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HELLO CARL —

WITHOUT YOU WE'D STILL BE DOWN  
ON SIDS ROW.

THANKS FOR YOUR KIND MAGIC.

YA,  
Hank



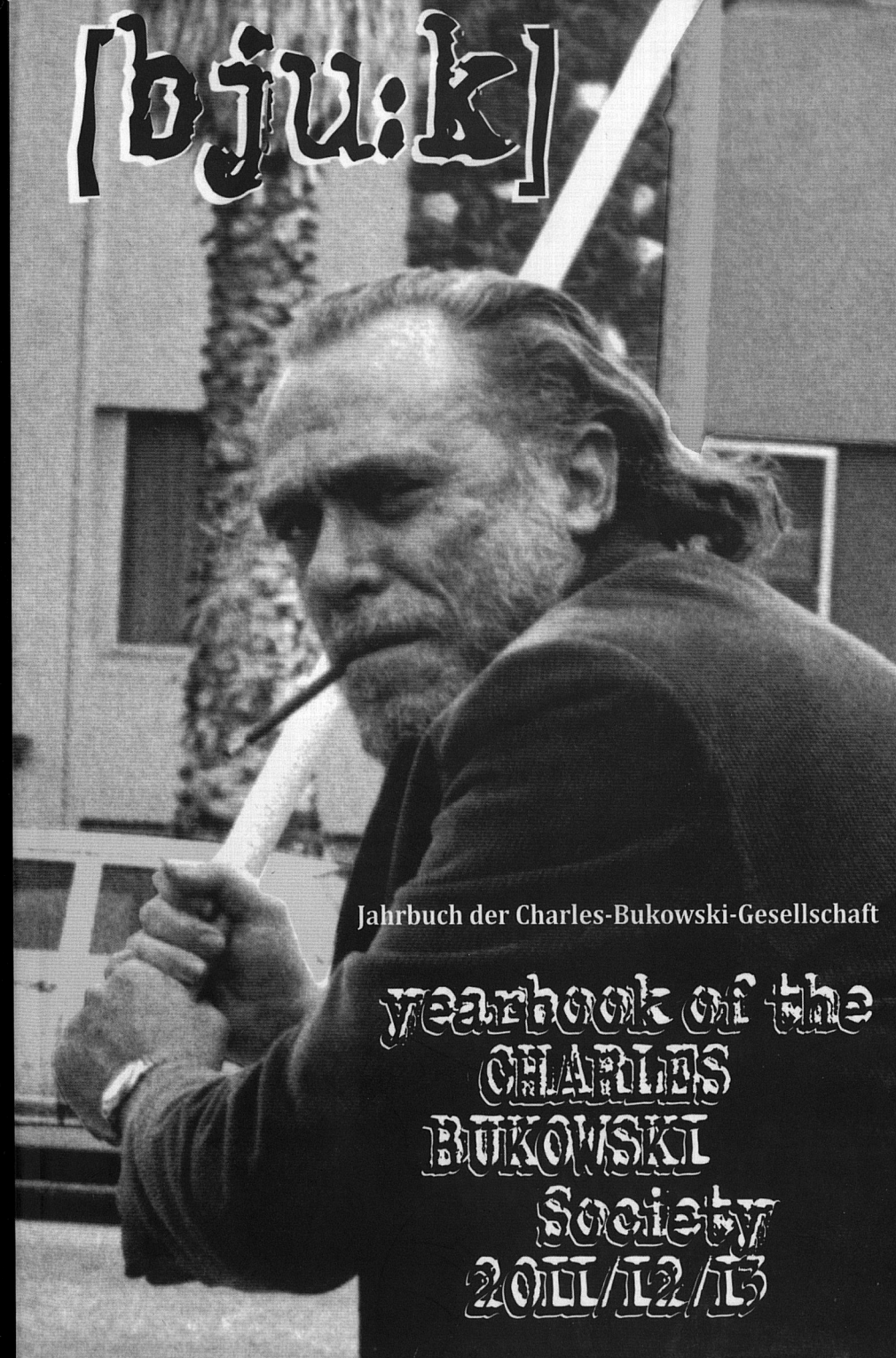
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gewidmet / dedicated to  
Carl Weissner



