

Translation samples

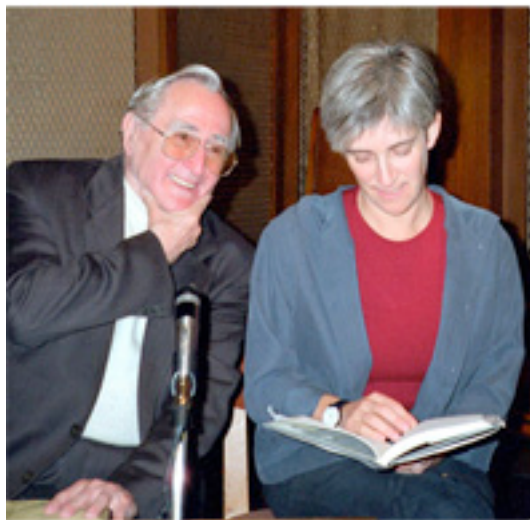
An Underground Life: Memoirs of a Gay Jew in Nazi Berlin, by Gad Beck, written with Frank Heibert, trans. by Allison Brown (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1999). With book review excerpts from Kirkus Reviews and The New York Times.

Reading sample, pp. 67–70:

It got increasingly quiet around those of us who were still left. And then it happened. Even when you expect a catastrophe, it always comes too soon. The Lewins got their lists. Just a few months before, they had repainted their apartment, probably painted right over the bugs; in any case it had badly needed a new coat. And now they were supposed to leave. When I heard the news, I wanted to see Manfred right away to arrange how he could get to Uncle Wobbi. But communication between us had gotten more difficult around that time, as I had just started checking out how much leeway I had at the potato job.

A few days later I spoke with Manfred's younger brother Rudi, who worked nights and had come to the early morning meeting of the remnants of our group right after his shift that day. He said to me, "Can you come by this evening? Manfred will be there." That was my chance. No new potato shipment was supposed to arrive that day.

When I got to Dragonerstrasse that evening, only Rudi and Schlomo were there. The rest of the Lewin family had been picked up early in the morning by the marshals. The night shift had spared the two brothers sitting before me from being taken as well. The two of them sat in the empty apartment, absolutely determined to report to the predeportation assembly camp on Grosse Hamburger Strasse the next morning. The camp had been set up in October 1942 to supplement the one on Levetzowstrasse, later replacing it entirely.



The Lewins had surely thought about their situation—at the very latest, once they received their lists. They didn't expect to be sent to an extermination camp. The mother, the youngest son, who suffered from asthma, the hunchbacked Rudi, and the little girl: All of them counted on the father—after all, there's always a demand for barbers, isn't there—and on the two strong sons, Manfred and Schlomo. The motto at the youth leadership had always been, "We're staying together!" And the same certainly applied for the Lewins. For me, in love and selfish as I was, this sentence had a different meaning: I did not want to be separated from Manfred.

The atmosphere within the Lewins' four empty walls was strangely mixed. I was in absolute despair, almost panic-stricken. The brothers were sad and anything but confident, though at the same time they were composed and



determined to hold on to the only certainty they had left: They would see their family the next day, and together they would face the events to come.

It was one of many goodbyes, and for me it was without a doubt the hardest of all. They were my last connection to Manfred, and even that would be lost all too soon. I screamed and cried, and they couldn't calm me down. I hardly even registered that they were there until Schlomo took me in his arms to comfort me. He started to cry too.

What happened then was not all that surprising; we made love. Maybe he had been envious at times of the happy moments Manfred had spent with me. Now he was facing an uncertain fate, and this was perhaps his last chance to experience closeness, unguarded and without danger. For me it was like a farewell from Manfred, a goodbye I never had a chance to say. Little Rudi snuggled up to us and sobbed. I don't know what he thought about the situation, if he understood it at all. The tragedy and the graveness of the moment aroused a desperate passion in Schlomo and me.

Early the next morning the two of them, unwavering, made their way to Grosse Hamburger Strasse. Everything was spinning around in my head; I was feverishly thinking of some way to save Manfred. Finally I thought I could try his boss, Lothar Hermann the painter. The authorities thought well of him, yet Manfred had told me he was a friendly man, typical Berlin working class, a small businessman, gruff but warmhearted, with a direct and rather uncomplicated disposition. I went to him without knowing exactly what I had in mind.

The business was located in an apartment on Gipsstrasse that had been refurbished to accommodate the paint and materials warehouse and a small office. It was still dark outside, but the teams of painters were already off to work. As I stood in front of Hermann, I took a deep breath and said, "I'm here to excuse Manfred Lewin. He was picked up yesterday." The man was moved, but not all that much. It wasn't anything new for him to "lose" workers in this way. "I would like to try to get him out," I said, cautiously groping for the right words. I thought maybe he would give me a letter saying that Manfred was indispensable or something like that. "Yeah, Manfred is a good boy," Hermann responded jovially, and I could see his mind clicking away.

