warned.

Sure enough, in the hour before the parents were to take home their children, the lights in the main room were dimmed and a dark, threatening visage entered, declaring in what seemed like a booming voice, "*Das Kind das das Spielzeug gestohlen hat, muss es zurückgeben* –The child who has stolen must return the toy!" Even before this was intoned, I had, in terror, been fumbling frantically in the dark to loosen my pants and grasp the toy from inside my underwear. I finally got hold of it and, in the gloom, heaved the toy in the direction of the tree. A

moment or two passed, and some figures stooped around the Christmas Tree. The Santa-Claus-From-Hell then announced, "*Hier gibt es keine bösen Kinder* –There are no evil children here," as he seemed to slip from the room.

After a short wait, the lights were turned on and standing by the Christmas tree was the good Santa Clause and one of the sisters of St. Boniface. They began to call off the names of the children and hand them a toy as they went into the hall to be picked up by their parents. I was the last to be called, and I went to the Christmas tree. The sister standing there looked down at me. She took my face in her hands and gently rubbed my cheeks. I remember her very sweet, kind face saying to me "*Lieber Maxie, das ist für dich* – dear Maxie, this is for you." It was, of course, the toy that I had stolen and, under duress, returned. As I left the kindergarten with my mother, clutching my present, I thought, "It's a good thing I stole that toy, or I would never have gotten it for a present". A boy of five with sticky fingers does not always catch on quickly.

#### IV

Sometimes not getting it wasn't my fault. My parents always left me out of the loop when it came to decisions. The more important the matter was, the less I was going to hear about it. The imminent leaving from Germany was pretty important, so I'm certain I had no inkling of what was going on. I do remember my father, who as it turned out was not going along with me and my mother to the

United States, asking me what toy I wanted more than any other. I clearly remember asking for a toy tank. The tank remains very vivid. It was a wind-up, metal tank that spewed sparks from its turret as it went along. I remember having it with me for several days and playing with it ceaselessly, carrying out imaginary assaults throughout our apartment until it disappeared among the things being packed away for the trip to the United States.

On a dark, wet day in December 1951, my mother and I left Munich for Bremerhaven, the port city from which we would sail to the United States. The train station was chilled, dim, filled with greyish light and billowing steam, and decorated with steel and stone. The station reverberated with the clanking from huge steam engines. I sat on some suitcases, somewhat perplexed, since this was about the first time that I realized we were leaving in some long term way. But why? And to where?

My German nanny, *Tante Zölfel*, was there as well as my father. My father shook as he hugged me, and I noticed the tears on his contorted face as he struggled to keep from sobbing. I was scared, and I began to cry. My father had always been to me a big, strong pal. He was Benno the partygoer, and he enjoyed having a good time. I remember the times I helped my greatly annoyed mother remove my father's clothes when, on occasion, he drank too much and stank like the rags used to wipe off bar counters, and collapsed on the bed. He used to sneak

off to the movies with me, buy me toys, and make whistles from tree branches and play with me in the *Alter Botanischer Garten* not far from *Königsplatz*.

I used to love to smell the coffee and shaving cream and after-shave lotion as Benno prepared to leave for work in the morning. He let me rub his just-shaved cheek to detect whether he had missed a spot or gotten a close-enough shave. Momma Breyna liked his cheeks to be smooth. Sometimes he lightly slapped some of the after-shave lotion on my face too. He shaved each day and he dressed like a movie star.

Many years later, Benno once told me, after I had snapped at him for bugging me to be neater and cleaner and spiffier, that he couldn't ever get the stench of death and filth out of his skin and nose. Because he was soiled and unclean for so much of the war years, he told me, he just had to try to look clean and healthy each day. For him to look good, to be clean, to look successful was to forget his years of living in the alleys, living on waste and garbage, running food to others who were hiding from the killers. Looking good was a way to tell the murderers and monsters that were after him and who tormented him and who dragged him through the ghastly muck of the concentration camp that he survived and was living large.

When I was a little boy in Munich, Benno always left me a little of his coffee in the morning, which I liked because he liked it. My father was hardly ever

cross with me and he spent lots of time hugging me and defending me for all of the rotten things for which I should have been punished. My father was my genie; I asked of him and I received from him. But now he was crying, and it scared me.

My parents and I stood at the side of the train leaving Munich, each of us tightly in one another's embrace, letting go only after repeated last warnings to board the train. It was cold, damp, and frightening. My mother and I boarded the train. As it began to leave the station I ran through the cars sobbing and screaming for Benno, my father. I ran to the last car to see if I could locate him outside among the crowd of people bidding farewell to the passengers. And there he was, at the side of the track waving at me. He could see me, and I could see the stream of tears on his face. I felt as if I would never see him again, and my mother's reassurances meant nothing. Sobbing inconsolably and beating repeatedly on the window, I watched my genie disappearing into the funnel of distance. And as my father waved good-bye, again and again and again, he suddenly was no longer there. I heard the rhythmic sound of the train's wheels moving along the tracks. It seemed as though I heard a voice sighing the words -- I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry. I'm sorry.

## V

I stared through the window for a very long time and finally fell asleep, waking as the train pulled into the station at the seaport of Bremerhaven twelve

hours later. Two weeks later, my mother and I boarded a U.S. troopship and after a very rough, winter trek across the North Atlantic eventually found ourselves walking along the streets of row-houses in Philadelphia on a gray, January evening. The Hebrew Immigration Aid Society, a long-standing organization whose purpose it was to find housing and jobs for newly arrived Jewish immigrants, directed us to that city and to a particular address, 2220 Natrona Street, within the neighborhood called Strawberry Mansion, not far from Fairmount Park and where 33rd Street and Ridge Avenue converged. It was one of those typical late 19<sup>th</sup> century-built eastern, big city neighborhoods, marked by red brick row houses, with steep landings and steps leading to porches.

We knocked on the door and a very fat woman, the landlady, came to the door and the warmth of the inside of her apartment reached out to us and we were shoed inside. She had been expecting us and had prepared some cookies and warm drinks. I sat down in front of a flickering television, something I had never before seen. The big, round landlady come over to switch the stations until she found something she thought a young boy might like and then returned to talk to my mother.

I stared at that small screen, contained in a large, wooden console. Before the screen was situated a kind of magnifying glass on a stand, which was used to enlarge the image being broadcast from a small television screen. On the screen,

and enlarged by the viewing glass, there appeared a cowboy in black clothes, trimmed in white and silver, atop his glorious white, dappled horse with a spectacular mane, rearing on its hind legs. He suddenly pulled off his hat and waved it and let it fall behind his neck by the leather cord that ran through its brim. He lifted his shiny revolvers from his holsters and held them in the air. The announcer then bellowed as I heard so many times thereafter, "Welcome to the Hopalong Cassidy Show!" And as I watched and ate my cookies, Hopalong enveloped a little Jewish-Bavarian boy in his hero magic, reassuring me that I was safe, and I believe he promised me that he'd always be there to rescue me.

And you might not believe me, but I recall Hopalong coming to me that night while I was in bed and he said to me, "Auf wiedersehen München!" "Goodbye Munich!" Hoppy often rescued me in bunches of slumber-land scrapes. I knew when I woke up sometime that first night in America that I had come home, that this was now my home, and that some day everything would be fine. In fact, within a few days my mother bought me a holster with toy pistol and cowboy hat, and we had a picture taken of ourselves, in which I was still in my Bavarian sweater with my new pistol out, and my buckaroo hat proudly atop my grinning face. My mother sent a copy of that picture to my father in Germany. I still have that picture. It rests next to my bed, so that Breyna and Maxie the Cowboy can watch over me.

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