

The Slow and Painful
Awakening of Herr
Wilhelm Neimann

-- A Morality Story --

Kenneth M. Kapp

1.

Wilhelm stared out of the train window as it made its way south down the Neckar River Valley. The late summer scenery would have been pleasing if his mind were not constantly struggling to fill in the empty spaces surrounding his last years in the war. The doctors had counseled him that it was a form of shell shock and that the memories might return when he was strong enough to accept them or perhaps not at all. "Only time will tell." Wilhelm had to laugh. He asked if they were trying to resurrect Jewish humor?

Ten years had already passed since he was transferred from the eastern front to a military hospital near Stuttgart. Pictures were taken and published in the Nazi press; the captions read, "*Wilhelm Neimann, war hero.*" He had little memory of this. Pain and medications obscured the early months of his rehabilitation. He learned later that his valor at one of the last battles of the Donetsk Campaign had turned the tide. He was severely wounded, given the Iron Cross and a trip west for rehabilitation. He still limped and suffered in cold weather.

The physical healing had been the easy part. He was eventually able to recall moving with his company to a bivouac in the vicinity of Kharkov. And then everything was blank. Only one or two images of frozen fields glimpsed from a train window remained. He was sure he had been sedated and that these were from his trip back to the military hospital.

After the war he had made a few attempts to obtain further information but by then, ironically, the German efficiency of keeping records seemed to have failed. "Yes," he was told, "your battalion took part in the Donetsk Campaign where you were wounded leading a counter-offensive against the

Soviet troops." And then the details became as hazy as his own memory.

Well, he thought, I did at least manage to finish some of the university studies interrupted by that maniac and his misguided sycophants – some third Reich! Any teaching job is better than none. A moment later he almost laughed, A hero's job teaching in a little gymnasium is far from being a professor. But then, I wasn't a Wehrmacht general.

A light drizzle had started and the train window was now streaked, the green valley becoming grey. Wilhelm Neimann closed his eyes and rested. His stop would come soon enough. He felt cold and numb in spite of the hot and muggy carriage. He made himself as comfortable as possible and soon dozed off.

He was only partially aware when the train stopped at his destination. The conductor gently tapped on his shoulder and said, "Herr Neimann. We are here. Let me help you to the platform."

Wilhelm got up, took the small hold-all from under his seat and with the use of his cane struggled down the aisle to the door. The conductor followed and obtained his larger bag. He assisted Wilhelm to the platform and deposited the bag at his side, then wished him good luck and saluted him with his left hand. His right sleeve was empty and pinned to his conductor's jacket.

Wilhelm looked around and noticed an older gentleman approaching from the other end of the platform. He was formally dressed. An old fashioned felt hat matched a heavy suit that must have predated the war.

He stopped in front of Wilhelm. "Herr Neimann, I am honored. Permit me to introduce myself. I am Emanuel Maemmer, the *de facto* mayor of Schweinfurt. We are pleased to have you join our *gymnasium*. History is important! Germany

must learn from its past. My car is outside and Schweinfurt is a short drive from here."

Emanuel directed a porter to help with Wilhelm's bags and they went through the station to the curb where an old car was parked. He said, "You were easy to recognize – the only distinguished passenger descending to the platform at the proper time. Likewise with my automobile – the only car waiting at the curb."

Wilhelm smiled. "Yes, the automobile likewise is distinguished. But I noticed the calendar date on the door was '15' and yet it is now the 27th of August."

Emanuel laughed. "The station-master's put that there. You may not have noticed that it was from 1946 and not 1954. That was the day he finally returned home after the war.

"I regret it is overcast and drizzling; the drive to Schweinfurt is pretty. We begin to go up the valley towards the Black Forest. But there will be more sunny days and the fall colors are indeed worthwhile." Receiving no response, he added, "If you are tired, this old man will be quiet and let you rest. There is no need to talk."

Wilhelm nodded his head and leaned back. He felt adrift. His immediate family were no longer amongst the living. It was a struggle to complete his education; he felt isolated. He frequently found himself looking back over his shoulder hoping to see someone he knew. He could not recall what had happened to him towards the end of the war; the weeks preceding the last skirmish where he was wounded remained a void. As a historian he felt a professional need to learn and record those details.

He made a face that he hoped was not noticed by Mayor Maemmer. He was disappointed. Schweinfurt was a little dot on the map in the southwestern corner of Baden-Wurttemberg. He would teach history in the local *gymnasium*, the only placement the University in Stuttgart could find for him.

The mayor drove directly to Immerhier's Inn. The school board had written, "There are limited options in Schweinfort for either room or board – the school is within walking distance of the inn."

