



BACK IN TIME

by Tony Beckwith
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BELGRANO-DEUTSCH

Tensions had been simmering for years and things were finally coming to a boil.

The German army occupied the Sudetenland in October 1938 and invaded Czechoslovakia the following March. It was clear to everyone that Europe was on the brink of war.

Against that distant backdrop, far away in Buenos Aires, Muriel and Claus were in love. Madly in love as only teenagers can be. They wanted to be together every minute of every day. There was already talk of marriage. Nothing formal, just conversation. But the love birds were convinced that they were soul mates; they would be joined in holy matrimony and spend the rest of their lives together.

There was just one catch. Muriel's parents had arrived from England as newlyweds some twenty-five years earlier. They'd lived in Argentina ever since and were fully integrated into the large Anglo-Argentine community there, but still thought of themselves as British. Claus' family, on the other hand, was German. German-Argentine, to be sure, but still German. These two communities



of European transplants had been in Buenos Aires for several generations and had settled comfortably into two neighbouring suburbs. The British, by and

large, lived in Coghlan. The Germans, on the whole, were in Belgrano. Both sets of parents remembered the last war all too well and could see another one looming on the horizon. It didn't take them long to realize how difficult it would be for them to become in-laws at this point in time, and they decided that their children would have to nip their romance in the bud. Not since the Montagues and the Capulets had such a drama played out between two families separated, in this case, by their nationalities. Or so it would seem to this pair of star-crossed lovers.

Muriel was tall and fair-skinned, with blue eyes and wavy blonde hair. So was Claus. Both were athletic and they made a handsome couple on the tennis court, or the dance floor, or walking hand-in-hand through the leafy streets near their homes. Belgrano was the larger of the two suburbs and had many fashionable pastry shops, restaurants, cafés, and bars, some of which catered almost exclusively to a German clientele. On Sunday afternoons, after the movies, Claus took Muriel to the Steinhauser Café or the Confitería Dietze. Over hot chocolate and confectionaries he introduced her to the intricacies of the Belgrano-Deutsch slang that was spoken by members of his community, a playful blend of the German of their fatherland and the Spanish of their Argentine life.

"It's a hybrid, like your Spanglish," he explained. Pointing at the typical Argentine pastry on her plate he said, "*Das ist ein alfajor!*" They laughed, gazing into each



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other's eyes. To them, Europe might as well be on another planet, and the trouble brewing there was none of their concern.

Muriel's father, Albert, was broad-minded, easy-going, and a hopeless romantic. He adored his daughter and was miserable to think that she was about to have her heart broken. His wife, Dora, however, thought Muriel was being unforgivably selfish by allowing herself to be swept off her feet by "that German boy" and putting them all in an impossible position.

"It's so inconsiderate," Dora fumed when she and Albert were alone in their bedroom on the second floor of their home on Calle Tronador. "How can she expect us to allow her to marry Claus? How on earth could we spend Christmas with his parents when our families are at war at home?"

"Oh, Dora, we've met Jürgen and Lydia and they're very nice people. And the war must have been hard on them too. Not all Germans are Nazi brutes, you know."

"Oh really?" she snapped, her eyes glinting. "Tell that to my brother, who never came back from the Western Front. Tell that to all the mothers whose boys were slaughtered at the Battle of the Somme. And what about your cousin? Went down with his ship at Jutland. Now it's all going to happen again. Claus will probably go over there to enlist, and he'll be fighting our boys! Don't you see? We can't possibly have anything to do with him or his family. I won't have it."

She was right, and Albert knew it. Claus' parents knew it too. Or at least his father did. Lydia, like Albert, was somewhat emotional and wept to think how devastated her son was going to be.

"We are so far away from Europe, what would it matter?" she pleaded, digging her head even deeper into the sand. "We are all part of a community here. The British and the Germans, we are neighbours, we have all been friends for years."

Jürgen shook his head. He recalled being thrown into the mayhem of trench warfare along *die Westfront* in the early days of 1915. He still remembered the sights and the sounds, the terrifying bombardments, and the hand-to-hand combat in the mud. To this day his dreams sometimes filled with vivid scenes he wished he could forget. He sighed and took her hands in his.

"Lydia, *mein Liebes*, we are neighbours, yes, but we have never been friends, not in the true sense of the word. We have been cordial, as we should be, but no one has really forgotten World War I. Germany and Britain will soon be at war, and all those half-buried memories are going to be dragged up all over again. Even if we don't agree with everything Hitler says, what can we do? German victories will be British defeats, and vice versa. Under those circumstances I don't see how we can have a family relationship with Muriel's people. It's terribly sad, but we must be realistic."



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Muriel and Claus took one last walk together through the streets of Belgrano. They didn't have it in them to run away together and ignore the obvious truths their parents were telling them. At first, she tried to convince him that a true love like theirs was the perfect example to show how people could rise above the hate and bitterness in the world and embrace their neighbours, whoever they might be. But she finally came to accept that, like Romeo and Juliet, their love was doomed,

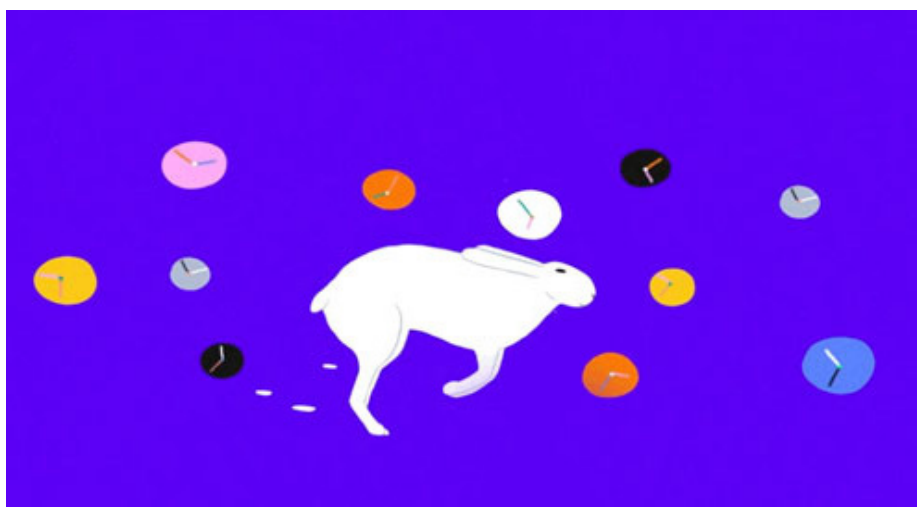


though not quite as tragically. One last kiss, then she turned and hurried home, tears streaming down her cheeks.

On the 1st of September 1939, a week before her eighteenth birthday, German tanks rolled into Poland and World War II began.

Three years later, Muriel married a young Anglo-Argentine with impeccable British credentials. They moved across the river to Montevideo and lived happily ever after.

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