Carl Weissner, Linda Lee Beighle (later Bukowski), Charles Bukowski

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## **Bukowski and the Germans: Excerpts from an Interview with Carl Weissner**

By Jay Dougherty

In 1987, with the help of a research grant through the Fulbright Commission, I set off to what was then *West* Germany to study the German reception of Charles Bukowski. Part of my research would involve many hours spent interviewing Carl Weissner, Bukowski's long-time German translator, who graciously gave his time to me over the course of, I believe, three or four days. I was lucky enough at the time to have the use of an apartment in Mannheim, and Carl came to see me there for the first interviews.

But soon enough, perhaps even the next day, Carl invited me to his »office« in Mannheim, which was, in fact, an apartment fairly high up in a high-rise that looked over one of the city's busiest streets. The place was nearly empty, except for Carl's old manual typewriter, which sat on a desk in the middle of the apartment's living room. Carl had the place lined with bookshelves, but otherwise it was largely devoid of furniture, as I recall. I remember thinking, in fact, that the place represented pretty well the thoroughly unromantic but actual life of a writer: hours upon hours spent alone, thinking, writing, working. It's no wonder that Bukowski found a soul mate in Weissner. Both men, undoubtedly, spent countless hours alone, working on their craft, accompanied only by the clack of the keys, the clink of a glass, or the crackle of a cigarette (Carl was a chain smoker of the filterless kind).

The interview that follows is an excerpt from the series of interviews that I did with Carl Weissner back in 1987. During that interview, Carl and I discussed a wide range of topics, but below I have culled those questions and responses that dealt with Weissner's views about why Bukowski resonated with Germans as well as he did. PoetryCircle.com will publish the full interview that I did with Weissner – along with photos from the interview, an introductory essay, and some related materials from Bukowski on his relationship with Carl – sometime in 2014.

Carl's responses below are unredacted, taken pretty much word-for-word from the original tapes. Although Carl later edited much of the raw material of the interview for the piece I published in *Gargoyle* titled »Translating Bukowski and the Beats«, I prefer the unrefined version of this interview, for it shows more clearly Carl's true conversational style, his energy, his enthusiasm for his work

and for Bukowski, his irreverence, and his intelligence. Enjoy, and keep a look-out on PoetryCircle.com and the new PoetryCircle Featured Writers site for an announcement about the release of the full interview – as well as announcements of more original Bukowski material, including a previously unreleased interview that I conducted with Bukowski back in 1986.

Jay Dougherty  
*Bethesda, Maryland, November 2013*

**Dougherty:** If you can generalize about the German response to Bukowski, what would you emphasize?

**Weissner:** Mostly the critics stress the fact that he's hugely enjoyable compared to people like Peter Handke, whom they have to read because he's so fucking famous. But he's so god-damned boring. The only comparison Handke will accept is either with Goethe or the Bible. He made that clear a couple of years ago. And instead of just coming right out and saying that this guy is hugely overblown, an egomaniac, and doesn't have enough to back it up, the critics keep writing these lengthy essays about every new book that comes out, some of it critical, but largely they don't dare to come right out with what they feel. Bukowski is easy, you know; you can say this is just crap, or you can say, »I like to read it on the crapper [laughter],« after having been unable to get through Günther Grass's latest one. And of course they like Bukowski's credible attitude vis-a-vis the American way of life and Reagan and so forth. But they like that in any American writer; they like it in Norman Mailer; they like it in others. [The attitude] is an aloofness and an unwillingness to be accepted into the fold and be a good citizen. And these things (being a good citizen, etc.) are such innate things in Germany. A lot of people just don't dare to speak out against the authorities, etc.; they cringe as soon as they have to pull over for a cop who wants to give them a speeding ticket, etc. So what [Gerald] Locklin calls a total freedom regardless of the consequences, simply not giving a damn about, oh, the *New York Times Book Review* or whatever those people have to say is attractive.

