

## “THE COSMOPOLITAN”

**Heinz Betzler** — Seattle

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(I interviewed Mr. Betzler at his home in April 1992. He did not allow me to see his internment files.)

Heinz Betzler visited the United States in 1926 with friends. They began their circuit in Florida in a 1923 Buick. Little did Betzler realize that his wanderings would be of interest to the FBI fifteen years later.

*From Florida we went along the Santa Fe Trail to Arizona and ended up in Los Angeles. We found various jobs. I got one with an automobile company, and we stayed there for six months. Then we went to Chicago. I stayed there for a month during the famous Dempsey-Tunney fight, while my friends decided to go back to New York. I left two weeks later to attend the wedding of my friend. So our round trip around the United States had taken about ten months, and it was very informative.*

*What amazed me was when we came into the South. I remembered the slogan for which World War I was fought against the Germans: the United States entered the war in April 1917 “to make the world safe for democracy.” When I found democracy in Florida and the southern states wanting, I was very, very surprised how the United States could do this sort of thing. Racial separation was not my idea of democracy, and that was not what the World War I was supposed to be for.*

*Back in New York, I found a job with General Motors. My folks were living in*

*Brazil; they left Germany during the inflation and went to Argentina first. I brought them to the United States, and oddly enough, after they came here, I was transferred to Brazil by General Motors and stayed for close to three years in Sao Paulo where GM had an assembly plant. That was 1930.*

*I became very well acquainted with the managing director, Mr. Van Vorhees and his family. In 1932, Mr. Van Vorhees was asked to take a special trip to the Soviet Union. The reason was a very simple one. The Soviets sent a delegation to New York to talk to General Motors about building an automobile plant in the Soviet Union. But the directors who talked with the Soviet delegation were very arrogant, and gave them the run-around for about a half a year until the Russians went to Henry Ford. They reached an accord very quickly with Ford to build an automobile plant in Nizhni Novgorod*

*Mr. Van Vorhees had been a colonel in army intelligence during the war. He was assigned the job to go to the Soviet Union to see whether he could sell them another factory. At that time the influence of the German government in the Soviet Union was dominant. The Germans had the most reliable information that you could get about the current economic conditions in the Soviet Union, so you had to read German. And the Soviet Union—at that time—was not yet recognized by the United States. So Mr. Van Vorhees accepted the job and asked me to come*

*along as his interpreter and secretary, which I gladly accepted. We went back to New York from Sao Paolo and stayed there for two months, then on to Berlin because we had to get visas from the Soviet consulate there. We finally left by train for Moscow on the 6th of March, by which time Hitler was already in power.*

*We established contact with the Soviet agencies, which now gave us the run-around. The fact was they had no money; they were in great distress in the 30s. The farmers were deprived of their property because the agreement was that if they delivered the foodstuffs they would get tractors, and so forth. Well, those farmers had been doing the farming all their lives, and they knew how to do it and could deliver. But the factories weren't working the way they were supposed to, and these farmers did not get their tractors. So they quit. Then they were killed. Stalin arrested them, and, according to the stories that I heard, he killed about five million Russians in reprisal.*

*Periodically my boss would leave the country, to give the impression that we were not too anxious. It was a psychological sort of thing. He went to Finland, or back to Germany, and I took that opportunity to make a trip in the Soviet Union. I flew from Moscow to Dnepropetrovsk and two elderly people with company connections met me at the station and took me to their home. The whole house used to belong to them, but now they only had two rooms.*

*Then I wanted to visit Istanbul. I managed to get a flight from Dnepropetrovsk to Odessa. In Odessa I stayed at a hotel and booked passage to Baku, then to Tiflis and over the mountains by bus and back again by*

*train to Moscow. The total trip took twenty days.*

*To make a long story short, we accomplished nothing in the Soviet Union. We decided to leave permanently, and went to Vienna, leaving our notice with the Russians that if they wanted to contact us this was where we would be. Van Vorhees had arranged for me to find a job at Opel, which is part of General Motors. So I was in Russelsheim, between Frankfurt and Mainz, which is the seat of the Opel factory. I was there for almost three years.*

*In the course of my stay with Opel, I got acquainted with a young lady who eventually became my wife, but the political situation grew more dangerous. Several times I was called before the Nazi Party high command about statements that I had made in private conversation with other people regarding the situation in Germany and what I had encountered in the Soviet Union and the United States. They hadn't appreciated what I said.*

