

This man never forgot his small-town past



John Sommer
Ideas and the Arts

Last week I mentioned a young man from my hometown in East Germany, who ran away to America. Of course many boys dreamed of going to America in the 19th century. He was one of the few who went and not only did he manage to leave but he acquired a great fortune and became an outstanding citizen of his adopted country. His story deserves to be told.

Not quite 100 years ago there was a teenager in Geithain with the name Paul Guenter. He was a smart boy but his parents were very poor and there were many other brothers and sisters. The money was simply not there to give Paul an education. Besides he was one of those who are considered to

be trouble makers. He did not know what he wanted but neither did he have any choices. The class-ridden, small-town community surrounding him was so confining and dampening to his spirit that he made more enemies than friends. He was a misfit and people were suspicious of him. After he had left school at the age of 14 he tried several trades, but he was too argumentative and rebellious for his masters and they never kept him for long. Eventually, with the help of a relative, who was to regret that he helped him, he secured a job in the local post office. One day, not long after he had started to work there, he vanished and nobody saw him again. It was discovered that money was missing in the accounts of the post office and he was blamed for taking it. The amount missing was small but it was enough to brand him a criminal in the memory of the town.

Many years went by. New ideas and new inventions occupied the minds of the people in the big cities. People lived in a new century now. In Geithain, however, people still talked about the boy who had run away. The Great War started and lasted a long time, en-

ding only after a whole generation of European and North American men had been uselessly destroyed. After the war came hunger, civil war and inflation and because of these stupendous happenings Paul Guenter was finally all but forgotten in his hometown.

One day a letter arrived from America at the office of the Mayor of Geithain. It was a long one, written on expensive paper with an imposing letterhead. The letter came from an American law firm and it said that their client, a wealthy gentleman with the name of Paul Guenter, wanted to donate a new public and trade school to the town, to atone for past wrong doings, but mainly to foster and upgrade the education of the children of Geithain. The letter stated further that Mr. Guenter was going to select the architect and that he would want to be involved in every aspect of the building of the school in order to get what he wanted. The school was to be called Paul Guenter School.

The people of the town, in particular the ones that remembered the difficult lad, were stunned. Nothing like that had ever happened before. Right away a fierce con-

troversy started as to the wisdom of accepting the gift of a "criminal." Some thought it outrageous to have the name of a thief over the door of the school their children would have to go to. Others thought it most handsome and generous of this man, who had not exactly been a favorite of the town, to lavish some of his wealth on the place he had grown up in. In the end the sheer magnitude of the gift quieted all discussions and within a few short years a building rose above the modest roofs of Geithain the likes of which did not exist anywhere. It was opened in 1926 by the tall, foreign looking donor, with many a celebration and became at once the pride of the town. Paul Guenter School boasted a clocktower so high it was visible from our farm three kilometres away. In rough weather, when my

brother was brought to school by buggy or sleigh I went with him just to have a look at the huge building adorned with art, and in 1933 I was finally old enough to enter there myself. I loved this school more than any of the others I went to later. Mr. Guenter, the boy who ran away with stolen money, had succeeded, together with the architect and an army of artists, to erect an edifice that proclaimed the ennobling power of knowledge over ignorance.

