

Current Comments®

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That Way Lies *MAD*-ness: Carl Djerassi Confronts His Past

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I would guess that a surprisingly high percentage of Americans have at some point in their lives had a more-than-passing acquaintance with that peculiar institution of humor known as *MAD* magazine. For nearly 40 years, and for generations of readers (most of whom probably read it when they should have been doing their homework), *MAD* has offered its own fractured view of social trends, politics, and popular culture.

Since *MAD*, other American humor magazines have achieved passing notoriety—the *National Lampoon* in the 1970s, for example, or the trendily impertinent *SPY* in this decade—but *MAD* has truly endured. And so has the freckled grin of the magazine's oddball mascot: Alfred E. Neuman. While the settings into which he intrudes on *MAD*'s cover may differ—a political scene one month, a satirical version of a movie poster the next, or perhaps a scene from a popular television show, with caricatured celebrities usually gawking in alarm or vexation—Alfred's gap-toothed smile has remained unchanged.

MAD even found its way into the pages of *Current Contents*® (CC®). In a 1976 essay discussing advertising for college courses, we borrowed some entries from "The Alfred E. Neuman University Competitive Hard-Sell Catalogue."¹

For at least one reader of *MAD*, however, the visage of Alfred E. Neuman evokes memories that are far from humorous. That reader is Carl Djerassi, the distinguished scientific entrepreneur and professor of chem-

istry at Stanford University, California. This week we present Carl's own memoir, reprinted from *Grand Street*, of his search for the origins of Alfred E. Neuman.² However, this narrative concerns far more than a comic book. It describes an uneasy transition to life in a new country, showing how the pre-World War II climate of hatred and fear in his homeland continued to haunt Carl even after he and his family managed to escape from Europe to America.

Having discussed Carl's many scientific achievements in a previous essay, I need not do so here.³ Earlier this year, an article in *THE SCIENTIST*® described Carl's successful "intellectual bigamy"—his ability to maintain flourishing careers in both academia and industry.⁴ Equally impressive, however, are Carl's various literary endeavors. We included some of his verse in a 1986 essay on the poetry-science connection.⁵ The piece that follows will be part of a collection of autobiographical essays that he plans to publish in book form under the title *Mind the Gap!*

Somehow, Carl has also found the time to write a novel, *Cantor's Dilemma*, which Doubleday will publish this fall. As Carl points out, *Cantor's Dilemma* is a fictional treatment of "the soul and baggage of contemporary science." Telling the story of Professor I. Cantor, who develops a theory of tumorigenesis, the novel is entirely realistic in portraying the political intricacies confronted by the working scientist. These include, in Carl's words, "publications, pri-

orities, the order of the authors, the choice of the journal, the collegiality and the brutal competition, academic tenure, grantsmanship, the Nobel Prize....”⁶ We are considering the possibility of running excerpts from *Cantor’s Dilemma* in *CC* later this year.

For now, we are pleased to present Carl’s story of his strange obsession with a face from his past.

* * * * *

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THE QUEST FOR ALFRED E. NEUMAN

Carl Djerassi

In this memoir, Carl Djerassi, Stanford University, California, describes his encounters with the grinning face of Alfred E. Neuman, mascot of *MAD* magazine. For Djerassi, the face recalls anti-Semitic posters seen in his European neighborhood in the days prior to World War II. He discusses his personal inquiry into the origins of Alfred E. Neuman—an attempt to reconcile the comic-book face with the troubling images of his youth.

Nearly half a century has passed, but I still remember every detail: the big ears projecting straight out like a wary deer’s; the tooth missing just above the thick lower lip, its gross thickness accentuated by the virtual absence of its upper partner; the eyes, big, yet hooded; the tousled black hair; the grin moronic, but also devious; and finally the nose—after the ears, it was the boy’s most prominent feature.

