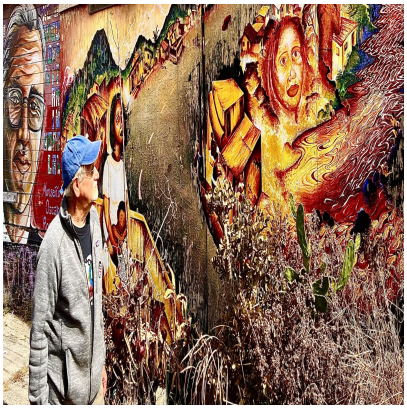

Bruce Neuburger: The life of a student radical turned farmworker, turned author

Description

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Bruce Neuburger was never an armchair radical.

Organizing against the Vietnam War while in the Coast Guard earned him an early, though honorable, discharge from the service. He helped organize GIs at Fort Ord and spent nearly a decade as a lettuce worker in Californiaâ??s fields, supporting efforts to improve the miserable working conditions endured by farmworkers.

He became a writer, using his skills to produce a newspaper for the GI movement and later for the farmworkers. More recently, he has written well-regarded books recounting his time as a farmworker and telling the story of his grandfather, a German Jew, who joined the anti-Nazi underground and was tortured and executed for his actions.

He taught English as a second language, loving the diversity of his students, and at 77, Neuberger is still active in progressive causes. â??I try to keep alive the idea of a better, non-exploitive world,â?• he said.

Joining the Coast Guard to beat the draft

Like many of his generation, Neuburger was radicalized by the war in Vietnam.

By the late 1960s, the war was at its height and young men by the tens of thousands were being drafted and shipped overseas. Hoping to avoid that fate, Neuburger, then a student at the University of California, Los Angeles, joined the Coast Guard Reserve. But rather than finding refuge in the Coast Guard, he was subjected to what he called McCarthyite and pro-war propaganda. He demanded equal time and was branded a troublemaker.

â??They broke into my car and found a stack of newspapers promoting anti-militarist and anti-imperialist ideas my friend and I were distributing around the base and put me back on active duty,â?• he said.

But Neuburger was saved from duty in the war zone by producing X-rays taken for a recent job application that showed he had a bad back. â??They put me on latrine duty for a while, threatened to court-martial me, and then told me to leave the base and never come back,â?• he said.

At 22, fired up about the Vietnam War, racism, and having been kicked out of the Coast Guard, Neuberger dropped out of college to become part of the GI anti-war movement. He allied with a group called â??Save Our Soldiers,â?• which needed people to work at a GI coffee house near the Army base at Fort Ord in Monterey.



Brue Neuburger. (Photo courtesy of Bruce Neuburger.)

The coffee house lasted only a year, closing about the same time as Neuburgerâ??s other job as a cook in a Mexican restaurant evaporated due to a lack of business.

Meanwhile, there was constant upheaval in Californiaâ??s Central Valley. The massive Salad Bowl strike of 1970 exploded out of the previous five-year Delano grape strike and boycott. It was the largest farmworker strike in U.S. history.

Needing a job in 1971, Neuberger heard that farmworkers were needed in the Salinas Valley. This was the first year of union contracts won by the United Farmworkersâ?? Organizing Committee (UFWOC), which became the United Farmworkers Union (UFW) in 1972. The new contracts made it possible to get jobs in the fields out of the union hiring hall.

Neuburger spent much of the next 10 years working mainly as a *lechuguero*, or lettuce worker. His first book, in 2013, â??Lettuce Wars: Ten Years of Work and Struggle in the Fields of California,â?• chronicled those experiences.

He was born in Astoria, Queens, New York, but grew up in Long Beach, California, where his father had been based during his wartime service. Deciding it would be a good place to settle, he moved the family West in 1949. His father ran a small business; his mother was a homemaker.

In high school, Neuburger competed in track but switched to gymnastics when he developed asthma. He was a star athlete, named a California inter-scholastic all-around champion in the Southern California division in his senior year. He started college at UCLA, but soon transferred to the University of California-Berkeley. â??I found things much more interesting in Berkeley, he said.

Radicalized at Cal

He rented a room in a house on Grove Street where there were leftists of every stripe. They introduced him to revolutionary ideas and theories from the Black Panthers and Mao Tse-Tung and his Cultural Revolution. â??I changed my world outlook very rapidly, but I was ready for it,â?• he said.