**Dougherty:** That's interesting. In a good many of the German reviews that I've read, the reviewers often dwell on Bukowski's iconoclastic traits, his sheer delight in ignoring etiquette and propriety, what's proper. Do you think there's some kind of wish-fulfillment being played out there on the part of the Germans?

**Weissner:** Yes, yes. I mean, one of our better-known writers who is a member of the communist party and also a fanatical long-distance runner wrote a very brief review of, I think, one of the story collections that Maro (Verlag) put out in the late 70s, and he says something like »meet the lineal successor to Celine – poet of hate who has given me a lot. Bukowski is saying a lot of things that guys like us don't dare express ourselves«. Something like that. I have it somewhere and translated it into English because I liked it so much.

This was unexpected because, you know, guys in the moo-moo left usually shy away from any comment on Bukowski, even if they're closet fans of Bukowski. But I think Bukowski expresses something which is shared by a lot people, not just leftist writers: the unappetizing aspects of life and a willingness to sometimes overdo it, mostly in a funny way – taking a stick and poking it around in the crapper before he flushes it ... a little added something. Even the dumbest hick out there will realize that he's able to see the funny or seriocomic aspects of things rather than wanting to make a big statement.

**Dougherty:** To what do you attribute his relative obscurity in the U.S.?

**Weissner:** It's a combination of the difficulties of distribution which you have as a large small press in California [Black Sparrow], as opposed to a New York publisher and the sheer dimensions of the fucking country. It's a lot easier to be visible in a country like Germany, where everything is so hyper-organized. You can go into a tiny town near the Czechoslovakian border which has only one book shop, half of which is devoted to greeting cards and soft porn magazines, but as long as the shop has the big book around somewhere, you can order any Bukowski title or any other title that's in print, and they'll have it for you within two days. You can't do that in the States, somewhere like Muskogee, Kalamazoo, Barston. You can do it in every fucking village in Germany.

And the major papers are in every train station, you know, so as soon as a name keeps popping up in the major papers and magazines, everybody knows it.

His loyalty to John Martin, publisher of Black Sparrow, will be everlasting, no matter how often he rails against him or feels like Martin's cheating. Forget it; he'll always go to bat for John Martin. And for that reason alone he'll never consider going to another publisher. At some point I'm sure he could have switched to a large publisher, just on the strength of his European sales. But that would mean that he has to follow the New York publisher's public relations policy, and if he has

to be shipped around, go here and there, he hates that. He not only hates it but would be physically unable to handle it because you can't appear on an American talk show drunk. Kerouac did it and fell flat on his face. Hank did it once but in France, where he got a great press, surprisingly. But you can do it once, but it's wise never to do it again. Hank refuses to do the reading circuit and the PR talk shows, the reading circuit and the talk shows.

**Dougherty:** Who is the Bukowski reader in West Germany?

**Weissner:** Well, it's a wide cross-section. He came along at the right time here, in the late sixties. People were kind of pooped after the student rebellion, you know, and after reading through kilometers of Marx and Lenin and Engels and so forth. And literature was out, I mean, fiction was out, and everybody walked around with tape-recorders doing recordings of workers. The idea was to let the workers speak their mind and for those doing the taping to act as their translators.



Carl at the same apartment in Mannheim where the first parts of this interview took place.  
Here he's reflecting on a story he just told.

Everybody was either into the deep underground – love and LSD and stuff – or rabid leftist revolutionary doctrine.

