RANDOM HOUSE eBOOKS

Charles Bukowski

Barry Miles

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About the Book

‘Fear makes me a writer, fear and a lack of confidence’

Charles Bukowski chronicled the seedy underside of the city in which he spent most of his life, Los Angeles. His heroes were the panhandlers and hustlers, the drunks and the hookers, his beat the racetracks and strip joints and his inspiration a series of dead-end jobs in warehouses, offices and factories. It was in the evenings that he would put on a classical record, open a beer and begin to type…

Brought up by a violent father, Bukowski suffered childhood beatings before developing horrific acne and withdrawing into a moody adolescence. Much of his young life epitomised the style of the Beat generation – riding Greyhound buses, bumming around and drinking himself into a stupor. His first story was published when he was 24 and his first poetry when he was 35. His novels have sold millions of copies worldwide in dozens of languages.

In this definitive biography Barry Miles, celebrated author of *Jack Kerouac: King of the Beats*, turns his attention to the exploits of this hard-drinking, belligerent wild man of literature. This is an essential addition to every Bukowski fan’s collection.

About the Author

Barry Miles is the critically acclaimed author of the biographies of Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac and William Burroughs (all published by Virgin) and of *The Beat Hotel*. He also wrote *Hippie* and the authorised biography of Paul McCartney, *Many Years From Now*.

Also by Barry Miles published by Virgin Books:

BEAT COLLECTION
ALLEN GINSBERG: A BIOGRAPHY
JACK KEROUAC: KING OF THE BEATS
WILLIAM BURROUGHS: EL HOMBRE INVISIBLE

CHARLES BUKOWSKI

Barry Miles

AUTHOR’S NOTE

Henry Charles Bukowski Junior was called Henry by his parents. His friends called him Hank, or sometimes Buke. He disliked being called Buck, as in fuck, ‘I’m *Buke*,[1] like in puke.’ Both words, of course, would have appealed to him as a way of shocking the conformist neighbours. I shall call him Hank, throughout, in order to distinguish between father and son.

INTRODUCTION

IN THE EARLY 60s there were scores, if not hundreds, of small literary magazines with names like *Wormwood Review, Dust, Ole* and *Nadada* being published in America, often from small towns I had never heard of. They were occasionally hand printed, like the *Outsider,* often mimeographed, and almost always produced as a labour of love, usually by someone with a factory job, or sometimes by a sympathetic academic in a midwestern college. They were available from a dozen or so bookstores worldwide, but were mostly sold by mail order; many of them ran lists of other magazines that carried similar material, often with brief reviews of the latest issue. The same names of contributors occurred time and again, but none so frequently as Charles Bukowski.

From 1965 until 1970 I had a bookshop of my own and carried everything of Bukowski's that I could lay my hands on: books, magazines, and even a record. First we stocked the little mimeograph chapbooks, then the beautiful, signed limited editions from Black Sparrow. And in 1967 the underground newspapers began, together with a flood of small broadsides and pamphlets.

In 1968 I was made the label manager for Zapple, an experimental division of Apple, the Beatles' record company. John Lennon and Paul McCartney asked me to record a series of poetry albums for them and so I prepared a list which included Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Richard Brautigan, Michael McClure, Allen Ginsberg, Kenneth Patchen and half a dozen others. High on the list was Charles Bukowski. All four Beatles gave the project their blessing so, in January 1969, I travelled to Los Angeles to make a spoken word album with him.

I arrived at 5125 1/2 De Longpre Avenue in a slummy part of East Hollywood near the 20th Century Fox Studios on Sunset in a rented green Mustang that looked gleamingly conspicuous in the shabby street. The single storey wooden-frame house had peeling paint and there were holes in the screen doors. Hank's house had a struggling hedge to one side, and his '57 Plymouth was parked on the patchy remains of his front lawn. The overflowing garbage cans had paper sacks filled with bottles and beer cans were stacked around them, awaiting collection.

The screen door opened straight into his living room. The shades were drawn. Rickety bookshelves were overloaded with books, magazines, old newspapers and racing forms. The settee had a hole where the stuffing was bursting out. There was a pile of car tyres in the corner and many empty beer cans. In another corner was Hank's desk with his huge, battered, sit-up-and-beg, black cast-iron Remington, dusty but for the carriage and keys, surrounded by cigar butts and ash, crumpled paper. Hank went straight down to the corner store and returned with a six-pack of Miller Light in glass bottles.

He was still working at the post office and wondering if it would ever be possible for him to make it as a professional poet. Essex House had just published *Notes of a Dirty Old Man*, a collection of his underground press columns, as a mass market paperback and he had been encouraged by this latest development.

