

Greg Cohen
POB 630158
Lanai City, Hawaii 96763
gcacme@wave.hicv.net

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Saddle Shoes

We'd long been cast adrift in times when the sight of a smile was a strange, surprising event. So I was probably the only one who wasn't there to have a good time. I was surely the only one who believed we were all there to die. Three years earlier, even two, you wouldn't have found any of them squeezing into a stinking, dank, clammy basement. It was dream as it melts to nightmare: coarse, harsh surfaced walls brutally revealed by twin tiny naked suns, garish staggering from their frayed cords as the dancers whirled swiftly and unseeing inches below them.

To see so many smiles at one time was perhaps worth risking death...any of the many ways surrounding us then. Shot on the street or even in your own home at a whim. But I'd seen worse kinds of death too, heard of others whispered around the newspaper office. That was my second surprise. These people were *knowingly* risking everything and they didn't even have to wear the yellow star.

There was space in the center of the slightly weaving, bright-eyed human walls for only two couples to dance. They traded turns eagerly as children at a party game, mopping the happy sweat of exhilaration and dancing from their brows and

necks. Mine reeked a sourer scent.

The greatest irony was that my risk was for the sorry reason that I'm a snoop. For them, it was noble, like a religion...they loved what the music represented as much as the music itself. Even if no one would print the news I wrote, I was still a reporter. When I'd first heard about this group and their hidden purpose I couldn't believe it, had to see for myself. To witness such foolish courage.

What people have lost sight of fifty years after Hitler's war is that you didn't necessarily have to be Jewish to lose all you owned, and not in some blind natural disaster but to a countryman, smug in his legalized, profane possessiveness. Imagine being shocked awake by the blinding shatter of your shop windows. Or how difficult it is to sleep with the stream of clients into your office abruptly evaporating as steadily as the last few starkly visible grains of sand in an hourglass. I'd also heard of even worse things, packed train cars, gas chambers and only hinted-at experiments.

Just for disagreeing with the wrong people. Like everyone in that room. In between records, we spoke critically of the Fuhrer, in praise of the music, all in low breathless tones. Theirs vibrated with awe and homage, mine with fear. They heard the backbeat, I only the rhythmic stamp of phantom boots, shuddering with the one thing we all knew at the paper for certain: Germany was losing the war.

And for what? I wanted to shake each of them by their shoulders and shout it. "What good does your ruin do this Billy Goodman or Glenn Miller?" I didn't at first,

because I knew their answer would be the same as Fritz gave me on the way over with a condescending shrug of his shoulder. "It's *Benny...Benny Goodman*." adding only the cryptic, "Just wait 'til you hear this music. Then you'll understand."

Well, I'd heard the music...after sweating through over an hour of it beneath the unrelenting dread of imminent Gestapo raiding parties pounding down the stairs, I knew in my heart that it was good. One song, "Jumpin' At The Woodside", made you think the world hadn't gone to hell. For five minutes or so anyway. But was that worth losing everything?...your home, freedom, savings, your standing as a citizen, maybe even your life? Fritz had remarked that he'd *laughed* when he first heard the radio proclamation from Goebbels himself that all jazz music was verboten. He says he was a good German and still is. I said that for a year or so myself. Fritz somehow believes that they'll *want* to hear his explanation, that they'll say, "Oh...just listening to *music*?...well, show your patriotism by keeping the volume low.", just a slap on the hand. I knew better from Reich sources I still had through the paper and believed the one thing I had going for me was these dancer's passion. It was so absolute. Surely I could make them see that men like Goebbels were out for *absolute* power?

My fear gave way to purpose and instead of bolting for the door, I put the question to all of them. Helmut stared at me as if he were a father just realizing his boy was blind. Or deaf. "But...you heard the best we have, Artie Shaw, Berrigan, even...Basie! Doesn't this music make you feel alive?"

When I nodded yes, he leaned forward, licking his lips slightly.

"And who are they to deny us life?" He leaned back with a smug look on his face. The room was flooded with sad smiles and affirmative murmurs. I knew if they were patronizing me, I was beaten before I started.

There have been other losses in my life in the fifty-odd years since then, but that particular one coursed through me on powerful wings tonight. It was a warm evening, of course it almost always is here in Florida, and I'd been watching Bogart and Bergman on that foggy landing strip while savoring the light breeze in from the balcony. As the credits rolled, I went out to stargaze with a cigarette.

When I heard the strains of swing music I found myself drifting inside, slumping back down before the TV slowly, mesmerized, as the story I'd wanted to write so many years ago unfolded in a way I'd never imagined; survivors' interviews interspersed with grainy black and white film clips of jazz greats doing their stuff, goose-stepping troops, close-ups of Hitler and his staff, plus Lindy Hoppers and more moving in that fluid, syncopating release of motion and emotion I had sat inches from that night in a Berlin basement. The story even had a great headline: "Swing Under The Swastika".

I was disconcerted by all the black and white footage, when my memories of Berlin were drenched in cold, sharp colors, pierced throughout by the brassy taste of terror. I'd wanted to leave that city of my birth and life, but just as I'd tell myself I was ready to take the chance, I'd come around a corner onto the frighteningly

familiar scene of stern-faced men, eyes dark with control, herding families or just lone, badly-beaten, wolfish men out a door smashed off its' hinges. My fear at the prospect of arrest while fleeing the Fatherland would swallow up my resolution as swiftly as the Gestapo's prisoners vanished into long, black cars recalling the Black Marias of my childhood.

Ironically enough, I was the only one of those gathered in that Berlin basement to get out of the country, though it wasn't until the war was over. It took me three years of wandering Europe and then Canada before I landed in New York, fevered by idealistic visions of writing for the New York Times, but just like during the war, I didn't seem to have what it took to make my hopes become much more than that. Every editor that fired me from each successively smaller paper until I'd barely reached the golden refuge of retirement had said the same damn thing, "You get the facts, but there's no life in your stories."

Suddenly noticing a film clip of stylish American dancers and gracious, bobbing people clustered at tables around them, I was transported to the core of an image: Helmut's girlfriend. She'd worn black men's wingtips painted to look like American saddle shoes. Sitting raptly, her right foot had moved subtly but constantly, smartly staying with the beat. I'd marveled at how she'd braved wearing them in public over to the meeting.

I remember wondering how it would be to feel that alive. Fervent, laughing eyes, high color, shifting, catlike muscles in her calves and beneath her thin dress,

all accented by waves of jet hair. But my gaze kept dropping to her foot, which had a rhythmic life of it's own. I see them; Fritz, Helmut, Heidi and all the others in that way: delighted, unconcerned, purely and simply vital. I'm amazed at the clarity of the view from this vast, safe distance.

I was also the only one in that room to make it out of those years alive. They were all caught dancing and sweating in some other basement only a week later, not to be heard from again. Tonight, hearing that joyful music, seeing them, feeling them as if I was back in that room with them again, I realize I still hate them.