

## Goodbye to Berlin

*Ch. Isherwood*

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'I am a camera'. I recall the famous words from a film aired on Swedish TV in the early 60's. My father seemed particularly interested in it. I did not know at the time of Isherwood, nor of my father's special interest in him and his writing, only later would I discover books of Isherwood in my parents' library. In the late sixties he became famous with the Cabaret revival, to say nothing about the movie with that name in 1972 starring Liza Minnelli. I read his Berlin stories in the late seventies, of which the present book was one part<sup>1</sup>, although I do not remember much of it, except perhaps the mood. The present volume, of which I have just partaken is a Signet Book, with yellowed pages, a musty smell, and a garish cover, with an alluring picture of Sally Bowles underneath an advertising caption of 'Bohemian life in a Wicked City', is obviously a relic to be found in the remains of my parents' library.

It consists of a few vignettes. His landlady, who obviously has seen better days, and his fellow lodgers, the engagement with the young thug Otto staying with him at his parents' apartment in an unsavory part of Berlin. His Platonic liaison with Sally Bowles, this young charmingly debauched English girl, with the many lovers, and of course his contacts with the rich Jewish family Landauers who owns a chain of department stores, the haughty daughter Natalie and her mysterious cousin Bernhard with whom he shares a nocturnal visit to a family lodge, which turns out to be a minor castle. He himself appears as a fictional character borrowing his name, although it is hard not to see the novel as autobiographical, despite the initial disclaimers by the author.

The scene is set around 1930, that is before the 'Machtübernahme' by Hitler, but the presence of Nazis is duly noted, and many remarks as to the persecution of Jews are made. However, it is not clear when the book was really written. If it was really written at the time it conveys, it would serve an interesting documentary function, if written after the war, as is indicated by the date of first publication in 1945, much of the documentary value is lost by the interference of hindsight. Especially those pertaining to the attitudes towards the Jewish population and the level of predominance of the Nazis, as those would be the most likely to be affected by added knowledge. It might be the case that Isherwood has resisted the obvious temptations to tinker, but it is hard to tell.

What brought Isherwood to Berlin in the first place? The place to go after the war in the swinging twenties was of course Paris, Berlin was another story, not as obvious, not as popular. While French was the second language *par preference*, German was not as well-known by the British, and besides it was the language of the former enemy. But Weimar Germany was a hotbed of decadence, at least so in the imagination of posterity, and thus exerted a certain kind of pull. Isherwood did not go alone, he brought fellow friends, all, as it would turn out, in search of young flesh, preferably, not to say exclusively, of the

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<sup>1</sup> 'Mr Norris changes trains' the other, first published by New Directions

same-sex kind. Of this the readers of the Berlin stories are given no explicit references, and unless having a certain sophistication which is incommensurable with innocence, they consequently will have no inkling. I certainly had not and was always surprised by all those camping tours with young men, taking it in stride, never suspecting their true nature, until I was explicitly so informed by Isherwood's openly autobiographical 'Christopher and his kind' which appeared many decades later, when the legal ban on male homosexuality had been lifted in England, and it was becoming chic.

The stories must have touched a chord, judging from their subsequent commercial success, not to mention their various spinoffs, already referred to. The subject was fresh, and the decadence titillating, but the art of Isherwood's writing certainly must have played a decisive role as well. His art of writing is artless, meaning deceptively simple and straightforward, conveying with economy, much more than fits to the page. There is a definite evocation of the atmosphere, vaguely reminiscent of the German painter Otto Dix, and the various characters are painted vividly, not only Sally Bowles, who seems to have stimulated the imagination most of the typical readers, and may in fact have been a bit overdone. Her mixture of decadence and innocence is not quite enough to make her believable as a nineteen-year old, unless of course her professed age is just part of her attitude, which would of course be fully in character. The high-strung Jewish girl Natalie, may be a more realistic painting of a young lady. Noteworthy is the nature of the narrators relations to them. With Bowles, the relation is obviously sexless, Isherwood more playing the role of a girlfriend, or more charitably an older brother, than a potential lover. No surprise that the landlady is shocked that this charming 'girlfriend' of his has lovers, how can he put up with it? Of course it serves him quite well. As with neurotic Natalie, the situation is more complicated. Clearly she would desire more, but of course without being so vulgar as to be explicit. In fact it is not even sure whether she is aware of it. The narrator is of course indifferent, maybe even clueless. His interest is more geared towards her cousin, a young man of sophistication and exquisite taste. As well as being fabulously well-off. (But of course in the novel we learn that he will eventually come to grief for obvious reasons - at least in hindsight).

Then there is the case of Otto. What can a mature young man of an intellectual bent and interests see in such a thug? He meets him at a seaside resort on the Baltic island of Rügen, where he is a friend of another young man, obviously to the knowledgeable reader (which I was not), an older lover who plays the role of the sugar Daddy, catering to the whims of a spoiled brat, no doubt ravaged with jealousy, when the young man follows his basic inclinations and goes out to dance. Somehow, the narrator takes over in some sense, but to what extent? On this aspect the novel is decorously reticent.