

FOOTSTEPS | GERMANY

Isherwood's Seductive Berlin



Christopher Isherwood

The writer was drawn to the freewheeling spirit of “the most decadent city in Europe” in the early 1930s, soon to be extinguished by the Nazis.

By RACHEL B. DOYLE

When Christopher Isherwood moved to Berlin in 1929, the 25-year-old British novelist could not quite bring himself to settle down in one place.

At one point he changed addresses three times in three months. There was the room he could barely afford next to the former Institute for Sexual Research in leafy Tiergarten park. There was the cramped, leaky attic flat that he shared with a family of five in Kreuzberg. And there was the apartment around Kottbusser Tor, in those days a slum (now a night-life hub), where he was pleased to discover that he was the sole Englishman when he went to register with the police.

“He liked to imagine himself as one of those mysterious wanderers who penetrate the depths of a foreign land, disguise themselves in the dress and customs of its natives and die in unknown graves, envied by their stay-at-home compatriots,” Isherwood wrote of this period in “Christopher and His Kind,” his third-person memoir of the 1930s.

Isherwood would not feel out of place in Berlin today, which is still a destination for the young and the creative. While fashions may have changed, Isherwood’s work still captures the essence of the German capital, with its art collections stashed in former bunkers, and louche nightclubs hiding behind unmarked doors.

The seductive excitement of Weimar-era Berlin — with its limitless sexual possibilities for the curious gay writer and parties where dancers “swayed in partial-paralytic rhythms under a huge sunshade suspended from the ceiling” — quickly inspired Isherwood. He steeped himself in the sordid and the refined, the red-light bars and the villas, the decadence and the apprehension of a city whose freewheeling spirit was about to be extinguished by Nazi terror. “Here was the seething brew of history in the making,” the author wrote in his memoir.

In December 1930, Isherwood finally settled into an apartment, at Nollendorfstrasse 17 in the Schöneberg district. The building was full of eccentrics who are now known through their fictional incarnations in novels like “The Last of Mr. Norris” (1935) and “Goodbye to Berlin” (1939). He lived there with Jean Ross, the model for his most famous character, the capricious nightclub singer and aspiring actress Sally Bowles, who captivated him with her “air of not caring a curse what people thought of her.” His landlady, Meta Thurauf, inspired the character of Fräulein Schroeder, who, in Isherwood’s fiction, symbolized the typical Berliner of the time. In dire economic straits after World War I, and forced to take in lodgers, she was at first skeptical of Hitler. Eventually she adapted to popular sentiment, in which locals “thrilled with a furtive, sensual pleasure, like school-boys, because the Jews, their business rivals, and the Marxists ... had been satisfactorily found guilty of the defeat and the inflation, and were going to catch it.”

The street Isherwood called home for two and a half years was bombed during World War II, and now the stately prewar buildings — including the one where he



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lived, with its pale yellow facade mounted with concrete lion heads — are mixed with uninspiring modern constructions. A fetish fashion workshop and a rare-book store share the ground floor of his former building; across the street, visitors can choose between a kabbalah center and a speak-easy-style cocktail bar, Stagger Lee, where one rings a brass doorbell to enter. Around the corner there is a six-month-old 1920s-themed cafe with musical performances named after Sally Bowles.

Still, Nollendorfstrasse doesn’t seem all that different from how the author described it in the opening lines of “Goodbye to Berlin”: “From my window, the deep solemn massive street. Cellar-shops where the lamps burn all day, under the shadow of top-heavy balconied facades, dirty plaster frontages embossed with scroll-work and heraldic devices.”

The neighborhood, in the days when Isherwood was giving English lessons and writing wry, detached stories in a front room of his apartment, was a thriving center of gay life, and remains so. Today it is not uncommon to see men in leather pants or shiny rubber boots or police costumes strolling around — there are numerous shops selling just these items, and a handful of clubs where one is not allowed in unless one is clad in them.