*I decided that since my parents were already American citizens, living in New York, I would go back to America. I asked for a new assignment and was transferred to General Motor's diesel in Detroit. That was in 1937.*

**Q:** After you returned to the United States, had you thought about becoming an American citizen?

*Oh, that was absolutely my intention. I had taken out my first papers. But you have to be there five years, and I never was there five years, coming and going, so I had to start all over again. Then the war broke out. During conversations with my colleagues at General Motors, I made it known that I was not a*

*sympathizer with Hitler, or the Nazis, but also that I certainly would never fight in a war on the side of the British, where I would have to fight against Germany. I would not do this, certainly not on the side of the British.*

*Then in 1939 the war broke out, and I was certainly not sympathetic with Germany's political trend.*

*Two days after Pearl Harbor, FBI agents knocked on my door and said, "We have heard about you and we would like to ask some questions." The Olympic games were held in Berlin in 1936, and my future wife and I attended. At the end of the games they issued these souvenir volumes showing the sporting events, but on the front of the book was a photo showing Hitler and other officials giving the Nazi salute. Well, those FBI agents said, "You are a German national?"*

*"Yes."*

*"And we have heard that you have given the Nazi salute on one occasion when the American anthem was played." This was at work, in Detroit, allegedly.*

*"Not to my knowledge."*

*This is what happened. I don't know what the occasion was when the National Anthem was played during working hours, but when it was over I said to a fellow next to me, "You know, this is the sort of thing they would do in Germany." And somebody saw me do that, and he reported to the FBI that I had given the Nazi salute during the playing of the American anthem. I never found out who the guy was. He didn't tell me either. So when the FBI came, this came up.*

*They also wanted to know about our sentiments, about politics, and our loyalty to the United States, I suppose, and we said, "Well, we are over here. We have no particular connection to*

*Germany." But my wife had all of her relatives over there, and I had worked for Opel, and then they came up with this salute thing, and I explained to them what happened. They looked through our library and said, "What kind of books do you have?" And they found this one called "Olympia 1936." It's the same book that deals with the individual athletic events, and on the front has the picture of Hitler giving the Nazi salute in the company of some other Nazi bigwigs.*

*"Why do you have this book?"*

*"Because it commemorates the Olympic games, which we attended." They took that book along and said, "You'd better come along with us too."*

*We had a son who was about one-year-old, and my wife was pregnant. No matter. They took me along to the immigration station, which was the building that they had designated to hold those people who were arrested on the same suspicion as me. When we got there the place was full; it was about ten o'clock in the evening. It wasn't a bedroom as such, but a room that had been converted where people could sleep. We were there for three months. My wife had the right to come and visit us, which she frequently did, and I was given permission to visit my wife at home. The person in charge, a "meanie" I will call him, because he ordered, "When you take these people out of here, put them in handcuffs."*

**Q:** How many times did you visit home?

*Twice, because, as I said, my wife was pregnant and it was shortly after Christmas. Finally I had my hearing, and there were three officials in there with a newspaper person, I guess; two of them were attorneys and one was from the FBI. And they wanted to tell me that*

*they didn't know what to do; they were also new to this procedure, just groping around to see in what manner they should interrogate the people who were brought in.*

*The fellow who was apparently the leader said, "Tell us your life story from the beginning, when you were born, and all that sort of thing." I told them that it was all in the records when I filed for citizenship: I was born in Germany, and so forth. But they wanted all the details again, and it took over three hours.*

*Then came the critical question: "Would you fight for the United States?" I said I would, but "I would never, ever fight on the side of the British against the Germans. After the Germans are finished with the British, I might." That was the conclusive statement; I was returned to the immigration station. Three weeks later that it was found that it was in the interests of the United States that I should be interned.*

*Shortly thereafter, a whole bunch of us were taken to the railway station. They brought us to Cincinnati where we were transferred to another train and taken to Fort Oglethorpe in Georgia. That was a military establishment. When we arrived there was a truck and three officers with armed soldiers. They took us to the camp, where the fellow in charge was a retired colonel. We all lined up and then he addressed us and said, "If anyone of you even makes an attempt to escape, these guards have orders to shoot to kill." And there were guard posts all the way around the fence. There was one huge room where all the beds were. The food was ample. One of the fellows who spoke up wanted to say something to the colonel during one of his periodic visits. When he said he wanted to complain, the colonel told his sergeant, "Hit that guy!" but he*

*wouldn't do it. Then he said, "Put him in solitary," or whatever it was. "Three days without food or water." He did too.*