We talked about the record. He was casual, relaxed and said that he had made a lot of home recordings before but he had not yet done a public reading. He hated the idea of performing in public. He said it was show business, an ego trip, but actually he was also shy, and concerned that he would make a fool of himself. I was unable to persuade him to come to a recording studio, unknown territory with ample opportunities for him to embarrass himself. He wanted to make the record at home, alone: ‘Sure, just show me how the machine works and come back in a few days. I’ll just curl up on the rug with some packs of beer, my books, turn on the machine and …’ I wired up an Ampex 3000, arranged a microphone stand and microphone, headphones and twelve reels of blank tape. He refused to allow me, or anyone else, to be present to supervise the recording, saying he was too shy.

When I returned a week later, Hank was looking a bit hungover. There was a middle-aged woman with him, in black fishnet stockings and a black slip. She disappeared into the bedroom without speaking, emerging some time later ready to leave, looking tired and worn-out. Hank crushed some notes into her hand. ‘Car fare’, he said, as much to me as to her. Nothing in the room had changed. The Ampex was where I had left it and, for a moment, I was worried that he had not recorded anything. But it was done. He had filled every reel with the poems and stories that we had selected: six hours of his favourite pieces. In fact he had attempted to record ‘on the other side’, not realising that professional tape recorders do not work like that, and he had, therefore, inadvertently wiped his first recordings. He said to be sure to listen to the story called ‘The Fire Station’ as he liked that best of all.

I thought the results were wonderful, a mix of poems and stories – perfect for the series I had planned. We called it *At Terror Street and Agony Way*. Unfortunately, before I even had time to edit the tapes, the Zapple label was closed by the Beatles’ new business manager Allen Klein and the poetry recordings were left unedited and unreleased. Over the years I managed to get most of the tapes out on other labels, but it was not until 1993 that *At Terror Street and Agony Way* finally reached the stores as a double CD on the King Mob label. Sadly, even that is now unavailable.

In rereading Hank’s books for this biography I found that his work was still fresh, it has not dated, it goes straight to the point. He gave a voice to the disenfranchised, the marginalised, the mad and dysfunctional, the factory hand, the working people, the drunk and disorderly. He made a point of always trying to write clearly so that people knew exactly what he was saying. He did not use a dictionary. He avoided long words and tried to use the easiest, simplest words possible. He told Jean-Francois Duval: ‘I like it raw, easy and simple. That way, I don’t lie to myself.’ In other words, he told the truth.

1. HOUSE OF TORTURE

IT WAS THE summer of 1939; Charles Bukowski had just graduated from Los Angeles High School. As usual, the Senior Prom was held in the girls' gym, which had been decorated with white crepe paper and had balloons in a net over the dance floor ready to be released on the dancers. A live combo played numbers like 'Deep Purple' and all the teenagers dressed in formal wear: tuxedos for the boys and long satin ball gowns for the girls. Hank did not have anyone to take but something drew him to the dance. He walked the two and a half miles from his parents' house and stood outside in the starless darkness, peering in through a wire-mesh covered window. He was amazed at the sight of his friends and classmates transformed from schoolchildren into adults so that he almost didn't recognise them as they danced, the boys very upright and straight, holding their dates in their arms, faces pressed into the girls' freshly permed hair. The girls had become women, very grown-up, stately, lovely. They looked wonderful. The boys were also transformed, they were handsome, confident, behaving with exaggerated politeness. Then Hank caught a glimpse of his reflection in the glass, staring in at them: the boils and scars on his face, his ragged shirt. He felt like some jungle animal drawn to the light and looking in. He wondered why he had come. He felt nauseous but kept watching. The dance ended and there was a pause while everyone left the floor. The couples chatted easily to each other. It all seemed natural and civilised. Hank could not understand where they had learned to converse like that and to dance. He couldn't converse or dance. Everybody was possessed of this secret knowledge but him. In any case, he knew that he would be too terrified even to look at one of those girls, let alone be close to her and talk. To look into her eyes or dance with her would have been beyond him.