"I have an idea," he said, scrutinizing me, "if you have the nerve." His eyes lit up. What did he mean? My mind was a blank; we could have waited forever for me to come up with any ideas. "I'll do anything," I answered.

"My son just went to work," he said, "His Hitler Youth uniform is hanging over there. It would fit you for sure; he's about as big as you. If you show up wearing it...."

Risky, but ingenious. I put on the uniform. It was at least four sizes too big, and the way it hung from my shoulders made me look like a scarecrow. As makeshift alterations I tucked the sleeves and legs up on the inside, hoping that it wouldn't be conspicuous. If I had been in the SS, I would've arrested someone looking like me on the spot. I couldn't have looked more suspicious.

It wasn't far to Grosse Hamburger Strasse. I shuffled along cautiously so the pant legs wouldn't slip down, and I tried out several variations of the story I was about to tell. The assembly camp was set up in two adjacent buildings, the former Jewish Old Age Home and my old school. As I walked through the entrance gate I calmed down completely. It wasn't a threatening place for me. One of the Jewish marshals stationed outside eyed me skeptically. Did he know me? Things were constantly going on there that weren't totally kosher. People kept coming up and wanting to know, Is my brother-in-law inside, Are the you-know-whos already gone, Could you take a note inside.... There was a lot of bribery, and the marshals often turned a blind eye to little things. But I was there as a Hitler Youth, and they didn't talk to Jewish marshals.

"Heil Hitler!" Not too abrupt; don't forget the sleeves. I marched inside. I said to the officer, "I would like to speak with the Obersturmbannführer, please." At least I knew the rank, even though I didn't know the name. The Obersturmbannführer came right away. The whole thing was amazingly smooth and businesslike. The assembly camp, why it was there, what happened inside—none of that was of any particular interest to this man, although people's fates were decided there every day. Normal procedure in carrying out a policy that had been in effect for a year already: Jews were evacuated to be sent to labor service, one after another. Everyone went along with it. No big deal.

And now a little Hitler Youth—I was nineteen at the time and small anyway—was standing there asking about one of the Jews that had been picked up. "The Jew Manfred Israel Lewin was brought here yesterday. He worked for us and is a saboteur! He has the keys to several of the apartments we are renovating. Materials have also been stored there. My father sent me to get him so we can get back to work!" Luckily, Herr Obersturmbannführer didn't ask any questions; of course Manfred didn't have any keys.

They got Manfred. When he saw me, his eyes twitched. I covered up any awkwardness by quickly saying, "You kept the keys! Now come with me and tell us exactly which key goes to which apartment, so we can get back to work!" My voice was calm, but sharp and clear. One sentence was pounding inside me: Get out of here fast; just get out of here with him fast!

The SS man had already started turning away. The case was closed for him. "But you'll bring him right back?!", he added. "What would I want with a Jew?" I answered. In this situation, at that time, a man like that was thinking neither of illegal Jews nor of the "final solution." The entire incident was not especially interesting to him. He laughed, and we left.

I walked out of my old school building onto the street. The buildings were familiar, the sidewalk, the streetlamps. I was back in my world, with my Manfred next to me. I was filled with a combination of triumph and security as we walked down the street together, past the former Old Age Home, past the entrance to the cemetery, with its couple of trees. Only a few minutes. I beamed at him, held out a twenty-mark bill—quite a bit for those times—and said quietly, "Here's some money. Now go to my uncle in Teltow like we discussed and wait for me. I'll come as soon as I can."

He stood there, took the twenty marks, and looked at me. "Gad, I can't go with you. My family needs me. If I abandon them now, I could never be free." No smile, no sadness. He had made his decision. We didn't even say goodbye. He turned around and went back. In those seconds, while I was gazing after him, I grew up.

Reviews of *An Underground Life: Memoirs of a Gay Jew in Nazi Berlin*:

From Kirkus Reviews, 1 August 1999:

"... Beck is a witty, chatty figure, and Heibert and Brown have done a splendid job of capturing and conveying his voice. The result is a readable and entertaining memoir of a terrible time."

From Books of the Times, New York Times, 6 December 1999, by Christopher Lehmann-Haupt:

"... Mr. Beck is far from a polished storyteller, and his prose, faithfully translated by Allison Brown into a contemporary vernacular, sometimes stumbles over itself. But his involvement in the traumatic events of his time is so intense and authentic that his narrative pulls you along."