ERWIN G. GUDDE 1956

After a painting by Charles Surendorf

Vita Nostra Brevis Est

ERWIN G. GUDDE

IF ONE DRAWS DIAGONAL LINES through the former German province of Ostpreussen one will find almost exactly at the intersection the strange name of Schippenbeil. It stands for the town in which I was born almost seventy years ago. This name and my family name destined me to become an amateur onomatologist from childhood. I was curious to know what was behind the two names. The meaning of the name Schippenbeil I learned first. It is a hybrid. The first part contains German *Schiff*, English *ship*. The

second part is from the Baltic-Pruzzian root *pilis*, hill, related to the English *pillar*, German *Pfeiler*. The reason for the name was obvious. My home town stood on a butte which had served as a fortification of the old Pruzzians against the Poles and Masovians and later against the Germans. The town was almost surrounded by a navigable river, the Alle, which made a wide gentle curve around the *pilis*.

The origin and meaning of the name Gudde I discovered much later in life. A professor of German philology stated in our class that it was derived from the Germanic *gudha* and contained the same root as god, Goethe, and good. I naturally had no reason to doubt this statement. Not until later when I began the desultory study of the old Baltic languages did I become aware that the name was not German at all but Pruzzian and meant "bush." My name-giving ancestor had apparently dwelled "in the bush," that is, in the woodlands.

My home country had, to be sure, once been occupied by Germanic tribes, the Goths or the Burgundians or both. When they moved west to the Rhine or north to Scandinavia or south to the Black Sea, the land was occupied by Baltic tribes, the Pruzzians and the Lithuanians. Around the year 1200 Pruzzia had reached a certain level of culture and the people could successfully defend themselves against the Poles, who had been Christians for several centuries. Duke Konrad of Masovia finally called on the Order of the Teutonic Knights for help — an Order which had become unemployed when the crusades petered out. The knights came, conquered, and christanized Pruzzia with fire and sword — at that time the prevailing method of converting stubborn people to the new faith. But, to the great chagrin of the Poles, the Teutonic knights stayed right in the country and Germanized it. Those Pruzzians who foreswore the trinity Perkunos, Pikolus, and Potrimpus and accepted the new trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Ghost were taken into the fold of the German conquerors and blended with them to form a new "race," in modern times known as the Ostpreußen. My ancestor was one of them, and today only the name shows the origin of the family. The country of the Ostpreussen was not presented to the Poles until seven centuries later by Messrs. Roosevelt, Churchill, and Stalin, the latter naturally reserving a good slice for himself.

My youth in the friendly little town was happy, although if I were given the choice, I would rather live over again the past fifteen years than my childhood. My best friend was the sexton who gave me the freedom of the church in front of which my father's house stood. One of my greatest pleasures it was to climb the seven staircases and three ladders which led to a narrow room underneath the spire. Even today, after having seen the grand, awe-inspiring views which the American West offers, the picture which I beheld from the church tower has not faded. It showed only a few square kilometers of flat land, interspersed with farms and villages, birch and spruce forests, traversed by the silvery bands of two rivers.

The greatest attraction which the sexton had to offer me was the little library in his quarters adjoining the church. It contained the most wholesome fare for a boy: books on history and geography, old chronicles and diaries, accounts of travel and exploration. One of my favorite books was that unsurpassed classic, Robinson Crusoe. It dominated my imagination for many years and its realistic style had a profound influence upon the development of my own literary style. So lasting was this influence that at about the age of forty I started working on an extensive literary project, the desert island motif in world literature.

Another book which I could read again and again was the Chronicle of my home town. It was for me a most vivid form of instruction in history. The buildings, the place names, and even some family names whose origin reached far into former centuries were part of my living presence. There was nothing remarkable about the little town, to be sure. No battle had been fought before its gates, no great man had been born within its walls, no product had made its name known in the world. Only the fact that the brothers of two famous men were buried in Schippenbeil provided some reason for modest local pride. In the old cemetery rested the remains of the older brother and teacher of Ferdinand Gregorovius, author of one of the classics of historiography, *History of the City of Rome in the Middle Ages*. Under a slab in the church itself lay the body of the brother of the literary reformer at the beginning of the eighteenth century, Johann Christoph Gottsched. The succinctness and brevity of the inscription which the great Gottsched had composed for his brother impressed even the schoolboy and provided him at an early age with sound philosophical ideas:

At this Place, Inquisitive Reader,
Lies the Body of
Johann Friedrich Gottsched,
A well founded Christian
Not because of blind Belief
But after mature religious Consideration.
A young Scholar
Who had advanced far enough in Knowledge
To consider all Scholarship a Trifle.
A Lover of Science
Who became convinced that we know only little for certain
And Nothing in its Completeness.
A Student of Medicine
Who was searching for a Cure against Death
But who proved by his early Demise
That he, like all others, had not found it.