And then *Notes of a Dirty Old Man* appeared – a strange mixture of short stories and political columns, but of a type that no one had ever read in Germany. The book was picked up by *Der Spiegel* and other publications, and I was totally surprised. And then it went out of print, and two years later there was a pocket-book edition, which they're still reprinting. And so when the next book came out, it got reviewed all over the place. The writing was so different, so open, that guys who were into proletarian literature automatically found a colleague – like, this is proletarian literature the way it should be; it's better than Upton Sinclair and so forth, because Hank is so direct, he doesn't waste any words, etc.

And yet others, like intellectuals, took him as the American primitive, and you know the Europeans have always been attracted by that persona. And so in the late sixties, when Bukowski first hit here, there was nothing around but this high-brow literature. Period. There was nothing around to compare to Bukowski. I mean, in the Ruhrgebiet, there were some workshops for workers, but nothing established. So it has been not only students but also a lot of people who never picked up a novel. The average apprentice who had gotten, say, only eight years of elementary school picked up on him. It's really, then, a large segment of the population that reads Bukowski. And today the pocketbook companies print fifty to a hundred thousand books each year.

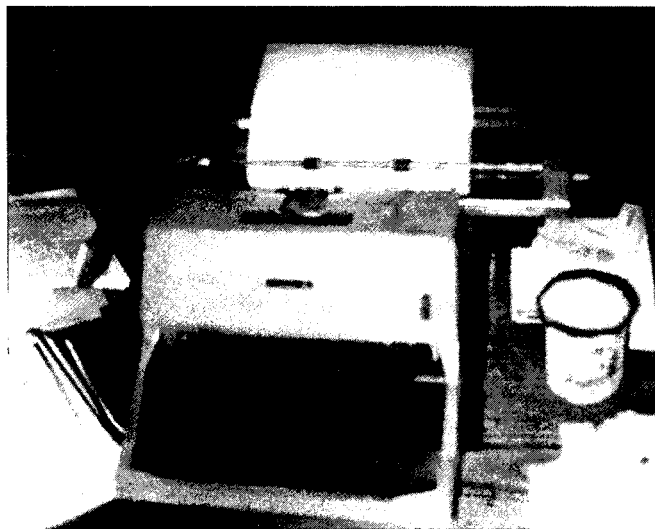
**Dougherty:** What one book would you say really launched Bukowski's career in West Germany?

**Weissner:** A big Bukowski reader published in '77 by Zweitausendeins, which collected four titles, two novels, and two collections of stories, and we wanted to followed it up with a big chunk of poetry and did – that was called *Western Avenue*. With the first volume, expectations had been raised very high, so with the poetry volume we had to make sure we had a selection that would satisfy these guys.

The reviews that *Western Avenue* got were just incredible. Many reviewers probably didn't realize that it was a selection that was made out of hundreds and hundreds of poems; they figured he had written it that way. It was just – wow – they were absolutely pooped by the magnitude. But it's an outrageous thing to publish a collection like that. There isn't a poet around in Germany who has ever

done that. There aren't many around who have written enough poems to make a selection like that possible to begin with. So that helped. It was just a bomb that – ooh – blew them away.

There's no real development visible in the volume, which spans some twenty years, but that's what's so impressive about it – this guy, at some point, starting writing poems and he immediately found his style, and he's kept it up until today. He's not been influenced by any fads; he's not been influenced by this huge Ginsberg success; he did not try to get bardic or rhapsodic or anything. He's just writing that dry, monotone but very much to-the-point material – including all these artful things that he manages to slip in. I can't remember any author that got a start like that in Germany. It was almost frightening, the universal acceptance. Instantaneous, except for some dissident voices from, as Burroughs would say, drearily predictable quarters.



Carl's work desk at his apartment overlooking a busy street in Mannheim. This desk sat in the middle of the living room of this apartment, and as you can infer from the photograph, there's little else in the room except this desk. On the desk sits a single lamp,

Carl's coffee cup, the papers from which he would translate directly onto the page inserted into his manual typewriter. Carl lived the life of the writer, and there was no better illustration of how this life was lived than this wooden typing desk in the middle of an otherwise empty room.