The music began again and the mirror globe revolved overhead washing the couples in moving points of red, blue, green and gold light. In *Ham on Rye* Bukowski remembers: 'And yet I knew that what I saw wasn't as simple and good as it appeared. There was a price to be paid for it all, a general falsity, that could be easily believed, and could be the first step down a dead-end street.' But it became too much for him to take, waves of loneliness swept over him, and he began to hate them, he hated their beauty, their sureness and confidence, their untroubled youth and their happiness. He repeated to himself: 'Someday I will be as happy as any of you, you will see.' Suddenly Hank's soliloquy was interrupted by the night-watchman, who appeared with a flashlight and demanded to know what he was doing. Gesturing, he told Hank to get lost before he called the cops. Hank protested that he was a senior and this was the Senior Prom and he had every right to be there. 'Bullshit,' said the man, shining his torch on Hank's scarred face. 'You're at least 22 years old.' The man followed him down the path, his flashlight edging him on, step by step off the campus, the music fading behind him. There are parallels between this archetypal scene and Charlie Chaplin's *The Gold Rush* where Chaplin's 'Little Man' watches a New Year party in full swing through a window. It is Hank as the outsider, the loner, the Frozen Man. Hank's life and that of the 'Little Man' have much in common: the series of menial jobs, the slapstick humour, the buffoonery, even a boxer theme; the park benches and dead end jobs, the destitution, the poverty. And, in the best Hollywood tradition, Hank's story even has a happy ending.

The German–Americans constitute one of the largest ethnic groups in the United States; there are more of them than English–Americans or Irish–Americans. By the beginning of the twentieth century, 10 per cent of the population was of German extraction. Hank’s grandfather Leonard emigrated to the United States in the 1880s after fighting in the war of 1870 when Bismarck defeated Napoleon III. In Cleveland he met eighteen-year-old Emilie Krause, whose family had emigrated to the United States from Danzig (now Gdansk) which was then in Germany. They married, settling in Pasadena. In 1904, after many years as a carpenter, Leonard started his own construction company. Pasadena and Los Angeles were both booming; at the top end of the scale this was the period of the Greene Brothers and the Craftsmen movement in California, and at the bottom end it was a time when thousands of sub-standard Spanish stucco boxes were thrown up. Anyone who knew how to build was inundated with work. Leonard did very well for himself and built a large two-storey home for his family. He and Emilie had four sons and two daughters, beginning with John who was born in 1881. Next came Charles followed by Hank’s father Henry, then Emma, Eleanor and the youngest, Ben.

The origin of the Bukowski family name is not known: they may well come from Bukowsko, a village in the L’vov district in Galicia near the present Polish border. Bukowsko is probably a derivation of Bukowski, the family name of a minor squire named Buk, from the Ukrainian ‘buk’ or beech. He was ennobled as a reward for his service as armour-bearer to his knight fighting the Turks in Vienna, a famous victory that stopped Islam in its tracks. Thus Buk became Bukowski. (Another version has the village simply named after some beech trees.) The Bukowskis are therefore either descendants of minor Polish nobility or, more likely, descendants of the many Jews who settled there in the eighteenth century, attracted by the town’s annual trade fair and later by the establishment of a powerful Hasidic court.

Hank's parents met when Henry Bukowski was a sergeant in the American army of occupation after the defeat of Germany in 1918. He was stationed in Andernach, a small town on the left bank of the Rhine, ten miles northwest of Koblenz in the Rhineland-Palatinate. Andernach is one of the oldest towns in Germany; it is the old Antunnacum, the Roman Castellum ante Nacum, a frontier garrison town founded by Drusus in 12 BC when the Romans began their wars against the Germanic tribes on the right bank of the river. They enlarged the river harbour and built the town walls, the foundations of which are still standing. In 1253 Andernach joined the confederation of the Rhine cities and was the southernmost member of the Hanseatic League. In 1794 Andernach passed to France, but was ceded to Prussia in 1815 together with the left bank of the Rhine. Its long history has left a treasure house of monuments and old buildings including the thirteenth-century Romanesque basilica, the Pfarrkirche Maria Himmelfahrt, whose four towers dominate the town.

Sergeant Henry Bukowski had an office job; Hank referred to him as a typist, but he had an advantage over most of the other American troops in that he spoke fluent German. He got to know Heinrich Fett, who managed the canteen for American troops, and they became friends. Heinrich lived at home with his parents, Nanatte and Wilhelm, a seamstress and a musician. Apparently music ran in the Fett family as we know that Wilhelm's father was a violin player who went from bar to bar, passing his hat until he had collected enough to buy a few drinks. He was often thrown out for being drunk and disorderly and simply moved on to the next bar and repeated the scenario. This was one family story that Hank enjoyed.

The war had caused many shortages and Henry was sometimes able to give the Fett family meat and other scarce foodstuffs. He had already glimpsed Heinrich’s sister Katherine, but it was not until he was invited to dinner that they were able to talk; she had previously resisted his advances and not replied when he shouted up to her from the street. Now they began an affair which quickly resulted in her becoming pregnant. Though Bukowski often claimed that he was born out of wedlock this was not so; Henry and Katherine were married on 15 July 1920 when she was eight months pregnant. The reason for the delay was so that Henry could first get demobilised. A month later, on 16 August, Heinrich Karl Bukowski was born at home in their apartment on the corner of Aktienstrasse near the railway station. Katherine’s parents were Catholics, as were the Bukowskis, and so Henry was baptised into the faith in the magnificent medieval font in the Mariendom.