Wilhelm wondered if this was a way for the locals to keep a closer watch on an outsider, even a war hero. There were Germans who committed atrocities during the war who sort postings in small villages as a safe place to hide. But he was disappointed remembering all too clearly his youthful aspiration of becoming a professor of history in a large university.

He had read about the fertile Neckarland region after obtaining his position. This corner of Germany had escaped the worst of the war. Schweinfort was small enough to have merited only an occasional visit by the SS. Most likely, there were few if any Jews in residence before the war. He kept in mind that it would not be smart to show the slightest interest in the Jewish question. "*After all,*" he thought, "*as an historian I should be neutral, a simple observer and recorder of events, always on the sidelines.*"

The car stopped in front of the inn's heavy wooden doors. Mayor Maemmer laid his hand on Wilhelm's leg. "A minute, please. I will try to come back and share supper with you. If you are too tired, have Johannes Wolfgang call me. Now, you go in and ask his son to come out for your luggage. I will not unlock the trunk until I see him. Use your cane carefully; the wet cobblestones are tricky. I've stumbled more than once, even without the excellent schnapps your good innkeeper makes."

There was a bite in the air when Wilhelm stepped out of the car and by the time he got to the door there was a fine film of ash on his face. The intermittent drizzle and strong winds had turned some farmer's burn-off into a disaster. The heavy door opened readily with the front hall giving on to the registration desk. The wall behind held a cubbyhole containing keys. In the large hall on the right that served as a bar and restaurant was

Johannes Wolfgang Immerhier, the innkeeper. He was polishing glasses behind the long, solid wooden bar. He put the glass down and broke into a smile, waving Wilhelm over as he came forward removing his apron.

“Ah, dear Professor Doctor Neimann, come in. I’ll send out my son for your luggage. I am sure Herr Maemmer would not permit you to carry it in yourself, such weather. Still, it will help with the late crops and greens. Do come in; sit down. I’ll fetch us both some of my own special schnapps. It will take the chill out of your bones. My bones are never cold.” The innkeeper chuckled at his joke.

Wilhelm was shown to a small round table and Johannes Wolfgang hurried to return with the tray that was waiting on the bar. He sat down across from Wilhelm and poured two generous amounts into brandy snifters.

Inclining his head Wilhelm said, “Many thanks, however, I am neither a Professor nor a Doctor; ‘Wilhelm’ will do well enough. This, then, for your health.”

“Yes, for health and may you have a long and pleasant stay in our little village – a stay that greets each day with a smile and a happy heart,” the innkeeper replied. They brought their glasses together. Following his host’s lead, Wilhelm took a healthy swallow and then caught his breath.

Johannes laughed. “Ah, it takes a while to get used to, but only a little longer than its downward journey. Then, please, I am Johannes. And see, here is my son with your luggage.” He laughed again and waved Wolfgang over. “My son, Wolfgang Johannes; for him ‘Wolfie’ will do until all his whiskers are gray. Wolfie, this is our new teacher, Herr Neimann. He has just swallowed some of your father’s schnapps and I now proclaim him a citizen in good standing of Schweinfurt.”

Wolfie placed the luggage on the floor and greeted Wilhelm with the strong handshake of youth. Johannes saw the

slight grimace on Wilhelm's face and shook his head. "Wolfie, the war is long over. Handshakes are not the battlefield. I am sure Herr Neimann has suffered enough pain already. So, be a good lad and take Herr Neimann's luggage up to his rooms."

Wolfie blushed and quickly apologized. "I am truly sorry. Father says I must have a blacksmith's blood in me. It's my weight training. I will bring you a beer I made especially to chase down my father's schnapps. Both will help you relax before supper. And then, if there's anything else you need or would like to know, I'm at your service." Wolfie bowed, picked up the luggage and started to the stairs across the front hall from the bar.

Seeing that his father was embarrassed, Wilhelm quickly said, "There is no harm done. I too was once young before the war which has a way of aging a person quickly. I feel twice my age and have the hobble to prove it."

Johannes protested, "No, that is not so. Come, another toast; I'm told it is an elixir of youth. Here is your room key, and when your glass is empty, or not, you may follow Wolfie up to your room. I am sure between my schnapps and my son's beer you will nap soundly. We will wake you for supper at seven if that's agreeable. I think there will be few other guests for supper and if the mayor cannot come, I will be honored to sit with you in his stead."

He downed his schnapps and patted his belly as he stood up. "My Hilda is an excellent cook; you don't get this way just from schnapps and beer alone. If you wish, Wilhelm, I'll have Wolfie bring up a little snack with his beer."

