

Karl

from The Autobiography of Jacob Czernowitz

by [Jeffrey Burghauer](#) (October 2023)



A Married Couple, George Grosz, 1930

My grandfather, Karl Czernowitz (1909 – 2001), was born in the same year that Shackleton discovered the magnetic South Pole; he died just four months shy of September 11. He saw Soviet Communism's beginning and end. He was born one year after the Ford Model T hit the market; in the year before his death, GPS became available for automotive use.

Karl's generation was awkwardly situated. Too young for the Great War and too old for World War II, he was (I believe) painfully self-conscious about never having served. I deduce this from the number of military periodicals he subscribed to, the number of baseball caps in his closet embroidered with the puzzling heraldry of different battalions, and his membership in clubs with military associations.

(Incidentally, when he retired, he bought a home in Leisure Knoll, one of those chilling geriatric colonies. This one was across the street from the Naval Air Warfare Center, Aircraft Division, Lakehurst, where the Hindenburg exploded in 1937. It remains an open question as to where the greater cataclysm occurred: to the west of South Hope Chapel Road, where the mooring mast was located, or to the east of South Hope Chapel Road, where Karl's marriage was located. All I know is that I'm still feeling the aftermath of the latter.)

When his mind was at rest (which was often), he'd sing to himself the first stanza of a German folksong:

*Du, du liegst mir im Herzen
Du, du liegst mir im Sinn.*

*Du, du machst mir viel Schmerzen,
Weißt nicht wie gut ich dir bin.
Ja, ja, ja, ja, weißt nicht wie gut ich dir bin.*

Was he even aware that he was singing? Here he is, strolling down the street, loose-limbed in his white trousers, white leather loafers, white mane dancing languidly in the seaside breeze, minding his own business, and, before long...

Du, du...

Oddly, it never occurred to me to ask him what it meant, or how he'd learned it. But the singing was by no means confined to "*Du, du.*" Karl Czernowitz would very often lapse into a casual recitative, as if he occupied a transitional scene of an opera.

"Grandpa," you'd say. "Could you please pass the meatloaf?" [\[*\]](#)

And, while complying, he'd warble:

C	D	A#	A	F
<i>Pas-</i>	<i>-sing</i>	<i>the</i>	<i>meat-</i>	<i>-loaf</i>

I'm sure that this habit would, given current diagnostic orthodoxies, qualify him for some label or another; however, I remember it as being *perfectly* benign.

Karl was married to one Leah Weber, when he was 38, and she was fifteen. I didn't know about the Other Woman's existence until I was in my early 30s; I didn't know Leah's name, and I

certainly didn't know anything about the age gap, until I was preparing to write this piece. When I first learned that Karl had been married previously, I'd found it puzzling, since Lucille, my grandmother, was so spiteful, calculating, needy, self-involved and (all-around) detestable, that the idea that Karl could possibly have left anyone *for* Lucille ... it made a horrible rash form on the surface of my consciousness. Could Karl have attached himself to this gruesome harridan as a means of penance for some carnal excess with a schoolgirl?

If so, the penance was hard indeed, for Lucille would scream at Karl (and I do mean *scream*) all the livelong day. It was the malignant sound one might expect from a meth-addicted macaw raised in the kind of Yiddish tenement where the bathtub is in the kitchen.

(I wouldn't want to imply that Lucille Czernowitz was without admirable—or, at the very least, impressive—qualities. For instance, I've known many who could walk and fart at the same time; but, in my experience, only Lucille could do so without any discernable change either to the pace of the tread or to the timbre and articulation of the fart. She had the posture of a tyrannosaurus rex. What a gal.)

Karl must have attained something like Buddhist enlightenment, for no matter how badly he was abused by his evil wife, not only did he never respond by putting a blunt kitchen knife through her abdomen (which would have made perfect human—if not legal—sense), but he wasn't even unsettled by it. Truly, he'd achieved something that eludes most self-satisfied bourgeois bohemians, with their expensive yoga classes, meditation retreats, and organic diets.

Let's remember, though, that Stoicism is often of ambiguous merit. After all, the protagonist of Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener" is nothing if not a Stoic *par excellence*. He's also a lunatic, lacking (to a pathological degree) even the most rudimentary self-preservation instincts.

