

Second Place NonFiction

## Heil Greta

by Lew Knickerbocker

We arrived in Hitler's Berlin on June 24, 1938. Father was representing the New York Evening Post as their German correspondent. The city was beautiful. It was the first warm day of summer. Mother Nature, Father Frost and Little Mary Sunshine do not select political parties. The Third Reich was festooned with red, white and black flags flying, banners spanning the building fronts, and everyone in ornate uniforms, even the streetcar conductors.

None of the foreign places I've been since – Paris, Tehran, St. Petersburg, Moscow, Saigon, Bangkok, or Rome – has excited me as much. If a movie had been made of our stay in Berlin, the background score could have been pinched directly from Richard Rogers' "Victory At Sea." His orchestral score contains pieces that are sweet, some that are somber, and others that are heroic. It exactly describes our Berlin experience.

Our family settled into a three-bedroom apartment about one-half block off Berlin's main thoroughfare, Unter den Linden. My parents had one bedroom, my grandmother who I called Gah and I shared the second, and the third went to Greta, our devoted housekeeper, cook, nanny, and translator.

Greta was an émigré from the old Prussian province of Silesia. For more than a thousand years, the Poles and Germans lived peacefully side by side. Then, after World War I, the Treaty of Versailles gave Silesia to the resurrected country of Poland. The Poles promptly drove out the German families, and many ended up as refugees in Berlin.

While Father fell right into German, Mother was unable to make head or tail of the language. It was with Greta that I started to learn the German spoken in Berlin, a variant of German with hard consonants. Berlinish was harsh, but contained charm, something like a growling dog with a wagging tail. In many ways it was nothing more than globs of sound.

Linguistically, Gah simply stood her ground, insisting everyone should know how to speak English. As far as she was concerned, the Germanic refusal to speak English was pure cussedness. Not only that, the Nazi anti-cosmetic drive, a reaction to the excesses of the Weimar Republic during the

Twenties, annoyed her greatly. "A lady needs a little rouge to look her best," she would say. "Just because they want to look like ghosts, doesn't mean that I have to."

The first time Greta gave me a bath, she looked at me with horror, asking "Did that hurt?" I had no idea what she meant until I saw her staring at my penis. "Did it hurt when they cut off the end of your wee-wee nose?" she asked.

It looked the same as always to me. I said, "No. Nobody hurt it."

Greta answered in a harsh tone, "Are you a Jew?" Having no idea what a Jew was, I shook my head. Then she said, "Well, what are you?"

Now that's a question philosophers have debated for centuries. How was I, a 4-year-old, to answer? "I guess I'm a boy."

The happiest times for me in Berlin were watching parades on Unter den Linden. Ignorant of the political situation, I loved the flags and banners, with people and bands marching up and down the street. The parades were full of energy. Everyone was chanting or singing or simply stomping along, telling the world they were Germans, and there was nothing better than being German.

With Greta clutching my hand, I marched along the sidewalk keeping pace with the parade. When the marchers raised a stiff right arm, and shouted, "Heil Hitler," we saluted along with them. Greta's salute was done with precision, and a look of ecstatic determination, whereas I liked to finish mine with a friendly wave.

While it was my greatest desire to be just like the people in the parades, I understood on some level that I was different. But I didn't know why I was different. One day, when all the marchers were giving the stiff-arm salute, it became clear to me why they could be Nazis, and I could not. All of them, men and women alike, had great hairy bushes under their arms. I realized that was what it took to be a Nazi, and I could never be one because my armpits were bare.

Hairless armpits or not, I still wanted to be like the model for the SS recruiting posters. Against the background of a swastika flag, and the word "Victory," they showed a tall young man with cropped blond hair, and a determined expression, staring into the future with steely blue eyes. I had the requisite blond hair, the determined look, and I could stare as well as anybody. The problem was that they didn't take 4-year olds.

Berlin, in addition to the thrilling parades, and people with body hair, had an amusement park attraction with miniature swastika-festooned airplanes where members of the Hitler Youth were “taught” to fly and dive-bomb. Having mastered marching and saluting, I yearned to learn to dive-bomb, too. Alas, it was not to be. One had to be much older – at least 6. While I was pouting, Czechoslovakia disappeared.

In Berlin, each day started with a hearty breakfast. Greta always fussed, and delivered long monologues about the relative merits of German, French, and Polish sausages. In her mind, Polish were the worst of the lot. Convinced Greta knew everything, I soon absorbed her belief that anything German was the best in the world. Clearly, “Übermenschen” sausages were a cut above.

Later in the day, either Gah or Greta would take me outside. At five in the afternoon we would return to the apartment where I was fed a light supper, and shuffled off to bed. The next morning at breakfast, my parents expected me to present a detailed report on my activities of the previous day, and that would be the last I saw of Father and Mother until the following morning.

At breakfast one morning, my father said to my grandmother, “You’ll never believe this, but last night Hitler shook hands with your daughter. Even kissed her hand.” Gah was, of course, properly impressed. Father continued, “Well, it was a big affair. Everyone trooped past the Fuehrer, and he stared blankly when they gave Nazi salutes. But when Agnes got there, his eyes widened, and he asked, ‘Who are you?’ Poor Agnes didn’t know how to respond, not knowing what he said. She just smiled as he looked at her with those blue eyes. And, by the way, his eyes are quite hypnotic, just as everyone claims. Then he took her hand, and raised it to his lips. The aides nearly fainted, but, as soon as possible, they shoved us on down the receiving line.”

My mother spoke up. “He has wet clammy hands. I didn’t like him at all.”

Father replied, “Well, let’s hope your charm will cut some ice with Goebbels. He has chopped my last three stories to bits.”

Time passed, and it seemed Goebbels and my father had different views on what was newsworthy. The day came when our belongings were packed, and Mother, Father, Gah, and I were loaded onto a night train. Greta was left crying in Berlin. She wanted to come with us, but couldn’t leave the country. She disappeared into the mist forever. I was sure I was the last of the gentleman adventurers. The only thing I knew was that we were stopping in a place where people wore funny wooden shoes, and then we were going home, wherever that was.