Wilhelm came to his feet slowly. "Yes, I see that this should be sipped. Perhaps then, if Wolfie doesn't mind, the beer and snack will most likely help me nap for an hour or so."

They walked over to the stairs as Wolfie came bounding down. "Wolfie, be so good as to walk up again with Herr

Neimann. Perhaps take his coat and portmanteau. He can check out his room and let you know if anything is lacking. If not, another trip for your beer and a snack – some dark bread and cheese.”

Wolfie helped Wilhelm get settled into his suite. “I’ve put your luggage on the bed in the other room. Your coat can go in the closet here by the door. The windows from this room look out over our creek. In the distance, when it’s not raining, you can see one lonely aspen tree marking its bank. Heinrich Maemmer, the mayor’s brother, can tell you about it if you ask. Father says it’s older than his grandfather. The Neckar River lies still further to the east. I’ll be back in a moment with the beer and cheese. But please let me know if you would like anything else.”

He returned carefully holding a tray with a large stein of sparkling ale threatening to spill over the rim and a plate with bread and cheese. He took two apples from his pockets. “The apples tend to roll off the tray; they’re from Klingerheim’s farm. I’ll put everything on the table near the window. I’ll knock ten minutes before seven if you wish. Enjoy.”

Wilhelm walked over to the window and stood with his hands behind his back. The drizzle showed no sign of abating. He grimaced thinking, *Schweinfurt is neither Stuttgart nor Frankfurt but perhaps it will work out well. My few belongings and books should arrive within two days. Perhaps I’ll be busy enough to avoid depression.* In the distance he could see the smudge rising slowly from a farmer’s burn-off. *That accounts for the ash that greeted me at the door.*

He sat down in the armchair next to the table and lifted the stein to his lips. He sampled the cheese and black bread before cutting two slices from one of the apples. Sighing, he closed his eyes. *Herr Doctor Professor...as a child I had hopes. Hitler and the war changed all that. Several operations and two years of physical therapy just to walk. Another year to earn my diploma from a local gymnasium completing studies interrupted*

by the war. Then seven more years in universities, first Frankfurt then Stuttgart. Everything but the final dissertation. Then neither the money nor the time. When he turned thirty-two the government withdrew its support. He was convinced that the Adenauer government wished to bury its recent Aryan past.

Wilhelm woke to find the drizzle was gone and the distant hills in shadow. He struggled to get up from his chair. In damp weather his old wounds were still painful, a physical pain he had learned to tolerate. The hidden past was troubling. The records from the eastern front were in shambles if they could be found at all and no one was willing to help him uncover the events surrounding his decorations. He could only confirm that he was with his battalion in the general area of Kharkov in the Ukraine when he was wounded.

They had told him, “It would be best that you forget about this and get on with your life.”

He protested. “How am I supposed to go on with my life if I cannot remember what happened and I am worried about what I might have done?”

The health officers had little sympathy reminding him that if he had done anything bad, he would have been on the list for the Nuremberg trials. “Besides,” they added, “you were only a lowly *Obersoldat* [private first class].” He had been dismissed.

However, his sense of justice recognized even a single small matter requires rectification. He was nagged by his ignorance of what this small matter could have been.

The hills were now all in shadows as he went to wash before supper. The face he saw in the mirror above the basin appeared as a stranger to him.

2.

Wolfgang knocked softly before seven as he had promised. Wilhelm opened the door and said, "I am almost ready. your potions helped me sleep. I will be down shortly."

In the large hall downstairs the empty tables that Wilhelm had noticed on his arrival were now covered with linen cloths. Plain glass vases with various clusters of wildflowers were set in their center. Wolfgang led Wilhelm to a small table off to one side. "I think you will like this table. You can easily see out into the rest of the hall and yet remain somewhat to the side. It is a perfect place for an historian. Would you like something to drink first? Ah yes, I almost forgot, Herr Maemmer called and regrets he cannot come after all. Perhaps, tomorrow for lunch if that's all right with you?"

Wilhelm declined the drink saying he was still tired. "Lunch with the mayor tomorrow will be fine. But I think now a light supper and an early retirement."

Wolfgang waved his sister over. "Herr Neimann, this is my sister, Brunhilda. She will help you order. We are truly a family restaurant. Father is there by the bar and my mother, Hilda, is our principal cook. Our little Schweinfurt is a small world; Mother is the mayor's sister!"

Wilhelm ordered the schnitzel and had a glass of red wine with dinner. He ate slowly. When it was time for dessert, Johannes came and sat down at his table.