There has been some speculation about Katherine Fett’s background as her mother’s maiden name, Nanatte Israel, suggests that she might have been Jewish. This would have made Hank Jewish as the transmission is through the maternal line. As Bukowski is also likely to be a Jewish name, Hank’s flirtation with Hitler and Nazism in the 40s was particularly unfortunate.

Out of the army, Henry first worked for the Rents, Requisitions and Claims Service before setting himself up as a self-employed building contractor; a boom industry following the destruction wreaked by the conflict. Two years after little Hank’s birth, his father moved the family to Pfaffendorf, on the outskirts of nearby Koblenz. This was a much larger city and even had an American consulate. It was a beautiful city with a medieval centre and, as the centre of the local wine industry, a thriving economy. The river Mosel joins the Rhine here. It seems likely that Henry would have settled there, but postwar inflation, largely caused by the stiff reparations imposed on Germany by the French at Versailles, brought the economy to the point of collapse. Unable to make a living, Henry decided, like his father before him, to take his family to the USA and, on 18 April 1923, they sailed from Bremerhaven to Baltimore on the SS *President Fillmore*.

They spent some months in Baltimore, but Henry was unable to find suitable employment so they moved on, back to Pasadena to join his parents.

There is not one building that you could show in a backdrop that people would instantly recognise as a Los Angeles setting, as you could with New York, London or Paris. The city is not that well known, it is formless, lacking in definition. The Hollywood sign on Mount Lee is the most recognisable structure in Los Angeles and that was originally an advertisement for the Hollywoodland subdivision. It is now given historic building protection: appropriate in a city where billboards are the main architectural feature. In Los Angeles there is no sense of place, the street landscape is so similar from one block to the next that the residents have to devise recognition tricks in order to cope with the long commutes, and an unfamiliar destination can often result in getting lost in the seemingly endless sprawl.

When three-year-old Hank arrived there were already 53 movie studios in Los Angeles, and the oil industry was rapidly expanding across the southern part of the city. During the 20s the landscape of Los Angeles was transformed by wooden oil derricks in what was to become the most intensive oil field development in American history, producing 20 per cent of the world’s output for that decade. In 1920 Los Angeles counted 576,673 residents but a decade later the census showed a population of 1,238,000. Hank arrived at a time of unprecedented growth. In the 20s Sunset Strip was still a dirt track; wheel ruts through citrus and avocado fields, subject to mudslides and flooding from the Hollywood Hills in the rainy season.

Then came Prohibition, and because the Strip was outside the City Limits where the county sheriffs were easily bribed, it quickly became home to brothels and speakeasies and, by the mid-1930s, accommodated some of the fanciest nightspots in the world, including the Trocadero, El Mocambo and Ciro’s. Sunset Strip was ideally located between the Hollywood studios and Beverly Hills where the stars had just begun to build their homes. Developers tried to open up the Hollywood Hills and, in 1923, construction began on Mulholland Drive (then called Mulholland Highway) but the lack of water, frequent fires and mudslides deterred the population and it wasn’t for another generation, not until after World War II, that property above the foothills was developed for anything except stables and riding schools.

Meanwhile the city spread south, following the Los Angeles River, and along the foothills, both east and west. Orange and citrus groves became freight yards and factories. There was a brutal open-shop, anti-union economy with wages generally about one third lower than other cities in the country, but the people still swarmed in, gulled by the boosterism of the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce.

There was a tremendous beauty in the mountain landscape. In *The Day of the Locust* Nathanael West captured the setting: ‘Hills rose directly behind his garage. They were covered with lupins, Canterbury bells, poppies, and several varieties of large yellow daisy. There were also some scrub pines, Joshua and Eucalyptus trees.’ The intense colours and the sunshine affects every writer who comes to Los Angeles. Even the normally hard-core John Rechy in *City of Night* felt moved to describe the flowers: ‘Blue and purple lupins, joshua trees with flowers held high,’ but added ‘You can rot here without feeling it.’ There were also the ubiquitous palm trees, including the indigenous California palm. In the 20s it was easy to reach the countryside, every third lot was vacant and you were never very far from the orange groves that surrounded the city. Oranges were everywhere, they not only gave their name to Orange County, due south of Los Angeles County, and to more than 140 streets, but entered everyday consciousness. When Raymond Chandler needed a simile in *Farewell My Lovely* he wrote: ‘A yellow window hung here and there, all by itself, like the last orange. Cars passed spraying the pavement with cold white light, then growled off into the darkness again.’ Everyone in southern California would have known what he meant.