In school I was a good-for-nothing who resented discipline, teachers, and home-work. If I acquired nevertheless a fair education, it was due to my insatiable reading and the ease with which I comprehended and retained whatever I read. My best teacher was my mother. She taught me many things which no teacher could possibly teach. Above all she implanted in me the germs of those principles which in later life determined my attitude: to be independent in spirit, to forego advancement and success rather than acquire it by kowtowing, not to take anything for granted or believe anything that can not be explained logically or scientifically, never to do anything just because everybody else does it. I have known people who have been more successful in life by not adhering to such principles. I do not envy them.

At the age of twelve I left my home town and went to live in Allenstein with my married sister. For four years I attended the Kopernikus-Schule, named for the great astronomer who had resided in the castle of Allenstein for many years. Here too I could not come to a satisfactory understanding with my teachers. The instruction was dull and uninspiring. Yet, we did learn something, certainly more than the average high school student in the United States. Much as I resented it at the time, the great number of dates and names that the history teacher drilled into us have stood

me in good stead in later years. Unfortunately my memory is also still burdened by the names of the Sundays between Easter and Pentecost, from *quasimodogeniti* to *exaudi*, or the names of the sons of Jacob, from Ruben to Benjamin. These were drilled into us by our teacher of religion. It was an excellent method of alienating children from the church.

My mother, a great enthusiast for nature and the out-of-doors, wanted me to become a horticulturist. I attended a horticultural college for five terms and worked in that profession for several years. I saw a great deal of central Europe in those years, mostly on bicycle. The work itself was anything but pleasant. Not that I dislike gardening. During the late war I was the prize victory gardener of my district, and one of the pleasures of my old age is to look upon the stately trees which I started from seed. But horticulturists in my time were not organized into a solid labor union, and working conditions were entirely unsatisfactory. I was therefore overly happy when the editor of one of the Ullstein papers in Berlin, the brother of my mother's best friend, offered me a job as a reporter. To be a writer had always been my ambition, and I was sure I now had found my calling. I worked only one year in Berlin, attending at the same time lectures at the university, among others those of the Roosevelt professor, Hugo Münsterberg of Harvard, then at the zenith of his fame as a reformer of psychological concepts. These lectures were as uninteresting as most of those which I later heard at American universities.

In the summer of 1911 I decided to see a little more of the world. The name *Amerika* has a fascinating ring to every German, and I decided to try my luck in the United States. That I became a citizen of this country is the greatest blessing that fate has bestowed upon me.

The Panama Pacific International Exposition of 1915 was then already widely advertised and I secured the commission of several German newspapers to report on it. After a jaunt through the Netherlands and northern France I embarked at the end of July for New York. I planned to drift slowly across the country doing odd jobs in journalism and reach San Francisco in time for the world's fair. In New York I found a job with the New York *Herold*. Although it was a German language paper my connection with it was an excellent schooling for my Americanization. I still think with sentimen-

tality of my desk from which I had a view of Park Row with the old city hall and the building of Pulitzer's *World*, which had remained behind when the hub of New York's newspaper world moved north.

I reached my destination ahead of schedule. In 1912 I was invited to come to San Francisco as assistant editor of a German socialist weekly — in the meantime I had become a member of the Socialist Party. There was a great satisfaction in working for a new progressive movement. At the election of November 4, 1912, the Debs-Seidel ticket received almost a million votes; it could have been twice as heavy had not Roosevelt's Bull Moose movement diverted a large fraction of the progressive element. Yet the Socialist Party bade fair to become the third major party. Unfortunately a few years later the victory of the radical bolshevik element in Russia inaugurated a new undemocratic, illiberal, socialistic movement which split up the old party in the United States as elsewhere, and put an end to hopes for the development of a liberal reform party on socialistic and democratic principles.

My connection with the *Vorwärts* of the Pacific Coast was unpleasant. Every Tom, Dick, and Harry who owned a share in the paper was my boss. In certain situations democracy does not work. Yet, these two years were pleasant and fruitful in other respects. I soon fell in love with San Francisco. As it was my habit when coming to a new place, I traversed the city during the first few weeks. From Lands End I walked to Bernal Heights, from Hunters Point to Ingleside Beach. Until Mount Tamalpais and Mount Diablo became my weekend goals, my favorite hike, summer or winter, was along the beach from the Cliff House to Mussel Rock. Although I have lived the larger part of my life in Alameda and Contra Costa counties, I have always considered San Francisco as "my city."