"I hoped you enjoyed the schnitzel, it is one of my favorite dishes. Hilda always makes extra so I can have some after we close. Everything is fine – the food and your room? Good. So now, you have met our family, all but Grandfather Wolfgang Johannes who is now in a home. You look confused;

do not worry I'll explain. We can bring your dessert into the other room by the hearth, or, if you wish, we can stay here."

Johannes got up and returned to the bar. Brunhilda came over and asked if he would like any dessert or coffee. Wilhelm begged off the dessert but wondered if another glass of wine would help him to sleep, chuckling to himself, *I guess my light supper was not to be*. The damp weather made his wounds throb and he thought how the war had made him older than his thirty-two years. Emanuel had pointed out the gymnasium and said that it was but a short walk but they were unaware of his limp.

Wilhelm had said nothing. And always, in the back of his mind, this soft nagging that something else had happened shortly before his last battle, something that he should remember.

Johannes returned with two glasses and a bottle of brandy. "Come; let us move to more comfortable chairs by the hearth and this will take care of whatever chill may remain from the rain. There is no fire, for that, we wait until October 1. It is our tradition like alternating our names."

Wilhelm smiled, "Yes, a comfortable chair would be welcome, and then perhaps you can explain the tradition with your names? I'm sure the brandy will warm my limbs more than the wine."

When they were seated to one side of the hearth Johannes began his story. "Ach, yes, our names. For many generations we have been alternating father to son and the once again. We switch back and forth. There was a family bible, unfortunately lost in the war, burnt, but we knew most of the story and so we now have a newer Bible and an abridged genealogy. Thankfully great grandfather's memory was good. I am sure we must have written down most of the Johannes Wolfgangs and Wolfgang Johannes's. Perhaps we missed a few generations early on, but that's not so important. After all they would still be Wolfgang Johannes or Johannes Wolfgang."

Wilhelm nodded in agreement and then a twinge in his right leg caused him to grimace.

Noting the obvious pain, Johannes said, "I will give you the whole story later. The hearth here is part of the story. I'm sure you're tired and need to get some rest."

Wilhelm struggled to his feet. "I must apologize. Even this short move has proven more tiring than I would have predicted. Mayor Maemmer was kind enough to offer to check on my belongings. If the removal company comes tomorrow, perhaps you can have Wolfie direct them to my room."

Johannes got up and said, "Come, I will walk with you to the stairs and wish you a *guten nacht*."

Wilhelm went to bed early. He slept soundly until seven, then showered and shaved. He came down for breakfast at eight. A buffet was set out on the bar. Brunhilda was standing off to one side doing her best to appear in charge. She greeted Wilhelm with a forced smile. "Good morning, Herr Neimann. Please help yourself. When you find a seat, I will bring you something to drink – tea or coffee, or perhaps milk?"

"Thank you, Brunhilda. A glass of milk would be nice but then later, a cup of coffee would be even better. I will help myself, as you kindly suggested, and then go over to the table where I was sitting last night. Would that be all right?"

Brunhilda nodded watching as Wilhelm placed eggs and a single piece of toast on his plate. He moved down the buffet stopping before the fruit. "The fruit appears fresh. Is it local?"

Brunhilda answered curtly, "Oh, yes, the Klingerheim kids, Gretchen and Jonnie, bring fruits and berries every morning in season or at least until school starts. They are really good. Gretchen told me it's because of their father's compost pile."

He spooned berries and nuts into a small bowl of porridge. Brunhilda followed him to his table with a glass of

milk. By the time he signaled for a cup of coffee, he was the only occupant in the restaurant.

Brunhilda came over with his coffee and asked if he would like a *kuchen* to go with the coffee. “My Aunt Ravina bakes them in her bakery. She’s not really my aunt but in our small village, we all look out for each other. Kids are always calling their parents’ friends ‘Aunt’ or ‘Uncle.’ And Aunt Ravina’s sweet rolls are especially good. My real Aunt Berta helps her.”

Looking around to check that they were alone, she leaned over and asked in a whisper, “Were you in the SS, Herr Neimann? Is that why they sent you here?”

Wilhelm was shocked by the accusation. He answered with an edge to his voice, “No, most certainly not. I was a plain foot soldier on the eastern front. We were four hundred kilometers east of Kiev when I was wounded. Why do you wish to know?”

“Because some damn SS Officer shot my Uncle Fritz here in the courtyard. I was not even nine. Things like that make a lasting impression on a child. So, were you in the SS?”

He sighed and answered again, “Most definitely not. Do you wish to talk about it?”

