

## A Grandson's Search for Answers

By Steve Wick  
Staff Writer

BILLY JOEL would be in his mid-40s and a world-famous singer and songwriter when he walked into the Jewish cemetery in Nuremberg, Germany, and discovered, packed close to the others, his grandfather's gravestone. The name, a birth date, a death date. A poor excuse for a man's biography.

His grandfather was Karl Joel, but he hardly knew him. The elder Joel once lived with his wife, Meta, in an apartment in Manhattan, and to the young grandson growing up a world away in Hicksville, he was a distant man who spoke in German-accented English.



**Arno Hamburger, who was close to the Joels in Germany, at Meta and Karl Joel's grave in Nuremberg.**

AP Photo for Newsday / Frank Boxler



AP Photo, 1933

**Nazi soldiers in front of a Berlin store they believed to be owned by Jews**

"He was very different from us -- me, my sister and my mother," Joel said. "There were just these little stories about him fleeing Nazi Germany in the '30s, and not much else. And when I was very young, after my parents divorced, he moved back to Germany, and I never saw him again."

But since last summer, the Karl Joel biography has begun to take on new

chapters -- and new meaning for his grandson. At the heart, it's a Holocaust story, although in this one the principal characters make it to safety, their stories go on. As the grandson has learned since his walk into the Nuremberg cemetery, his grandfather owned, in that city, a prosperous mail-order fabric business, the second-largest of its kind in Germany. But in July, 1938, as the Nazis were closing in, Joel arranged to sell it to a Nazi Party member named Josef Neckermann. In a deal that was more robbery than business transaction, he agreed on a price

that was a fraction of its worth. Ultimately, though, he fled Germany with his wife and teenage son and was paid nothing at all for his





AP Photo

**Shattered glass after the  
Kristallnacht rampage,  
Berlin, 1938**

business. Neckermann was 26 at the time; Joel was 50. After the Joels fled Nuremberg, Neckermann moved into the Joels' mansion -- still filled with the family's furnishings -- in a fancy section of Nuremberg.

Last summer, hoping for more information and a measure of

closure, Billy Joel and his half-brother, Alex, met in Austria with Neckermann's three grandchildren. The meeting with Julia, Marcus and Lucas Neckermann was arranged by Austrian documentary filmmaker Beate Thalberg, who had spent a year digging through German court records to find out what had transpired between Karl Joel and Josef Neckermann in July, 1938, and in a postwar lawsuit that Joel brought against Neckermann. Thalberg declined to be interviewed for this story.

"We sat and talked, but it was very awkward," Billy Joel said recently. "I kept thinking, my grandfather lost everything he had to your grandfather. I don't think they really understand what happened. There were certainly no apologies."

The Neckermanns say they do understand, but they say the story is not what it seems to be. Josef Neckermann's son, Johannes -- Julia, Marcus and Lucas' father -- lives today in a small town in upstate New York. He said he was stunned to learn recently that Karl Joel's grandson was Billy Joel.

"I know the man my father was," he said. "He was honorable in this case. He tried to be helpful to Karl Joel. Not all Germans at that time were bad people."

After 1945, Neckermann built a business empire and became a postwar German celebrity. He was photographed with politicians. He opened factories. He became famous as an equestrian Olympic medal winner. "My father was more famous in Germany than Billy Joel is in this country," said Johannes Neckermann. "He had six Olympic medals in horseback riding. When he died in 1991, his death was broadcast on all the stations."



AP File Photo

**After the war, Josef  
Neckermann became  
something of a celebrity in  
Germany, winning six  
Olympic medals as an  
equestrian.**

Set against the backdrop of the



File Photo

**A burning synagogue,  
Berlin, 1938**

Holocaust, this is a story about history and injustice, forced emigration and fate, family love and loyalty, and the power of memory. It is a story of fathers and sons, and grandchildren coming to grips with the lives and decisions of their grandparents.

Billy and Alex Joel are just now learning the full details of what happened to their grandfather. But the journey into his grandfather's life has also brought Billy Joel in contact with his father, who lives in Austria with his second wife, the mother of Alex, who works as a symphony

conductor. As a child, Joel watched his father walk out of the family home in Hicksville, bought with GI Bill money and built by William Levitt at the fading edge of a Hicksville potato farm. He would not see or hear from him again for years.

"When I visit my father," Billy Joel said, "I can see the ghosts. There is a lot about his life that I don't understand. As much as I am interested in my grandfather's life, it's what happened to me here on Long Island that made me. It was my mother who nourished me, who brought me up and who went through the tough times living as a single woman in Hicksville. Thank God she hung in on that ground."