Neuburger started writing in Berkeley, putting out a few editions of a small, mimeographed paper he called â??The Gadfly.â?• It was mainly composed of sarcastic digs at college and academic life. But the killing of Martin Luther King prompted a more serious response. â??I was very shaken by the assassination of Martin Luther King and wrote a poem about it that someone framed and put up on the wall of a synagogue in my hometown of Long Beach,â?• he said.

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Writing became Neuburgerâ??s organizing tool of choice. At Fort Ord, he wrote articles for a GI paper called â??Right on Post.â?• As a farmworker, he helped create a bilingual paper in 1972 called â??*El Obrero de Valle Salinas,*â?• or â??The Worker of the Salinas Valley.â?• It dealt with labor, anti-war, and anti-racism subjects. â??I wanted the farmworkers to connect with the outside world and see their situation within that context,â?• he said.



Bruce Neuburger on Balmy Alley in front of mural by Lucia Gonzalez. (Photo by Colin Campbell.)

Neuburger said the impetus to start the paper was the killing of a U.S. citizen in the fields by the immigration authorities, called â??La Migraâ?• by the workers. The paperâ??s stories reflected the â??gross substandard housing and the harsh, back-breaking working conditions in the fields,â?• Neuburger said, â??and it also attempted to convey their spirit of resistance.â?• With the help of his Mexican co-workers, he became fluent in Spanish.

â??I started in the fields working on the crew thinning and weeding lettuce and laughed that first day on the job when they handed me a short hoe maybe long enough to touch my knee,â?• Neuburger said.

Used for decades, the short-handled hoe forced a lettuce thinner to bend at a 90-degree angle. When he asked a union representative â??When does the work stop hurting,â?? he replied, â??When you stop working.â?•

After his first year in the fields, Neuburger learned to cut and pack lettuce. The work was incredibly strenuous, Neuburger said, but the piecework pay was better than working by the hour when picking other vegetables. When asked by his Mexican co-workers why he was working in the fields, Neuburger

said he found the job by accident but stayed for the friendships and the chance to be part of a movement that might realize the promise of a different, more just society.

Farmworkers win better conditions

Some conditions did begin to change for the better after Cesar Chavez formed the United Farmworkers Organizing Committee (UFWOC), protesting conditions in the grape fields with a strike and boycott in 1965. â??For the first time,â?• Neuburger said, â??the initiative for change was placed in the hands of workers as a collective organization.â?•

The UFWOC became the United Farmworkers Union (UFW), and until the mid-70s, the union won some battles to improve the lives of the farmworkers. They got rid of the short-handled hoe, but as the farmworkers made gains, Neuburger felt the UFW had shifted towards a more conservative stance, under pressure from the growers and the government.

He had a falling out with Chavez when the UFW responded to the growersâ?? use of undocumented workers to break strikes by pressuring the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) to deport those workers. It was wrong and tactically harmful to unite with the immigration authorities,he said, because it widened division among farmworkers. â??I believed that anyone living and working in the U.S. should be accorded basic human rights, free from persecution,â?• Neuburger said.