I recall one particular occasion when my mother, father, sister, brother, grandmother, and grandfather were going to the beach at Seaside Heights. This was the golden age of the station wagon, a type of car that looked like a huge, misshapen chocolate bar, with a storage area at the very rear that could unfold into a broad, backward-facing bench. All three of us kids found the bench magical—wouldn't you? Thankfully, we could all be accommodated on it.

So there we were, sailing down a highway lined with ratty pine trees in the sandy soil, mesmerized as each inch of conquered asphalt splayed out behind us, when—*whoosh!*—the collapsible beach chairs, which had been tied to the roof-rack, sailed with a rather shocking grace into our wake, landing in the middle of the road—a crowded, multi-lane affair where the 55-mile-per-hour speed limit was being politely acknowledged rather than obeyed.

We pulled over on the shoulder. Silence. Karl finally piped up:

“I'll just go get the chairs.”

“But they're in the middle of the highway,” my father, Lonnie, perspicaciously observed.

“Oh, that won't be a problem.”

“It will, Dad. You'll get killed.”

“They're good chairs.”

“No. They're not *good* chairs; they're *bad* chairs. But even *if* they were good chairs, I would not let you walk out into the middle of the highway.”

“It's not that busy.”

“It *is* busy, Dad! You will get killed. Don't you understand that, Dad? Dad: if you walk into the highway, you will get

killed!”

“Oh, I don’t think so.”

Lonnie’s face was reddening; Karl’s pulse wasn’t exceeding 75 beats per minute.

“I don’t think so at all,” Karl repeated, as if having given the matter some further thought. “No, I don’t think so at all. I’ll just walk out there.”

Lonnie’s gaskets were being sorely tested.

“Look at that truck,” he said, indicating one of many, “the one passing ... *there*. See it? Okay. Just behind it there’s another car. There’s another car to the left, and another car to the right. And everyone is going 65 miles per hour. Do you see that?”

“Certainly.”

“Okay. How could anyone try to walk *between* them, and not get killed? Right, Dad?” The distance between this and a shout was narrowing. “Because that’s where the chairs are: *in the middle of the road*.”

“I’ll just go get the chairs.”

Lucille had the preternatural ability to recognize the exact moment at which some good, old-fashioned, unrestrained screaming would produce the most edifying effect. She now commenced:

“Listen to Lonnie, you stupid idiot!”

“Mom, I have this under control.”

Lucille, to Lonnie: “He never listens!”—now, to Karl: “You never listen!”

“Mom, this is not helping.”

Lucille's hearing aid began to squeal.

"What?" she said.

"Mom, you need a new battery for your—"

"Du, du liegst mir im Herzen ..."

"Mom! I can't—"

The discussion was settled obliquely though (one must admit) decisively by an eighteen-wheeler, which ran over the chairs, reducing them to wisps of nylon webbing and pulverized flakes of aluminum tubing.

Karl Czernowitz had neither wit nor charm nor curiosity. For all the time we spent together, I don't think I ever had an actual conversation with him. Were I to have dropped dead, I can't imagine that he would have lost any sleep. I mean this quite literally.

But he radiated a certain something that neutralized all surrounding tensions. His presence was like spiritual Febreze.[\[†\]](#) Although I wouldn't want to be with Karl during the average emergency, I can't imagine a better companion for an emergency which nobody can do anything about. His marriage offered plenty of practice.

It's expecting rather a lot to wonder aloud why there aren't more saints around. I'd be perfectly happy settling for those who obey the Hippocratic admonition: "Do no harm." And, notwithstanding what he may or may not have done to a schoolgirl in the late 1940s, Karl Czernowitz was just such a man.

[\[*\]](#) Meatloaf was a staple of suburban American cuisine before the discovery was made that food could, theoretically, not

only taste good, but conduce to one's overall health and sense of wellbeing. This information didn't reach considerable swaths of the United States until the mid-1990s, and there remain (believe it or not) isolated corners of the American Midwest where the gospel still struggles to attain a foothold.

[†] Febreze was a sprayable odor eliminator that became available in 1996, at a unique historical juncture: when we were advanced enough to know that we were entitled to an easy chemical substitute for housework, but still primitive enough to be producing household stench (e.g. tobacco smoke) so unpleasant as to render urgent measures necessary.

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