The air was still clean and the sky was blue; the motor age only began in the 20s and there were very few cars. No freeways were built until after World War II with the exception of the Arroyo Seco Parkway, built in 1938, but that was only six miles long.

Pasadena was still best known as a winter retreat for eastern millionaires. This was where passenger trains terminated. The Union Station in downtown LA was only built in 1939, the last of the great train stations before air travel destroyed the railroads.

By the time Henry, Katherine and Hank arrived in Pasadena, Emilie and Leonard were estranged; a situation caused largely by Leonard’s fondness for whiskey. Though not divorced they lived separately, not seeing each other, and his name was never mentioned in her presence. Financially she was well cared for, having taken charge of most of Leonard’s money from his construction business. After the children had grown, Emilie had moved to a smaller house, one of several that Leonard owned, built under a grove of overhanging pepper trees. She had canaries, each one in a different cage, and every evening she would cover each cage with a white cloth so that the birds could sleep. She had a piano and on one visit, while the adults talked, little Hank played random notes on the keyboard. When his father told him to stop, his grandmother encouraged him, saying, ‘Let the boy play.’

Emilie was religious and always attended the sunrise Easter service. Movies she thought were sinful and would not see them but she always watched the Rose Bowl parade; she and Leonard had originally lived on South Pasadena Avenue, just down from the Rose Bowl in Brookside Park. She enjoyed the southern California lifestyle and liked to visit the beach where she sat primly on a bench, looking out to sea. Her austere German ways – no show of emotion, no kissing or touching her grandchildren – seemed completely out of place in the warm sunlight surrounded by brilliantly coloured flowers and shrubs, birds with bright plumage in the flowering bushes and waving palm trees. This frigid carapace did not mean she had no feelings; such restraint was common across the whole of Europe in the days of large families and very high child mortality; to get too close and then have the child die could be devastating. Many parents continued to maintain a heartbreaking distance between them and their children which only the 1960s generation really broke down. Jazz musician Art Pepper, born in 1925, had a parallel experience to Bukowski, brought up by a German grandmother in Los Angeles. In *Straight Life* he wrote: ‘She was a solid German lady … but she was cold, very cold and unfeeling … I saw that there was no warmth, no affection. I was terrified and completely alone. And at that time I realised that no one wanted me. There was no love and I wished I could die.’ At least Hank had better than this.

Most of our information about Bukowski’s childhood comes from his *Bildungsroman Ham on Rye*, but the same incidents are described again and again in scores of poems and interviews, each one adding a little more to the story: a new angle, an extra detail. Bukowski opens *Ham on Rye* with a description of hiding under the table in 1922

Germany, but as this memory includes his grandmother Emilie, it must have occurred in Pasadena. Most children remember nothing of their first three years of life but food was very important in the Bukowski family and one of the first things Bukowski tells us in *Ham on Rye* is what they ate: knockwurst and sauerkraut, chicken, green peas, carrots, spinach, string beans, meatballs and spaghetti, sometimes mixed in with ravioli. For breakfast they had waffles or hotcakes with scrambled eggs and bacon or French toast and sausages. On Sunday, when Emilie Bukowski came to visit, it was usually roast beef, mashed potatoes and gravy, followed by strawberry shortcake or apple pie with vanilla ice cream. German food remains the basis of American coffee shop cooking today and hamburgers and frankfurters have become symbolic of America itself.

Emilie was big and heavy and wore full-length skirts and dresses, her collar trimmed with antique lace and set off with a large glass brooch. According to Hank, she had a serious gas problem and would fart in loud bursts, four or five times, about a minute apart, just as the food was being served. Then she would say: 'I will bury you all.' Hank wrote: 'Every Sunday it was death and gas.'[1] She enjoyed her food, and ate enormous helpings. After apple pie and ice cream there would usually be a big argument with her son over nothing and Emilie would run out of the door and take the red car back to Pasadena. After she left, Henry would stride around the room, fanning the air with a newspaper to get rid of the smell, saying: 'It's all that damned sauerkraut she eats.'

Bukowski wrote about his grandmother a lot, always misspelling her name as Emily, using the American form. Emilie enjoyed visiting Henry and Katherine because Katherine, like her, had been born in Germany and had old-fashioned German manners which in Emilie's eyes made her superior to all the other wives and husbands of her children. Emilie Bukowski was self-sufficient and very independent. She regarded hospitals with disdain and never used them or called a doctor. One evening, when she was 87,[2] she keeled over and died while feeding her canaries.