Of great importance for the completion of my Americanization was my connection with the "Radical Club." I was the youngest member and, I believe, I am now one of the few survivors. There was really nothing "radical" about the club. It was a collective name for a group of people who wanted to reform the world in one way or another. Some were for birth control, others for abolishing capital punishment. Some believed in socialism, others in anarchism (these were the most gentle of the lot); still others believed in

Theodore Roosevelt's progressivism. The discussions were at times eccentric but always interesting and instructive — especially for me who seldom opened his mouth. Here I met John D. Barry, the liberal columnist of the *Daily News*, who died only a few years ago in Santa Monica; Lincoln Steffens, the king of "muckrakers;" Fremont Older and his beautiful and aggressive wife, who were at that time leaders in the liberal movement, a few years later panegyrics of William Randolph Hearst; Har Dyal, a forerunner of Ghandi in the fight against British domination in India, and many others. Unless my memory fails me, it was also in the Radical Club that I met for the first time Chester Rowell, a great American newpaperman, who was then developing the San Francisco *Chronicle* into one of the leading dailies in the country.

In the summer of 1914, I quit my uncongenial job. But my intention of reporting on the world's fair came to naught. With the outbreak of the War people in Europe lost interest in the stucco city by the Golden Gate. I believe I saw only two or three of my articles about the Exposition in print. Reports on the reaction and the attitude of the United States toward the War always found a market, however. Political correspondence passed the British blockade as late as the spring of 1916 and — what is even more astonishing — honoraria from Germany reached me promptly.

The morning of the second of August 1914, is indelibly impressed upon my memory. The news of the preceding day had been rather discouraging, yet we hoped against hope that the catastrophe might still be avoided. I lived in Berkeley at that time, and after an almost sleepless night I walked at daybreak to the Southern Pacific Station (now Shattuck Square), where the first train would unload the morning papers. Today we turn a knob and the radio brings us the latest news to our bedside, It was not as easy as that half a century ago. When the newsboy opened the first parcel, the headline "German and Russian Outposts in Clash" in large block letters stared me in the face. Underneath the headline was a short cablegram: "A German patrol near Prostken was fired on this afternoon by a Russian frontier patrol. The Germans returned the fire. There were no losses."

These few words, so ridiculously insignificant in view of all that followed, struck me with such force that I said partly to the boy partly to myself, "Now everything is lost." These words still ring

in my ears. I shall not live to see the end of the gigantic struggle in which the world is now engaged. Yet, I may have been a true prophet when I said instinctively, almost unconsciously, on the fateful morning of August 2, 1914, "All is lost." The distrastous course which man-made history has taken since that date has kept alive in me the fear that the stupid exchange of shots in the forest of Prostken may actually have marked the beginning of the end of our humanistic, democratic, liberalistic civilization.

Whatever ideas I may have had concerning my immediate career, the outbreak of the war took the decision out of my hands. I enrolled as a student at the University of California at the mature age of twenty-five. My student years I remember with pleasure. The wonderful library, the well equipped laboratories, the cordial relationship between faculty and students, the lovely co-eds — all that was new and stimulating. At that time the campus still had a park-like character and the view across the Golden Gate was unobscured. The architecture of the buildings, to be sure, was as ugly and inharmonious as it is today.

I signed up for a variety of courses with emphasis on history. The idea of pursuing a journalistic career was still in my mind. At any rate, I wanted to acquire a broad education and leave to fate what might happen. Nothing was further removed from my mind than to become a teacher. Yet, a teacher I became and remained for forty years. For one nice August day in 1915 this happened.

Richard Pinger, a professor in the Department of German, had spent his sabbatical in Germany and brought greetings from an old friend. When Pinger heard of my plans, he enthusiastically enrolled me as a future professor of German, and to my life-long regret, I succumbed to his persuasive enthusiasm.

In 1918 it looked as if fate would intervene in my behalf. The political and intellectual leaders of the country came to the conclusion that the Kaiser's armies could be more effectively beaten if all German language instruction in the United States were suppressed. I had to give up my job as teaching assistant, and in order to replete my exchequer I worked for two years as a machinist's helper and street car conductor in San Francisco. Those were rewarding years in spite of hard work. I had no intention of finishing my work for the Ph. D. in German literature. Yet, the devil ex-

tended his tail again and I grabbed it. In 1920 I was back teaching German.

In the course of years I learned to enjoy the pleasure of teaching, and since the job was an easy one, my life as an academic teacher was happy and carefree. I "published" extensively, fulfilling thereby that part of professional duties which is considered in our universities of greater importance than efficient teaching. The light teaching load fortunately made it possible for me to do research in and write about subjects which I considered of greater merit and interest — especially the fascinating epic of western American history.