His image occupied the center of a dirty poster plastered on the walls in our neighborhood in Vienna, just after the Nazis had taken over in 1938. The head was attached to a gangly neck, itself protruding from an absurdly adult suit. Even if the picture had been in color, one knew that this shirt had to be dirty white, the coat and vest black. The latter was buttoned almost to the sternum, so that only the knot

of the black tie was visible. In a remarkably succinct way his attire managed to stigmatize him as a sly street peddler. The poster’s brutal message consisted of just three words: *Tod den Juden!*—Death to the Jews!

When I bumped into the face the second time, it was in a news vendor’s stall in the Midwest during the early forties. It may have been Mount Vernon, Ohio, where, like most of the students from Kenyon College, I used to go to the movies; or perhaps Tarkio, Missouri, where I spent a semester as a seventeen-year-old sophomore at the local college. I was so shocked by the appearance of that face that I did not even focus on its details. The fact that this grinning boy’s nose was somewhere between triangular and bulbous, rather than sharply Semitic, escaped me.

To most browsers, the magazines and comic books surrounding that face must have seemed innocuous and commonplace. To me, who had arrived in the States a couple of years earlier from Bulgaria, where I spent a year and a half after the *Anschluss* waiting for a visa, such camouflage made the face in its midst even more threatening. I was still fantasticaly sensitive to every real or imaginary anti-Semitic innuendo. I did not touch the picture. I knew exactly what it stood for.

At the time, I did not tell anyone what I had seen, just as I hardly disclosed anything about my past life. It was my way of attempting to “pass,” which even without my accent would not have been too easy in this small Midwestern town where I was the only Hitler refugee; many of the locals had never even met a Jew.

“Where’re you from?” they’d ask as soon as I’d finished a sentence or two.

“My mother lives in upstate New York,” I’d reply, sometimes mentioning the hamlet near the Canadian border where she worked as a physician’s assistant. Without an American license, her Viennese M.D. was useless here.

“Yes, but where’re you *from*?” they’d persist. “What kind of an accent is that?”

“Bulgaria,” I’d say, knowing it wasn’t so, and then toss them another morsel, hoping it would deflect the inquisition. “I went to an American school in Sofia.” Usually that worked. After all, how many youths were there in northwestern Missouri who had gone to the American College of Sofia, Bulgaria?

The next question, “But why did you come *here*?” I fielded easily. I presented my reply in wrapping made opaque by local chauvinism. “My parents wanted me to continue my schooling here.”

The catch was that “here.” The word could refer to the specific city or school where the conversation took place, or it could ask—without actually asking—“Why did you have to leave Europe?” In choosing to answer the former, nothing I said was untrue; I just did not volunteer any excess information. What most of the questioners wanted to know, but rarely heard, was the following.

My mother and I, like thousands of other Hitler refugees, left Europe at the beginning of the Second World War to come “here.”

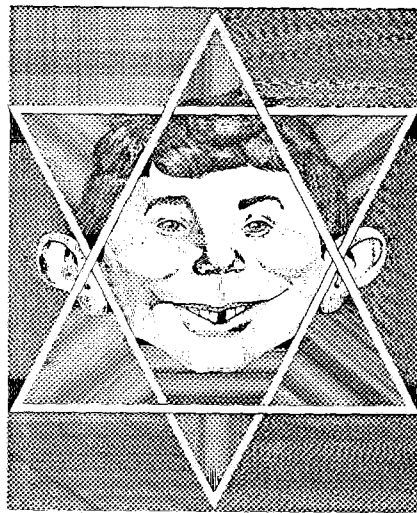


Illustration by Monica Inesia

Compared to other Jews, we found it much easier to escape from Vienna, because my father, who was divorced from my mother, was Bulgarian and had been practicing medicine in Sofia. Soon after the *Anschluss*, he came to Vienna, remarried my mother for a couple of months, and took us out on a Bulgarian passport.