Katherine and Emilie spoke German together; Katherine knew very little English when she arrived and always retained a thick German accent. German was also Hank's first language, but he soon forgot it. He struggled hard to lose his accent, too, because the neighbourhood children teased him mercilessly about it. When they arrived in Baltimore, Henry had quickly anglicised his family: Katherine became Kate or Katey, and little Heinrich became Henry. When they were together Hank's parents spoke German. Hank could hear them in the other room after he had gone to bed, and they also 'turned on the Deutsche' whenever they wanted to discuss something without him understanding.

In 1924, after a few months in Pasadena with Emilie, the family moved to Trinity Street, just south of downtown Los Angeles, near the old industrial district and the newly created Central Manufacturing District which extended along the already polluted Los Angeles River. The countryside was not far away, but things were changing rapidly; that same year three hundred acres of cauliflower fields near the river were dug up and replaced with the Union Pacific and Southern Pacific freight yards. They had a small house in a poor neighbourhood but little Hank was not allowed to play with the other children because they were poor. Their families were no more deprived than Hank's own parents but the Bukowskis aspired to be rich and they didn't want their son mingling with 'bad' children. The children would have only teased him anyway as Hank was dressed in clean formal clothes at all times in the German tradition and must have looked like a freak to them. The first time he played with children of his own age was when he went to kindergarten. He did not know how to relate to the other children. Because his father had not allowed him to join them in the street, he did not know how to catch a ball or swing a baseball bat. He was put in a game, someone threw a ball at him and he didn't know what to do. He dropped it. 'They seemed very strange, they laughed and talked and seemed happy. I didn't like them.'

Nonetheless he enjoyed kindergarten; they planted radish seeds and two weeks later they had grown and the children were able to eat them with salt, they painted in watercolours and did all the usual group activities. In the manner of the day, Hank was very strictly toilet trained and had been taught that everything to do with going to the bathroom was 'dirty'. This created big problems for him at kindergarten because he was ashamed to tell the teacher or to let the others know that he needed to go, so he held it. 'It was really terrible to hold it. And the air was white, I felt like vomiting.' When the other, less repressed children came back from using the toilets, Hank would look at them and think they were dirty, that they did something dirty in there. He always wanted to go to the bathroom. For Hank: 'Kindergarten was mostly white air.'[3]

Henry took a job delivering milk for the Los Angeles Creamery Company, making his rounds with a horse and cart. The horses provide one of the few tender moments with his father that Hank ever wrote about. One morning, when Hank was almost five, his father woke him. 'Come on, I want to show you something.' It was still dark and Hank walked outside with his father in the moonlight, still in his pyjamas and slippers. The horse was standing very still, harnessed to the wagon. 'Watch,' said his father and he put a sugar cube in his hand and offered it to the horse. The horse ate it from his palm. 'Now you try it …,' said Henry, putting a sugar cube in Hank's hand. Hank was afraid the horse would bite him, but Henry pushed him closer, telling him to hold out his hand. 'The head came down. I saw the nostrils; the lips pulled back, I saw the tongue and the teeth, and then the sugar cube was gone.' His father gave him another lump to feed the horse. It was a magical experience for the four-year-old child. The horse was so big, towering over him and he was aware of its great strength and was scared it would stand on his feet, but it was the most exciting thing that had ever happened to him. In 'Ice for the Eagles' he wrote: 'The horses were more real than/my father/more real than God.'[4] The horse shook its head in pleasure. 'Now,' said Henry, 'I'll take you back inside before the horse shits on you.'[5]

In another tender moment from *Ham on Rye* Hank describes his father playing games with the packaging of Camel cigarettes, having Hank count how many pyramids there were on the packet. His father could always find more. There were tricks to do with the camel's humps and the words on the package. It was a constant source of wonder to the little boy. Though we come to know his father as an argumentative, bombastic brute who dominated his cowed wife, Hank didn't actively dislike him until he started beating him, something which appears to have begun after Hank had started school, though it was very common in those unenlightened days for parents to beat their children.

If grandmother didn't visit, the family would drive out to the nearby orange groves on a Sunday. They had a metal chest that held dry ice in which they kept frozen cans of fruit. In the picnic basket went the weenies and liverwurst, the salami sandwiches and bananas and potato chips; good German fare. The fizzy drinks were continually switched from the icebox to the basket so that they would not freeze solid.

One memory that Hank revisited several times was a picnic trip during which his father climbed a fence and filled a picnic basket with oranges, only to be confronted by the orange grove's irate owner who ordered them off his property at gunpoint and without their stolen fruit. For all his lectures about the glories of the American way of life, Henry was not above breaking the property laws himself when he thought he might get away with it.