The routine of my serene and contented life was interrupted in 1933 when Hitler's gang succeeded in becoming masters of the land with which I was after all still connected by sentimental strings. I saw the danger which threatened our democratic civilization; it seemed to me that very few others saw it. I threw myself wholeheartedly into the fight against fascism while the statesmen as well as the mass of the citizens of our so-called democracies looked on disinterestedly when the militarists crushed Spanish democracy with the effective aid of Hitler and Mussolini. In retrospect I must admit reluctantly that those who believed that fascism, compared with communism, was the lesser evil were perhaps right. Today Moscow is a more formidable enemy to western civilization than Berlin or Rome could have become.

The political situation dominated my thinking and doing during the years preceding and following Pearl Harbor. In those years I learned that a human being is capable of accomplishing much more than one ordinarily assumes. In addition to my duties at the University I was first aid instructor with the Red Cross, chairman of a branch of disaster relief in San Francisco, chairman of the Congress for Democracy, delegate to the Citizens for Victory; I took care of two gardens, engaged in public speaking, broadcasting, and translating; and commuted daily between Berkeley and my home at the foot of Twin Peaks. Even my literary and scholarly work I did not neglect.

If in the last fourth of my life I changed from the status of an amateur to that of a professional onomatologist, it was due to my friend George R. Stewart. He was a member of a committee to prepare an encyclopedia of United States geographical names, and

in the fall of 1943 he invited me to write the volume on California. I declined at first. I was at that time teaching a class in the Army Specialized Training Program, and was otherwise engaged in war work. After Stalingrad and Tunis my modest services in helping to defeat the axis were no longer required. I accepted Stewart's renewed invitation. Upon the suggestion of the late Samuel Farquhar, manager of the University of California Press, *California Place Names* was made a university project. President Robert G. Sproul commissioned me officially to write the book, and an imposing list of sponsors gave the project dignity and importance. In almost five years of hard intellectual labor I produced the book. I have never felt the satisfaction of creative scholarship more keenly than in those years. It was a great pleasure for me that the book was generally well received. With one notable exception — my own dear alma mater. Ironically enough, President Sproul and his administrative and academic advisers failed to recognize my contribution to scholarship and California history.

In the year in which *California Place Names* was published, I also had the pleasure of erecting an enduring monument to the humanist who has exercised the most beneficial influence upon my thinking and doing. Upon my suggestion the United States Board on Geographical Names bestowed the name of Johann Wolfgang Goethe upon the highest yet unnamed peak in the Sierra Nevada.

In 1951 I thought of creating a center for name research in the United States by establishing a section on onomastics within the Modern Language Association. After some correspondence with Elsdon C. Smith, an enthusiastic onomatologist, we decided for the foundation of an American Name Society, which took place December 27, 1951, in Detroit, Michigan. After some misgivings, discouragements, and tribulations I succeeded in bringing out the first issue of *Names*, the journal of the American Name Society, in the spring of 1953, and continued as its editor until 1956. It was not my last but, I hope, my most lasting contribution to the realm of American letters.

Vita nostra brevis est — my life like that of all my fellow human beings has been brief, too brief to comprehend and enjoy it in all its fascinating aspects and forms. Yet I have lived it intensely and happily, and I have made at least some use of my modest talents. Now at an age approaching seventy I have the great satisfaction of

unimpaired mental alertness. Physically I have not been so fortunate. I have enjoyed good health and a sturdy body which enabled me to swim from Richmond Beach to Red Rock and back at the age of forty-five and to climb Mount Lyell at fifty one. But in my sixties arthritis began to have a crippling effect on my hips, and the time may come when I shall have to imitate Mark Twain's example and do my writing in bed. It does not discourage me. From my study I look over centuries old oaks, over acacias and pines, ceanothus and Fremontia which I once started from seed; I see the hills and dales of one of California's beautiful broad valleys. When this picture some day will fade I hope I shall leave the world with this thought in my mind:

You happy eyes!
Wherever you were,
Whatever you saw —
It was bonny and fair.

FIFTY YEARS OF WRITING

This bibliography which I append to the sketch of my life is naturally incomplete. My youthful efforts, the writings of my socialistic period, the editorials in the *Vorwärts der Pacific Küste*, my reports for European periodicals on the World Fair of 1915 in San Francisco and on America's attitude in World War I — all that is gone. The few fragments I still have I shall some day entrust to the flames. Of one article I wish I had a copy because it was my first attempt in the field of onomatology. The Germans called a florist *Blumengeschäftsinhaber.* In an article in the leading florists' weekly I proposed to substitute for this monstrosity the term *Blütner* and for a florist's shop *Blütnerei.* The year I left Berlin I had the satisfaction of a number of *Blumengeschäfte* having adopted my proposal. I do not know whether the idea spread and was accepted elsewhere.

This bibliography then covers approximately the period of my life as academic teacher. Most newspaper articles, reviews of textbooks, short notices etc. were not included. Perhaps I should have weeded out a little more. But I thought the list might reflect the literary interests of a humanist — even though there may be quite a bit of chaff among the wheat.

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1930

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1948

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