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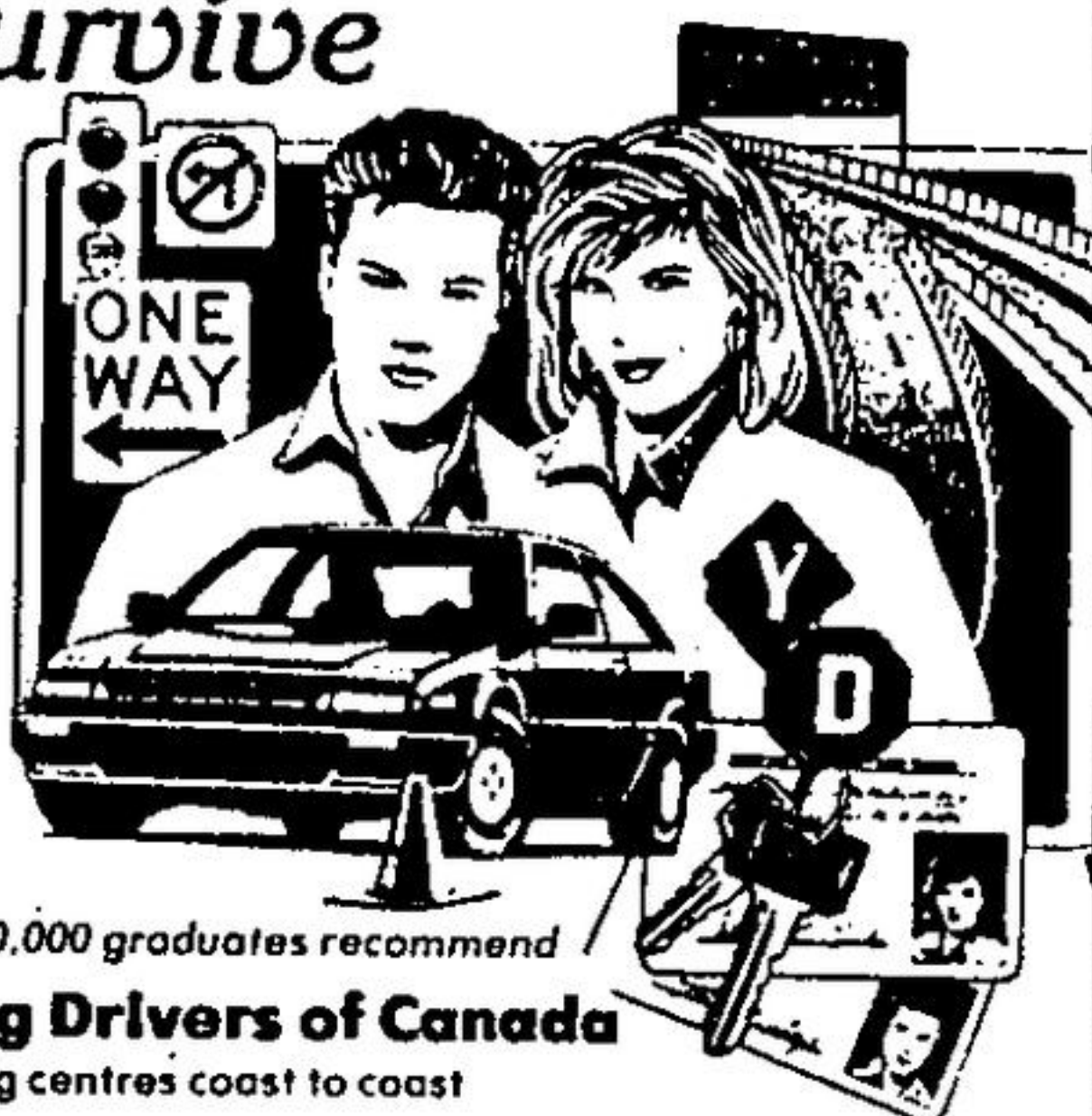
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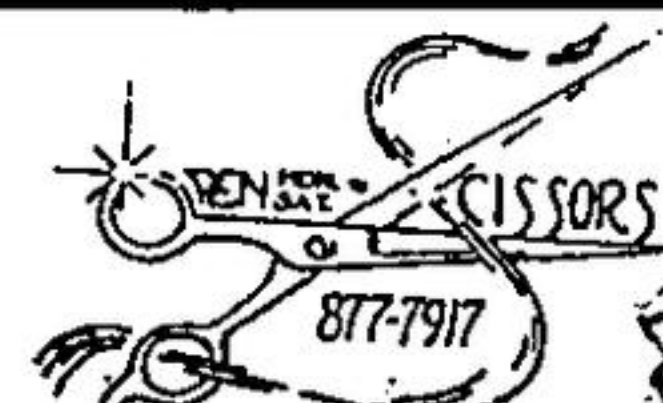
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