The Neckermann side of the story is laden with the heavy weight of German history, and the role Josef Neckermann played in it. They, too, say they want closure. Julia Neckermann-Rossler, 31, said meeting Alex and Billy Joel last summer "was the end to a long trek for us in learning the story of our family. I was 21 when my grandfather died, so there was never a chance to say, 'Hey, tell me about your life.' It was very interesting to meet the Joels. And I think they are just trying to understand what happened to their grandfather. This is really a story of our two grandfathers."



Newsday Photo/J. Michael Dombroski

**Billy Joel plays Nassau Coliseum  
in 1998.**

There is another grandson in this story.

In 1935, three years before his acquisition of the Joel business, Neckermann acquired -- at a fraction of its worth -- a large department store in the city of Wurzburg owned by a German Jew named Siegmund Ruschkewitz. His brief biography is partly told in records in Germany and at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. His memory is kept alive by his grandson, Gad Ruschkewitz, 63, who lives in Israel.

"My grandfather was a wealthy, self-made man," he said. "He made something of his life. What I think only my family knows is that Neckermann worked for my grandfather in the department store in Wurzburg. My father told me Neckermann brought a Nazi member to the store and they threw him out. I don't know if any payment was made, but my father told me that all Neckermann offered for the business was 46,000 Reich.marks, which was less than the cost of renovations my grandfather had recently made.

"After he lost the business, my grandfather and his second wife left Wurzburg for Berlin and lived in a hotel as two poor people until they could get on a ship for Palestine, where my father was already living. So you see, they were trying to reach their son. They had a beautiful home with a garden [in Wurzburg]. I believe they lost that, too. Why else would they have gone to that hotel?"

En route, Ruschkewitz and his wife died of typhus aboard ship. Their bodies were thrown overboard near the island of Crete.

Their other son, Ernst, who stayed behind in Germany, was killed at the Buchenwald concentration camp on March 31, 1945 -- three weeks before the end of the war.

Ernst's wife, Ruth, was killed in Auschwitz, date unknown.

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In the early 1930s, the Joel name was well known in Germany.

Karl Joel's mail-order fabric business was the nation's second-biggest. His factory was in Nuremberg, where he also operated a retail business. Joel, his wife, Meta, and their young son, Howard, who was born in 1923, lived in a grand home in a swank Nuremberg neighborhood.

"I knew the Joel family in 1933," said Arno Hamburger, who today lives in Nuremberg. "Howard was a schoolmate of mine." A Jew, Hamburger grew up in Nuremberg and left for Palestine before the war began.

After Hitler came to power in 1933, the German government turned its attention to the country's Jews. On April 14 of that year, Nuremberg's first Jewish victim was a young man named Arthur Kahn, age 21, shot through the head because the Nazis thought he was a communist. Hamburger's uncle was pulled out of his home at nearly the same time

and beaten half to death for no apparent reason other than that he was Jewish. And that same year, Hamburger's father lost his livelihood.

"A Nazi took my father's wholesale meat business in '33, and we had no means anymore," Hamburger said. "But the Joels were wealthy, and on weekends they always invited me to their home. They knew my family did not have much. I got cakes and candies from them. They lived very near the zoo, so Howard and I would go there every weekend and the Joels paid the ticket for me."

Within days of the Nazi government assuming power, laws were decreed aimed solely at Jews, who amounted to 1 percent of the population, including 9,500 in Nuremberg. The laws were like a series of ever-tightening rings, beginning with regulations that forced Jews out of certain livelihoods and expanding to laws that required them to report to the government how much money they had and where they kept it. The momentum continued to build through 1935 with the passage of the Nuremberg Laws, which defined who was a Jew and began the process of stripping Jews of their citizenship.

By decree, Karl Joel had to put up a sign in the window of his business stating that it was Jewish-owned. To make matters more personal for the Joels, *Der Stürmer*, a weekly newspaper published by an anti-Semitic madman named Julius Streicher, was published in Nuremberg. In May, 1933, Streicher printed an attack on Joel. A year later, in June, 1934, he attacked Joel again.

Hamburger has kept copies of the newspapers. One afternoon Hamburger read them slowly to a reporter. The first article reads, in part:

"Karl Joel is a Yid. Lately strange things happened in his business. The female employees can tell quite a few things about the impertinent and dirty way that their boss approaches them. He pays starvation wages to people who work for him. Thus he is able to sell his linen rags at low costs and so ruins German businessmen... The Jew Joel pushes them against the wall."