We only have a series of vignettes from Hank's early life. Hank was six years old the first time he met his grandfather. Leonard was a big, solidly built man, six foot three inches, and wore a long white beard and moustache. He had pure white hair and brilliant, sparkling blue eyes. Hank thought he was the most beautiful man he had ever seen. They drove over to see him in his father's Model T Ford. Hank's grandfather had been an army officer and stood up tall and straight in front of his little house. Hank's parents did not get out of the car so Hank walked alone over to the porch to meet him. He said, 'Hello Henry. You and I, we know each other.' There was the smell of whiskey on his breath, though Hank could not have known what that was at the time. Leonard clearly had a bootleg supply as this was in the middle of Prohibition. He took Hank into the house and invited him to sit down. Leonard went into another room and returned with a small tin box which he gave to Hank. Hank's small fingers could not open it so his grandfather did it for him. Inside were his medals from the war of 1870 including a Maltese cross on a ribbon. He gave them to Hank. They met only one more time (though in *Ham on Rye* the two meetings are conflated into one). This time he gave Henry his gold pocket watch on a long gold chain. Henry wound it up too tight and broke it, something he always felt bad about.[6]

In 1927 the family moved to a small Spanish-style bungalow at 4511 South 28th Street in Jefferson Park. Hank was sent to Virginia Road Grammar School, two blocks away between 29th and 30th. He felt like an outsider, the other children knew what to do; they used elaborate rituals to choose sides, they played complicated ball games that he did not know the rules for, they made circles and sang songs. He stood watching them, asking himself, What are they doing,[7] why are they doing that, why run in a circle like that? Even at that age a part of him thought, This is stupid. He told Fernanda Pivano: ‘I used to look at them and say, “What’s wrong with you?” And they’d look at me and say, “Hey, there’s something wrong with you.” The crowd was always here, and I was always there, from the very beginning. And there’s just an impasse.’ He told Steve Richmond: ‘I’ve never felt good with the crowd and it started in grammar school,[8] I sensed that they touched each other, but that I did not belong.’ It was something that stayed with him: ‘The worst part is that I do not even belong with the *best* ones, the living ones, I seem sliced off forever by some god damn trick, either my imagining or some type of insanity, but even the good ones leave me dangling and I feel like a fool, and I know that I am a fool for I feel what I know.’ It was the schoolyard he really disliked;[9] the embarrassment of always being chosen next to last on the baseball team.

But it wasn’t all alienation at school: his teachers praised his painting, calling him a genius, and he relaxed enough to begin using the bathroom, but only to piss. Hank was often constipated, sometimes so much so that his mother would take him to the doctor. Hank’s bowels were of great interest to him and the subject of numerous poems and asides in his books. In the poem ‘Poop’ he described his problems in digesting his food while facing his father across the table. Henry would wipe up the gravy on his plate with a piece of bread and chew his food with greasy lips, spittle flying as he engaged in idiotic conversation. He noisily slurped his coffee then wiped his face with a huge white napkin and then leaned back to relax with a Camel,[10] lighting it with a kitchen match that he would put, still burning, into the ashtray. Hank tried to swallow his food but ‘it all turned to glue inside’.[11]

It was at Virginia Road Grammar School that Hank had his first problem with teachers. It appears he had some form of dyslexia; in the poem ‘Education’ he says he had trouble differentiating between the words ‘sing’ and ‘sign’, he couldn’t get the order of the letters right. There was something there he couldn’t overcome. The teacher, Mrs Sims, asked Hank’s mother to come and see her and told her he was not learning anything and not trying. Dyslexia was unknown then, so it seemed that he was either dumb or slacking. Mrs Bukowski began to cry, upsetting the teacher so much that she said she would give Hank another chance. His mother said: ‘Oh Henry, your father is so disappointed in you,[12] I don’t know what we are going to do.’ She shared the teacher’s view that he was just being lazy, but her reaction also showed her own fear of her husband. The event was burned into Hank’s memory and more than forty years later he could still remember Mrs Sims’s fierce pointed face thick with white powder.

Hank was, in one incident, picked on by a school bully and provoked into a fight. When the teacher broke it up, Hank was blamed and he found himself in the headmaster’s office. Regarding him as a troublemaker, the headmaster taunted him, ‘Think you’re a tough guy, eh?’ and shook his hand, squeezing it harder and harder until he screamed in pain. He gave Hank a note in a sealed envelope to take to his parents. In Germany, teachers had the same status as a judge or a doctor and Hank’s mother was beside herself with anxiety at the shame and disgrace of it all. It was either for this, or for the sloppy work caused by dyslexia – reports vary – that Hank was beaten when his father got home. It was the first time that Henry used his razor strop.

The first blow shocked him more than anything else, but each following blow increased the pain. At first he saw the confining walls, and the toilet and bath, but after a while he couldn’t see anything. With each stroke Henry upbraided him, but Hank couldn’t understand the words. Suddenly

Hank began to sob, swallowing and choking on the tears and mucus in his throat and Henry stopped. Hank's mother was standing outside in the hall. 'Why didn't you help me?' he asked.