But my response always implied that “here” was this very village in Missouri housing the hundred and forty-odd students of Presbyterian-supported Tarkio College, or Gambier in Ohio, where some three hundred young men studied in an Episcopalian atmosphere. My questioners were always flattered that my parents had apparently chosen Tarkio or Kenyon as the optimum site for their only son’s education. In point of fact, I was there for only one reason: the colleges had offered me a scholarship.

Of course, some of the inquisitors were more persistent. (Was it my paternal Sephardic background that invariably made me attribute to innocent Midwestern curiosity fifteenth-century Spanish inquisitorial motives?) “Why didn’t you stay in Bulgaria?” (“Idiot,” I wanted to retort but didn’t, because that would have taken explanations incompatible with “passing.”) “Were you born there?” Once I owned up to having been born in Vienna, the questions tended to become more precise and, worst of all, more intrusive. Still, I equivocated. Only

when asked point-blank. "Are you Jewish?" did I acknowledge that fact, and then promptly change the subject. In Tarkio, Missouri, I was the only Jew, or at least I thought so, until the day that boy's picture leered at me out of the newsstand.

Years later—probably in Michigan where I taught, and where rabid anti-Semites like Gerald L. K. Smith and Father Coughlin operated—I again came upon that face: on the cover of a publication with the implausible title of *MAD*. But by this time, having become an American citizen, I felt more secure. I flipped open the magazine and was stunned to find it filled with comics.

Even though I am approaching the end of my fifth decade in this country, I have still not adapted to three American infatuations: football, peanut butter and comics. During my formative years in college and graduate school, and the beginnings of my professional career, my reading was limited to one newspaper (the *New York Times*), one magazine (the *New Yorker*), a fair amount of fiction and literary prose and many professional journals in organic and medicinal chemistry. The one common denominator to this hodgepodge of printed material was the total absence of comics. Still, it is curious that I was never attracted to comics, since my professional literature is so full of the pictography of chemical structures. Opening the pages of *MAD*, therefore, did not assuage my suspicion that it was just another publication of some anti-Semitic cabal.

I was too preoccupied with other matters, and also too impatient, to delve into the contents of the magazine. The title itself seemed to me conclusive. However, I did make some discreet inquiries about the nature of that cover picture. To my surprise, virtually every person I asked knew the identity of that boy: Alfred E. Neuman.

"Where does he come from?" It was my turn to ask that pointed question, only to be told that nobody knew or even cared. He had just existed as long as my informants could remember.

"N E W M A N?" I spelled the name.

"No," I was corrected, "N E U M A N."

"Aha," I cried out triumphantly, "I knew it. It isn't 'nooman,' it's 'noyman.' German, of course."

Years passed while the boy's face receded again from my conscious memory. One day, I visited Yad Vashem, the Holocaust memorial in Jerusalem. As I stared at some of the enlarged photographs from that most despicable and horrible period in European history, Alfred E. Neuman's face seemed to surface here and there. That was when I decided that the time had come to uncover the origin of the face that had never quite left me.

As soon as I returned to California, I went to a local news agent. "Do you carry *MAD*?" I inquired, not even knowing whether the magazine still existed. "Over there," the man pointed. I could not believe my eyes when I saw a happily grinning Alfred E. Neuman dressed in a snowrabbit's outfit stepping out of a chimney, holiday cheer practically oozing from the January 1988 cover of the latest *MAD*. I handed over \$1.35 and walked to a corner of the store. Right then and there, for the first time in my life, I read a comic book from cover to cover. In spite of my ingrained suspicion, it became clear to me that no Nazi had ever had his hands on that issue. In fact, it was not even obvious to me why kids would read it: the political cartoon on the last page featuring Gary Hart and Ronald Reagan was clever and biting. So much so that I would not have been surprised to find it on the cover of a magazine like *Mother Jones*.