IN THE SECOND article, the headline reads: THE LINEN YID OF NUREMBERG. Hamburger read from it, slowly.

"... This business is not as generally believed in German hands. It is definitely Jewish. The owner is a full-blooded Yid. Every week he dispatches thousands of parcels all over Germany... He uses his profits in a typical Jewish way. He organizes drinking bouts during which he is supplied with German girls and women."

At about the time of the first Streicher attack, Karl Joel told his family he wanted to move to Berlin.

"The idea of going to Berlin," said Howard Joel, now 77 and in poor health, "was because it was reputed to have a more gentle attitude toward Jews."

To get him to safety, Howard Joel was sent to boarding school in Switzerland. But he returned in June, 1936, for his bar mitzvah, which was held in a big Berlin synagogue. The boy spoke, and afterward his parents had a quiet gathering at their home. Young children ran around the backyard. By then, the Joels were under no illusions that life would be different in Berlin. On the previous Aug. 15, a huge rally had been staged in Berlin where speakers demanded Jews be expelled from the country.

Photographs of this event show huge banners reading "THE JEWS ARE OUR MISFORTUNE" spread across an enormous stage.

But the laws being decreed by the government under the umbrella of a process called Aryanization were slowly making Joel's goal of keeping his business alive impossible.

"As boycotts were organized, Jews were forced to lower their prices to try and stay in business," said Avraham Barkai, a Holocaust scholar who lives in Israel. "The goal of the Aryanization program was to strip the Jews of all their wealth and property and turn it over to non-Jews and the government. There were roughly 100,000 Jewish-owned firms in 1933. By the mid-'30s, there were no more than 20,000. Those Jews still holding onto their businesses understood that time was limited."

Harry Reicher, a professor of law at the University of Pennsylvania, who teaches a class on the law and the Holocaust, said, "As a good businessman, Mr. Joel of course knew these laws and was no doubt following them to the letter. He knew the registration process gave the Nazis an inventory of his property. The noose was tightening around his neck."

It would seem certain that Joel knew who Siegmund Ruschkewitz was. In the fall of 1935, just a few weeks after the passage of the Nuremberg Laws that legalized discrimination against Jews, 23-year-old Josef Neckermann moved to acquire Ruschkewitz' Wurzburg department store. Part of the story of what happened is told in records at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C.; another part of it is told by Ruschkewitz' grandson, Gad. And still another part is told by Neckermann himself, in his autobiography.

"My grandfather had come from Poland in 1899 and had become a very

wealthy man," said Gad Ruschkewitz. "He had a beautiful home with a cook and a garden. My father told me that Neckermann was the No. 2 in the business, and one day he brought a Nazi official to the office, and they both confronted the old man.

"He was forced that day to sell his business. My father said the price was less than the improvements my grandfather had just made to the store. But he had no choice. They threatened him."

After the forced sale of his department store, Siegmund Ruschkewitz and his wife moved into a pauper's hotel in Berlin, their grandson said, to await a means of getting to Palestine, where their son Fritz was living. Records in Washington, D.C., show that Fritz Ruschkewitz and his wife had left Germany in September, 1933.

"My father got married and within days he and his new wife left for Palestine," Gad Ruschkewitz said. "My grandfather said at that time that the troubles would pass -- his words were, 'This is a black cloud, it will pass over.'"

In "Memories," his 1991 autobiography, Neckermann writes that he heard that Ruschkewitz wanted to sell after Nazis stood in front of the store and warned shoppers not to go inside. There is no mention in the book that he worked for Ruschkewitz. The book, written in German, was read at Newsday's request by Jeff Gaab, a history professor at the State University at Farmingdale who is fluent in the language.

"He writes that a preliminary agreement was drawn up saying he would pay Ruschkewitz 100,000 Reichmarks," Gaab said. "He describes the business as a cheap store. He writes that Ruschkewitz was selling because it was getting bad for Jews in Wurzburg. The chapter ends with Neckermann saying that Ruschkewitz died en route to Palestine."

To Gad Ruschkewitz, Josef Neckermann's account is ludicrous. "My grandfather did not willingly sell his business for next to nothing," he said. "And he and his wife would not have moved into a hotel in Berlin if they still had their home. My father went back to Germany in 1952 to claim restitution from the government, which he received. So isn't that an admission that what Neckermann did was a criminal deed?"

Holding on in Berlin, the Joels watched as a new series of laws were passed in the spring and summer of 1938. In June of that year, the government passed a law meant to completely strip Jews from the economic life of the country. Their property was to be turned over to the government's economic office and to non-Jewish Germans.