“No! And you can get your own coffee from behind the bar!” Brunhilda’s eyes darted about and her mouth opened wide as if she would scream. Suddenly she turned and rushed from the dining room.

Wilhelm sat in shock. He shook his head. *How sad it is to still be terrified by the Nazis. What a strange young woman. She must be more than twenty but she made her exit like a scared ten year old. And her blue eyes were like icicles.*

He refilled his coffee cup and limped back to his table. He was puzzled; perhaps he would learn more later. A few minutes later Wolfie came in to announce that the school had

sent over the textbooks for his classes. "I've taken the liberty to bring them up to your rooms and left them outside your door. When you are through eating I can bring up an urn of coffee and you can look over the books. Or if you prefer, I can bring the books back down to our library and set things up there for you to work."

Thanking Wolfie for his offer he said, "Yes, a small pot of coffee would be nice but I would prefer to work in my rooms. I have had enough of breakfast in any case."

Wolfie knocked on Wilhelm's door at one; Emanuel and Heinrich had arrived for lunch. When Wilhelm came to their table Emanuel introduced his brother. "Wilhelm, I thought I would bring along my older brother. Heinrich is the pharmacist here in Schweinfurt and also functions at times as our doctor. I dare say this is one of the few times you need not worry that the chemist will misread the doctor's prescription. We are a small village and cannot support a full-time doctor. One comes regularly on Wednesday afternoons using a back room in the apothecary. Prescriptions can be filled on the spot. Best then you stay healthy."

Wilhelm shook hands and Emanuel continued. "His herbal medicines are most effectual. He has even been known to set an arm or leg should they be fractured. No need to rush off to Stuttgart to see a specialist."

They had poached sole and garden vegetables for lunch. After finishing the first cup of coffee, Emanuel begged to be excused, "I have a meeting scheduled at 2:30."

After he left, Heinrich addressed Wilhelm. "Please don't think me rude, I noticed your limp when you came in. It is a nice day and the apothecary is only a few kilometers away on the village square. If you would like, I have my own car here and we can drive when we finish. You will get to see our little village and discover all the many things an apothecary needs to stock in these modern times."

Wilhelm nodded. “Yes, a little fresh air would be nice and learning more about Schweinfort would be helpful.”

On the short drive into town, Wilhelm reflected that the two brothers had only their ears and cast of their eyes in common. Emanuel was a few centimeters shorter and broader of shoulder. He was dark while Heinrich was ruddy, as if he were a woodsman.

It was nearly three when Heinrich unlocked the apothecary, a corner store on the west side of the square. A faded sign of a mortar and pestle hung out at an angle above the door.

Heinrich smiled when he saw that Wilhelm had taken note. The word “Apothicaire” could still be read in a fine flowery hand.

“Ah, you’ve noticed my sign. The story goes back to the time of Napoleon and that’s why ‘Apothecary’ is in French. Napoleon came through here on one of his many campaigns. One of our grandparents was able to help an ailing general of his with some herbs and a salve. A year later, a messenger delivered the sign saying it was from the Emperor himself by way of thanks. We have had a long line of apothecaries in our family. Someone once said that we are now waiting for another war so that our sign can be replaced. Thankfully, we were spared that honor in this last war, and I for one, would prefer never to have such an honor again.

“So, now if you would like, I can look at your leg and see if I might have something that can help. If not, also fine.”

“Whatever help you could provide would be appreciated. The university doctors told me not to expect any further improvement in my mobility or lessening of the pain.”

They went through the store into a back room that served both Heinrich and the visiting doctor. Heinrich made a thorough

examination and suggested: “I have a salve I would like you to massage into both buttocks at night; it will have a cooling effect. In addition, I will give you some herbal pills to take at night before going to bed. They will reduce the slight swelling that remains.”

They went into the store proper to the counter where Heinrich prepared his salves and pills. Ten minutes later he handed them to Wilhelm who reached for his wallet.

Heinrich held up his hand. “Oh no, I could not accept any payment. We need all our teachers strong and healthy. Besides, we do not yet know if these will work. Shall we plan in ten days, two Sundays, to hike to the lone aspen on our creek. If you want, then, I will tell you how I have come to these salves and herbals. I think it’s time to take you back to the inn.”

The ride seemed shorter. A few minutes later, Wilhelm was dropped off in front of the inn. He thanked Heinrich once again for the medications. On the way up to his room, he realized that Heinrich reminded him of an uncle he had last seen in 1938. He had not thought about this uncle in more than a decade, not since his mother had written him of his death early in the war.