'The father is always right,' she said.

To her the father and husband was the unquestioned head of the household. To Hank it simply meant that she had no love for him and the incident permanently alienated him from his parents. He did not love them, or care anything for them, and had all the usual children's fantasies that they were not his real parents but that they must have adopted him. Somewhere, he felt, there were some real parents, capable of love not just the blind obedience to authoritarian dogma. He did not feel rejected, he just felt as if he were in the wrong place, with the wrong parents. Like many children he would lie in bed in the dark and think: 'Those aren't my parents in the other room,[13] that's somebody else.'

This was at a time when corporal punishment was commonplace, both at home and in most schools, particularly Catholic ones. 'Spare the rod and spoil the child' and 'children should be seen and not heard' were typical of the reactionary clichés that guided the lives of many unthinking people and, though most survived it relatively unscathed, there were some particularly sensitive children whose lives were destroyed or warped by such casual brutality. No one doubts the pain and trauma inflicted on Hank, or that there was an obvious element of sadism in his father's behaviour, at least when Hank was older. We can also see a mindless vacuity in his mother's blind acceptance of her husband's authority; however, Bukowski managed to parlay his whippings into something possibly a great deal more sinister than they actually were. At least in these early days the Bukowskis sound like a typical working-class, authoritarian family, determined to 'beat sense' into their recalcitrant child in the days before knowledge of Freud, Dr Spock and popular psychology was widespread or even existed. Later, during the Depression years when the family was under considerable strain, and Hank was an adolescent questioning his father's authority, there is no doubt that Hank's beatings were part of an Oedipal power struggle.

Fighting was part of everyday life, something Hank grew up with and was even enamoured of. As a teenager he fought a lot; as an adult he enjoyed and sought out bar fights. Later he followed boxing and attended matches, even toying with the idea of entering the ring himself. When he was little, however, he avoided violence if he possibly could. It was hard to be a German kid in Los Angeles in the 20s. The Great War was not long over and anti-German feeling still ran high. Hank used to be chased by the neighbourhood kids yelling: 'Heinie! Heinie! Heinie!' but they never caught him. He knew all the back alleys and dead ends, the backyards and chicken coops, the empty lots filled with brush, the garage roofs and crawl spaces. It was a game. They didn't really want to catch him either in case he turned into a real German and bayoneted them.

Hank's mother no doubt suffered, also, from anti-German feeling. She desperately missed her family and was lonely for German friends. Sometimes Henry would take her to the Deutsche Haus, at 634 15th Street, a German social centre not far from their house where they could eat, listen to a German band and buy German magazines and newspapers. Sometimes there were movies and documentaries about Germany. They usually went after church on Sundays, but it was a boring event for Hank because he didn't speak the language.

Each afternoon, when school ended, there would be a fight between two of the older boys out by the back fence. They were never fair fights; there was always a smaller boy whose face would be pounded bloody. 'The smaller boys took their beatings wordlessly,[14] never begging, never asking for mercy.’ It was the survival of the fittest and Hank quickly became adept at the ways of the jungle. He seems to have avoided fights at Grammar School but on the street it was different.

One day he got into a fight with three kids he had never seen before. He saw off two of them but the biggest one carried on fighting, and Hank was losing. There was a little girl who lived next door, who from the age of six or seven had made a habit of showing him her panties. The girl, called Lisa in the poem ‘Panties’, came up behind his aggressor and cracked him over the head with a large bottle. That ended the fight and the boy ran off screaming, holding his head. For some inexplicable reason,[15] the girl never showed Hank her panties again.

Henry Bukowski’s true character begins to emerge in a series of stories illustrating his irascibility and short temper. In ‘The Monkey’ we see him at his most unpleasant. A fat organ grinder wearing a red fez, badly faded by the sun, came down the street with his monkey; the monkey was dressed in a little hat, waistcoat and pants and danced and did somersaults to the music. When the music ended the organ grinder passed his cup around. Other parents gave nickels and dimes, the children gave pennies, but Hank’s father came storming out of the house, yelling ‘What’s all the goddamed noise’ and immediately got into an argument with the man, frightening the monkey so that it bit the organ grinder’s hand, making it bleed. Henry ordered the man off the block,[16] spoiling the entertainment for everyone.

Hank’s descriptions of his childhood do not include any toys or games, but focus very much on his parents: hatred of them when they were at home or pleasure at their absence. The most time he spent with them was at dinner and Hank gives many descriptions of the aspiring German bourgeoisie at table: his father loved pancakes for breakfast, with syrup, butter and bacon, and he liked his