Isherwood immersed himself in the area’s night life; it provided fodder for the novel “Goodbye to Berlin,” which was adapted into the 1966 musical and 1972 film “Cabaret.” His apartment was a short distance from several iconic clubs, including the Eldorado, known for its transvestite shows. There, customers could buy tokens to exchange for dances with men and women in drag, then try to guess their partners’ gender. Masks were available for those who wished to protect their identities.

“He probably saw Marlene here,” said Brendan Nash, a transplanted Londoner who gives “Isherwood’s Neighborhood” tours. He was referring to Marlene Dietrich, the glamorous actress born and raised in the Schöneberg district. On a sunny summer morning we were standing in front of an organic supermarket on Motzstrasse 24, where a sign read “Speisekam-



mer im Eldorado” (“Pantry in the Eldorado”), acknowledging that the room where transvestite performers once shimmied on stage is currently dedicated to vegetables.

We went inside to inspect a small photo gallery next to the cash register that showed how the nightclub used to look — a two-story space with gilded ceilings, chandeliers, white tablecloths and art on the walls. Mr. Nash, who began giving the tour in 2011, said it was considered chic in Weimar-era heterosexual society to spend the evening there, just as tourists today line up to dance with the shirtless leather daddies at the techno temple Berghain in Friedrichshain.

In “Christopher and His Kind,” Isherwood drolly described Berlin’s “dens of pseudo-vice”: “Here, screaming boys in drag and monocled, Eton-cropped girls in dinner-jackets play-acted the high jinks of Sodom and Gomorrah, horrifying the onlookers and reassuring them that Berlin was still the most decadent city in Europe.”

Many of the author’s main sources of inspiration were the seedy “boy bars” that he frequented in a canalside area of Kreuzberg, especially one called the Cosy Corner, on Zossener Strasse 7, which became a model for the Alexander Casino in “Goodbye to Berlin.” Today, that address is

next to a small piano shop and close to charming businesses like Knopf Paul, which sells buttons, including ones made from eucalyptus and deer horn, and a pharmacy called Zum Goldenen Einhorn (To the Golden Unicorn) with wooden cabinets and porcelain jars.

Yet in Isherwood’s fiction, the area was a notorious place where the police regularly hunted for “wanted criminals or escaped reformatory boys.” Thrill-seeking visitors flocked there on weekends. “They discussed communism and Van Gogh and the best restaurants. Some of them seemed a little scared: perhaps they expected to be knifed in this den of thieves,” the author wrote.

Isherwood’s genius was in fusing the private, often outré lives of the Berliners, with the political events unfurling like a blood-red banner. The brownshirts carrying the swastika flag put an end to much of the scene that defined his time in the city and hastened his departure.

“Boy bars of every sort were being raided, now, and many were shut down. . . . No doubt the prudent ones were scared and lying low, while the silly ones fluttered around town exclaiming how sexy the Storm Troopers looked in their uniforms,” Isherwood wrote in “Christopher & His Kind.”

In May of 1933 the author left Berlin for a peripatetic existence traveling around Europe for several years with his draft-evading German boyfriend, Heinz Neddermeyer. He returned to visit in 1952 between the war and the Wall, finding “smashed buildings along that familiar street” — Nollendorfstrasse — and “house-fronts . . . pitted by bomb fragments and eaten by decay.” He never saw the city restored to the familiar, welcoming and inspiring place he would likely find it today.

Isherwood settled in Southern California in 1939, but remained both exhilarated and haunted by his time in the German capital. “Always in the background was Berlin. It was calling me every night, and its voice was the harsh sexy voice of the gramophone records,” he wrote in the 1962 novel, “Down There on a Visit.” “Berlin had affected me like a party at the end of which I didn’t want to go home.”

Top, the convivial scene at Heile Welt (Perfect World), a bar on Motzstrasse 5 in Schöneberg, near where Christopher Isherwood lived from 1930 to 1933. Above, an advertisement, left, for the Gear store on Kalkreuthstrasse, one of the fetish shops nearby. The area is still the thriving center of gay life that it was in Isherwood’s day.

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