A few weeks after the passage of the June law, Josef Neckermann called on Karl Joel. By then, Neckermann was a Nazi Party member. Records filed at the U.S. Archives in Maryland show that he became a party member in January, 1937. According to Neckermann's book, he approached Joel for humanitarian reasons: to help him raise money so he could leave the country.

"My dad got that business because he was more or less doing Mr. Joel a favor," said Johannes Neckermann. "My father always said that Mr. Joel wanted to sell him the business. Not everything was bad which happened in the Third Reich. There were families that actually did honest business."

IN THE BOOK, Josef Neckermann writes that he met Joel and agreed to pay him 1 million Reichmarks for the business. He writes that he met Joel only once, and then Joel suddenly left Nuremberg.

"The author writes that after Mr. Joel left, he didn't know what to do with the property," Prof. Gaab said. "He is implying that Joel left in order to thwart the selling of the business."

But the "sale" went through, Neckermann writes. He states that he paid the selling price into a government-controlled bank account in Berlin, but that "it stands to reason that Mr. Joel saw little or none of this money" because he had left the country by the middle of July. Neckermann writes that he "rented" the Joel family home, which included a children's bedroom set and other furnishings.

"My father said he offered a ridiculous price, 10 cents on the dollar, but he accepted it because he had no choice," Howard Joel said. "He could not stay. We went to Switzerland, where my father was to wait for his payment. After several weeks, a letter came from Neckermann saying if you come to Berlin, the account will be settled."

"My father was so mad. We were living in a one-room flat in Zurich, with no money and a ticket for a cruise to the Caribbean. So we went to Cuba, without anything from the business, with the intention of trying to get to the U.S."

Johannes Neckermann said the low price was controlled by the government, as was the final payment. "Mr. Joel was not paid because the government controlled the money, not my father," he said.

Barkai, the Israeli scholar, said "transactions like Joel's had to be approved by party agencies. The payment into a government-controlled account was in most instances a bribe paid to the party by the German

who wanted the business. To get one of the larger businesses, you had to have standing with the party. They took care of their people first. It's a sad story for the Joels, but a fine story for the Neckermanns."

Had the Joels been in Nuremberg on Aug. 10, they might have watched from a distance as cranes equipped with wrecking balls pulled up to the city's main synagogue. Over the course of an afternoon, the cranes demolished it, stone by stone, stripping it to the ground.

"I was standing 200 yards away," Hamburger said. "I watched the whole thing."

Four months later, over three nights in early November, Nazi mobs attacked Jews, smashed the windows at Jewish-owned businesses, and set synagogues ablaze across the country, in what came to be known as Kristallnacht. Broken glass littered the sidewalks of towns and cities. The Berlin synagogue where Howard Joel was bar mitzvahed two years before went up in flames, and so did the other synagogue in Nuremberg.

When the Joels arrived in Washington Heights in 1942, they found that the rabbi from Nuremberg -- the one whose temple was destroyed by the wrecking ball in August, 1938 -- was living in the same neighborhood. There were scores of other German Jews there, too.

"My father started a business at 395 Broadway," Howard Joel said. "He made hair bows. He sold them in five- and ten-cent stores. My mother helped to make the bows, and I delivered them to the stores."

On his birthday the following year, Joel was drafted. As it turned out, the rabbi's son received his draft notice the very same day. They were both sent to Europe where, in the spring of 1945, Joel found himself back in Nuremberg. He looked for anything of his father's business that survived, but all that stood was part of a chimney where his father's factory had been.

When he returned to New York at war's end, Howard Joel learned that the rabbi's son had been killed in Europe. Karl and Meta Joel were still operating the hair bow business, but as soon as he could, Karl Joel returned to Germany.

"He wanted to get his money," Howard Joel said. "He was still mad about it. I believe he saw Neckermann face to face, but the rest was done through lawyers."

In Neckermann's book, he writes that he met Joel after the war in the Four Seasons Hotel in Munich. He does not describe the details of their

encounter, but he states that Joel filed a lawsuit against him that would take until 1959 to be settled. Howard Joel said he does not know the exact details of the settlement, but that it was established that the business was worth millions of Reichmarks more than the sale price in 1938. Neckermann writes that, at war's end, Joel's business no longer existed and the new fabric business was entirely his own.

Johannes Neckermann said Howard Joel got "more" than the 1 million Reichmarks promised in 1938. And he added that his father was "embittered" by Joel's lawyers.

"It was not a good experience for my father," he said. "He was dealing with the typical greedy American lawyers."