I was puzzled: how could I reconcile my memory of that taunting face of forty years before with this benign comic? My first American vision of Alfred E. Neuman's face had been around 1942, give or take a few months. Yet on telephoning the editorial office of *MAD* to inquire when the first issue had appeared and how I could secure a copy, I received a preposterous reply: Number 1 of *MAD* had only hit the newsstands in October 1952. Even more absurd was their claim that Alfred E. Neuman—face as well as name—had not graced the cover of *MAD* until 1956. Had the Nazis sold the original magazine to some innocent purchaser with the proviso that the origin of the publication be disguised? Everyone knows of notorious examples of the falsification of historical facts. If *MAD* was just another such victim, it was time for me to correct the record—if not for the public's sake, then at least for mine. Two weeks later, I flew

to New York and headed for 485 Madison Avenue, the current perch of *MAD*.

The bemused tolerance with which the small editorial staff received me was reflected in the genial disarray of their offices, in which, after very little searching, they located the bound volumes of the magazine starting with the first issue. Its cover featured a terrified family, the man yelping. "That thing! That slithering blob coming toward us!"; the woman screaming "What is it?"; and the small child at their feet exclaiming, "It's Melvin!" Melvin Coznowski, I was told, was Alfred E. Neuman's predecessor.

The face I'd remembered—the face that had remained with me for decades and had brought me to *MAD*'s New York office—first surfaced in *MAD* in November 1955. It appeared above the masthead in Number 26 (surrounded by Socrates, Napoleon, Freud and Marilyn Monroe), but so small that it occupied less than half the space of the central letter A in the title. The next issue, Number 27 of April 1956, had a somewhat larger boy crouching at General Eisenhower's feet amid a bewildering crowd of at least sixty characters ranging from Dewey, Stevenson and Nixon to Churchill, King Farouk and Khrushchev. It took until the December 1956 issue before the likeness of Alfred E. Neuman—the famous Norman Mingo portrait apparently familiar to all Americans but me—filled the cover in lonely splendor. He was featured as a write-in candidate for President under the slogan "What—Me Worry?"

I was totally perplexed by the incompatibility between these facts and my memory until the first glimmer of vindication arose. An early Letters to the Editor section, an amusing collection of feisty and succinct missives, contained no less than eleven different images of Alfred alias who knows who, sent in by readers claiming to have known the ur-Alfred. In three pictures, the hair was actually slicked down.

He could almost have been a neighborhood school kid. The three most nitwitted ones had him wear hats of various descriptions; the rest started to approach my image from Nazi days.

These letters and many other fascinating exhibits were in a huge binder containing background material from a copyright suit that had been filed against *MAD* in the 1950s. I found myself rooting for *MAD*—my belated and, by now, favorite introduction to American comics. Therefore I was relieved to find that the magazine had won by demonstrating an abundance of prior art with that face and with legends such as "Me worry?" or "Da-a-h...Me worry?" There were references to a publication of that face by Gertrude Breton Park of Los Angeles around 1914; to a 1936 advertisement from Brotman Dental Lab in Winnipeg; to a somewhat corny book, *Hall of Fame*, published in 1943 in Toronto by one J. J. Carrick. There was no question that at least in terms of chronology that face existed when I was a teenager in the Midwest.

I had almost forgotten my role as a Nazi hunter, but then I got warmer. Not hot, not quite there, but warm enough: a postcard with the Nazi version of the face, except for the hooked nose, and the legend "Sure—I'm for Roosevelt." The reverse side read: "If you are opposed to the Third Term send these to your friends. 15 cards for 25c. Send coin or stamps. Low, quantity prices on request. Send to Bob Howdale, Box 625, Oak Park, Ill."

I suppose I could have flown to Chicago, searched the old phone books, and tracked down Bob Howdale. Maybe he was one of Father Coughlin's followers. But I had lost my taste for the chase for the real Alfred E. Neuman. I was certain that neither *MAD* nor Bob Howdale could make me forget the specters of my youth. As to my own memory of Alfred's face, there is a line in a poem by Bruce Bawer that says it all: "The past cannot move into the present uncorrupted."

"The quest for Alfred E. Neuman" was first published in *Grand Street*.