*We were there probably six weeks, and then we were sent to Camp Forrest, Tennessee. It was set up originally for prisoners of war, but since it didn't have any prisoners yet, they put us in there. Again, the fellow in charge was a colonel, but this time, an extremely decent person.*

*He listened to our complaints, if we had any, and we were allowed a spokesman. In another part of the camp, there were some interned seamen from freighters. One night one of those guys had come to us; he had crawled through the fence. Of course the next day they discovered when they had the roll call that he was missing, and they found him in our camp. That was exciting.*

*We had a university there because we had [many] people who were able to teach. We were in cabins [hutments] with four people each, a wood stove, and that was adequate. We had our sporting events. We could do whatever we wanted to do if we didn't break the rule of getting too close to the fence. I have no complaints. We could write letters. Of course they were all censored. We grew anxious, though, and eventually my wife asked for voluntary internment; we were running out of money. The government contacted my wife when she wanted to be voluntarily interned to try to dissuade her.*

*My turn to leave came about a year later, in January or February 1943. I was told that, "Yes, you will be united with your wife and your son." We were sent to Seagoville, which had been a female correctional center. Beautiful, concrete, brick structures; they were like hotels.*

Q: Did they tell you why you were moved?

*Yes, this is where the overriding issue that I have formulated comes in: the American government was determined that most of us were going to be American citizens eventually, and they did not want us mistreated in any way. Now, there were some that wanted to go back to Germany, and they were repatriated. But the others were treated with all the respect and courtesy that was possible. They wanted to restore family life. They didn't want continued separation. Coming from a camp like Forrest, and coming to Seagoville, where there was a dining room with small tables of four, was like moving into the Ritz Carlton Hotel. It was fabulous. The people in this camp were extremely polite to us, and fair. I have absolutely nothing but admiration for them, really. If it had been permitted, and if they had wanted to be, they would have been our friends. That was still not the ideal situation, because it was confinement.*

*They built a big camp at Crystal City, Texas, and that is where all of us wanted to go. There we would have a separate cabin and what amounted to a normal family situation—a kitchen and all the sort of things that you could do as if you were at home. Eventually we were taken to there. I was elected to the camp staff and was the Red Cross connection between the German and American Red Cross. I was also a schoolteacher.*

*The schools played an important part in our camp life, particularly for families with kids, and most of the people had kids. I taught Third and Fourth grades. We had professional school personnel of high quality, mostly deported Germans from Latin America. We had school plays, organized athletic activities, and*

*classes from Kindergarten through Twelfth grade, as well as specialized college subjects. One of our high school seniors was drafted by the army; he was born in the United States.*

*After we established ourselves we had to do a lot of work, like making roads and planting trees to make it livable, but the idea was very plain that the United States government wanted us to be together, to lead as strong a family life as possible. And we did. Of course, we had our choice of making friends. Some we liked, some we didn't, that is normal, and we got very well acquainted with a family who had been brought up from Haiti, Mr. and Mrs. Reinbold, who had three children. He had been the German consul in Haiti. Most of those Germans had been brought up from Central and South America. Some of them spoke only Spanish because they had been married to natives.*

Q: Were all the Japanese males?

*No, families. About 1,600 Japanese and about 1,200 Germans. We had separate quarters, but there was no fence or anything between us. We attended each other's events. We had a hall where we could entertain, and as I said, the American government knew precisely what they were doing. They wanted it to be as comfortable as the situation permitted. None of us ever went hungry and as I already mentioned, the personnel were very, very fair and very nice. During 1943 or '44, I was asked whether I wanted to be released in the United States. I said I would not be very happy to work in a defense industry, and under the circumstances, I preferred to stay.*

*The INS officials who ran the camp had their offices in the middle of the*

*camp. Anybody who wanted to talk to them walked in there and said, "I would like to see...." Whoever you wanted to see. If we wanted to ask a question, or had a complaint, we went to them.*

**Q:** So they weren't a continuous presence in your life?

*No, not at all. Both the Japanese and the Germans had their own leadership. Ours was Baron von Falkenheim, and he picked his own assistants.*

*We came to Schenectady on the 27th of August 1945, with almost no money; I think only fifty dollars. Two days later I had a job, a very menial job, but a job. When we gave up our apartment in Detroit, everything was put into storage. So when we came to Schenectady my mother sent me \$1,000 to make a down payment on a house. We had no furniture, or very little, but the neighbors next door, Mr. and Mrs. "S," helped us out. We didn't tell them that we had been interned.*