"Neckermann is no different from so many other Germans who benefited financially from the Holocaust," said Harry Reicher, the University of Pennsylvania Law School professor. "They acquired properties from Jews who were under threat, they held on as the postwar German economy made them wealthy, and they led very successful lives without scrutiny as to how they got what they did."

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In the early 1970s, Billy Joel went looking for his father.

"My father was always away when I was a boy," he said. "When my parents split up, I was about 7 or 8. I think the whole thing ended when I was 10. After that, I never heard from him. Not a postcard, not a phone call."

In his early 20s, writing songs deeply anchored to his upbringing in Hicksville, in the culture of 1970s suburban Long Island, Joel was signed to a record label. "The company was established in Europe, and there was this young fellow working in Holland named David. I said, 'David, if you can, keep your eye out for my father. His name is Howard, or Helmut, Joel. He's somewhere in Europe.' I gave him the general age and physical description. I had to imagine what he would look like.

"Well, David found a Howard Joel living in Amsterdam. This was 1972. He tracked this fellow down and found it was my father. He went and knocked on the door and said, 'I represent a company that markets your son's music and he is looking for you.' David called me later and said, 'Your father was worried you may have been killed in Vietnam.'

"I was living in Hampton Bays then. I wrote a long, rambling letter to

him about how I became a musician, that this was my life. 'I'm with a record company, and writing songs, and have not heard from you, and I hope somehow to meet you and maybe I'll be in Europe. Would that be okay, could I see you?'

"I got this response from him, maybe half a page. It said, 'Good to hear from you, please keep in touch. I'm newly married.' Then I moved to L.A. I wrote him again and gave him a new address and I got a note back saying he was coming to L.A. I met him coming off the plane. This was the first time I'd seen him since I was 10 or so. I knew him immediately.

"I took him back to the house where Elizabeth, my first wife, and I were living. I wrote 'Piano Man' in that house. I think he looked over this house, which was on a beautiful spot overlooking the ocean, and thought his son was doing very well.

"He said he was married and had a young son named Alex. He talked about his father living in Germany. So my grandfather was alive and living in Europe, which kind of floored me."

TO HIS GRANDSON, Karl Joel had been an emotionally distant, elderly European on American soil who never quite belonged, and yet, as he now learned from his father, had gone back to the country that had stolen his home and business and booted him out. As it turned out, Karl Joel was alone, living in a hotel in Berlin. Meta Joel had died in Nuremberg on Sept. 10, 1971. But Billy Joel would not see his grandfather before his death on Nov. 4, 1982.

A decade later, Billy Joel came to Nuremberg to give a master class. His father and half-brother went along. "The program for the evening mentioned that the Joel family had originated in Nuremberg," Billy Joel recalled. "It said if not for the 'tragedy' of the war, a family with all this musical talent might still be living in our fair city. It was all prettied up.

"Mr. Hamburger took us to the Jewish cemetery. It was the first time I wore a yarmulke and I was in my 40s and I'm reading the names on the stones."

And then last summer, in the denouement of his personal journey into his grandfather's history, Billy Joel sat down with the Neckermann grandchildren.

"We asked some questions, but what could we ask now that would really matter?" said Alex Joel. "I was not angry at them. Neither was Bill. They didn't do anything. We don't hold a grudge. But I would have liked them

to say that what happened wasn't right."

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On a cold evening in early March, Billy Joel conducted a master class at the State University at Stony Brook. Before a packed auditorium, he played his music, joked about selling his Amagansett home to comedian Jerry Seinfeld, introduced two classical pieces he has written, talked about his growing up and his inspirations. Which is better for writing lyrics, he was asked, falling in love or having your heart broken?

Well, he said, both are really good.

He spoke of his daughter, Alexa Ray, 14, and what it meant to him to be present in her life. "Nothing that has ever happened to me compares to that," he said.

As the evening wore on, he spoke of his mother and father. There was a piano in the Hicksville house, and his father used to play classical music on it. He loved Chopin. His mother's musical tastes ran to Gilbert and Sullivan.

By the end of March, he was nearly out of his house in Amagansett and moved into a residence on the North Shore of Nassau County, a new beginning. He is back again to the place where his mother used to drive him when he was a boy to point out the big homes. She lives a few miles away. The circle of his story has come around.

The irony in Karl Joel's forced emigration to America is, to his grandson, breathtaking: Had Karl Joel not fled Germany, then his son, Howard, would not have met his future wife, and the couple would not have moved to that Levitt house in Hicksville, where his grandson, under pressure from his mother, took piano lessons.

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