*Mrs. "S" was a very concerned and considerate woman. She saw the situation we were in, and offered all the help that we could possibly get. The funny part was that when we bought this house there was a gentleman living in the basement, and he wanted to stay on. When we moved in, all of a sudden, this man came upstairs, and I said, "Who are you?" And he said, "I'm Mr. 'P.' I am living downstairs, and if you don't mind, I'd like to stay." So he stayed and we bought the house on a mortgage of twenty-seven dollars a month. Mr. "P" paid us twenty-seven dollars for his room.*

*I worked for this place about a month making hot water heaters. Then I worked for another automotive company, NAPA. And naturally, I immediately reinstated*

*my request for citizenship. I worked for NAPA until I became a citizen, and then I immediately applied at General Electric and got a job at General Electric in Research and Development. From then on, it was good—almost. I worked for General Electric from 1952 until 1970. But something happened in between. Do you remember McCarthy, the Communist hunter?*

**Q:** He found out you went to the Soviet Union?

*No, he didn't, but General Electric did. Apparently some government officials contacted all kinds of people at General Electric, inquiring about their employees' political leanings. The idiocy of this in my case is staggering! I was interned as supposedly a Nazi, and now they wanted to find out whether I was a Communist!*

*I could not continue the job on which I was working. They transferred me to a plant that had nothing to do with the military whatsoever. Finally they decided that I should have a hearing. The hearings were in New York City. That was in 1953. There were three people again, and a stenographer who took the voice recording. And up came that question again, of me having saluted the flag. They had the records, of course; they got them from the FBI, I suppose. I told them the story again.*

*The hearing was in the morning for three hours, then two more in the afternoon. Everything I said was recorded. I told them my political sympathies, how I was first suspected as being a Nazi, and now of being a communist. "It doesn't make any sense. I have no connections with any political organization of any kind."*

Q: Did they talk about your having been to the Soviet Union?

*Of course. Then something very interesting happened. During the Korean War, I was a blood donor. After the meeting was over I returned to my hotel, and it dawned on me that in my pocketbook I had the records that I had donated blood to the Red Cross. So I went back to the offices of the people running the hearing and wrote a letter about my blood donations. They contacted me and said, "Yes, we got your message. You may go back to Schenectady." After three days I was cleared at General Electric and got my old job back.*

*Eventually I was made a supervisor and did very well. I'm very fond of General Electric. I gave them 100 percent. Anyhow, because of the loss of a big contract, they had to let, I think, seven thousand engineers go, and they approached me and said, "In spite of the fact that you are in the top twenty, you are now 64 1/2 years-old. Wouldn't you consider retiring? You will get a pension. You will get whatever you have paid into the common fund. We don't want to pull people out who are in their 40s who have kids in college and that sort of thing." And so I agreed to do that, and we parted friends and I went in retirement, which was the beginning of an extremely active occupation.*

*Oddly enough, we don't have any German friends. They are all native-born Americans. There was no plan not to meet the Germans, it just happened. In the process, I have become much Americanized, I would say.*

*But my emotional sentiments about Germany haven't changed. Hitler was an aberration, a passing phase. And what the Nazis did is repulsive. But what*

*we did to the Indians and the blacks is repulsive, too. And what the Spaniards did to the Incas and Mayas is also repulsive. The human race has committed so many crimes against each other that nobody is outstanding. We all seem to have committed the same crimes. I'm not in favor of what the Israelis are doing to the Palestinians.*

*My internment was an unnecessary thing, I felt. But I was a German citizen, and there was a war, and hysteria allows and permits and almost commands almost anything. So you have to find enemies; you have to find the spies and the fifth columnists. The war creates situations that cannot be explained logically; circumstances seem to demand that you find a spy or a fifth columnist and then do something about it. I was a victim of circumstances. Nevertheless, my feelings about internment have been so colored by the experience I had with the American people and the fair treatment that we got, that I have NO complaints. The treatment in those camps had such a beneficial impact that being interned was not a punishment. It was a safe heaven. I think it would have been worse if I would have been outside because I can't keep my mouth shut. I'm a very outspoken person; I do not say anything that I don't believe.*

*When I heard what was going on in Germany during the war, I wouldn't believe at first that these things had happened; I just would not believe it. But my admiration for the American people has increased enormously, and I have no regrets that I became an American citizen. I have lived in the United States now since 1926, and this is 1992. What else would you be? But my sentiments for Germany haven't changed either. I*

*want Germany to recover. I wish them well after what they have been through.*