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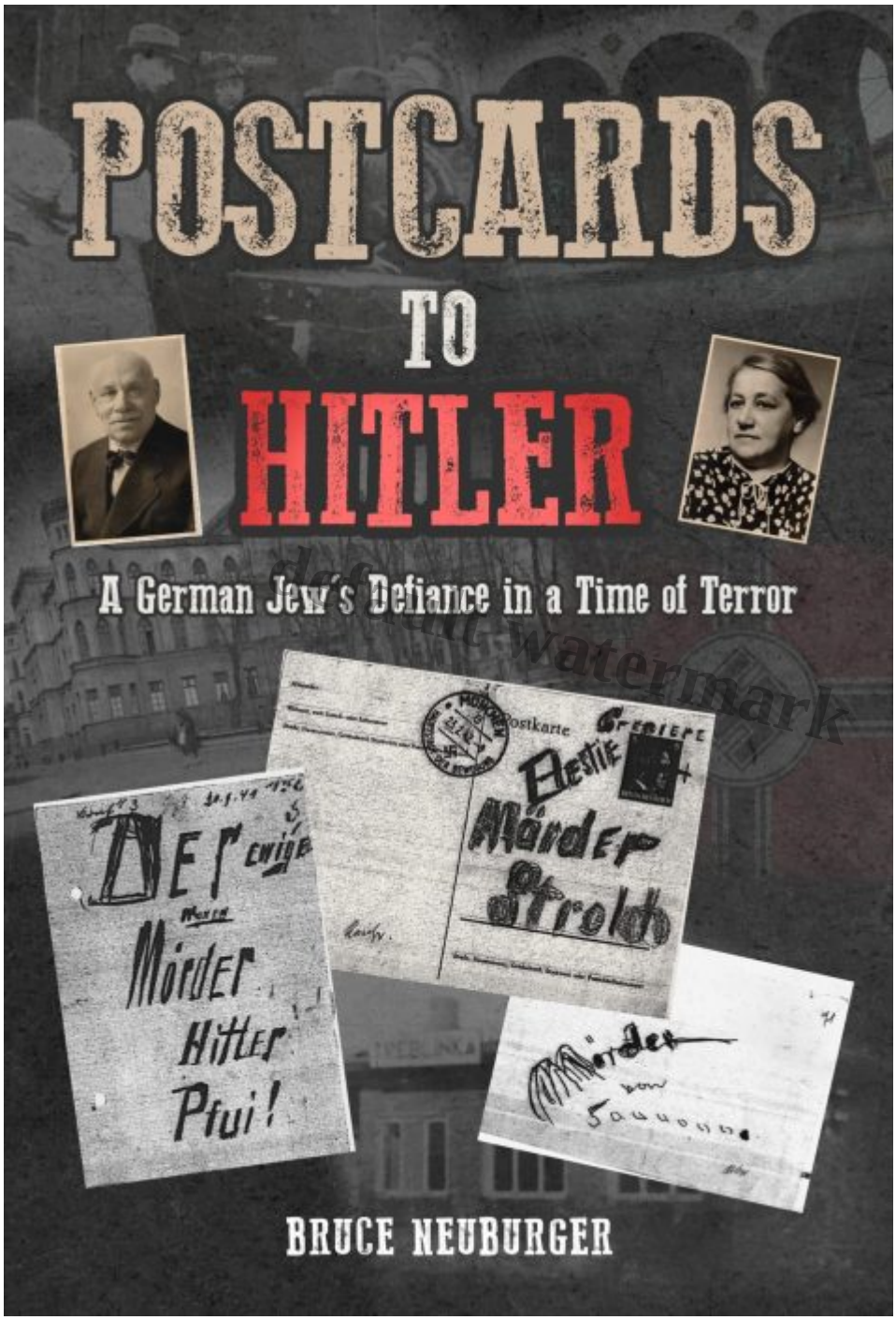
His stance angered not only the growers but some union members. He was fired several times and was once beaten by other farmworkers,he said. Blacklisted by the growers and unable to get work, he left the fields in 1979.



Bruce Neuburgerâ??s latest book: The story of his grandfatherâ??s resistance to the Nazis.

â??A few years after I left the fields, all the union gains were lost as the growers regained power,â?• Neuburger said. â??When I spent time with farmworkers in the 2010s while writing an epilogue for Lettuce Wars, I found the workers were worse off than in the years I worked in the fields.â?•

He drove a cab for six years and returned to school at San Francisco State University, where he got a bachelorâ??s degree in English and a masterâ??s in 1986 with concentrations in Spanish, Ethnic Studies, and Latin American history.

He started teaching English as a second language at the San Mateo Adult School that year and finished his career at San Mateo and City College San Francisco in 2015. â??While it was not a well-paid job, all of us ESL teachers would say the same thing â?? that it was the students in their diversity and enthusiasm that kept us going,â?• he said.

Neuburger continues to write, and this year produced his second book based on the anti-Nazi actions of his grandfather Benno Neuburger. â??Postcards to Hitler: A German Jewâ??s Defiance in a Time of Terrorâ?• is a narrative history drawn from direct interviews, archival documents, and the letters written by his grandparents as they tried desperately to emigrate.

Benno, a modest land investor, and his wife, Anna Einstein, were living in Munich during a relatively secure and prosperous time for German Jews. They joined the resistance after the Nazis took power. Benno wrote and mailed anti-Nazi postcards to his community in a desperate act of rebellion for which he was killed. Anna was murdered in a concentration camp.

Neuburger also contributes to an online press, â??Counterpunch,â?• and other publications, and shares his current writing with colleagues in the Californiaâ??s Writerâ??s Club.

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Bruce and Sharon Neuburger. (Photo courtesy of Bruce Neuburger.)

He and his wife, Sharon, married in 1983. They have no children, but Neuburger has a daughter, from a previous relationship, and two granddaughters. He and Sharon live in their home in the Excelsior district.

Heâ??s still an activist. Heâ??s been meeting with a Honduran family for five years through the Inter-faith Movement for Human Integrity at the Calvary Church. â??I act as a translator when they meet with immigration attorneys and need other help,â?• he said.

Neuburger attends services at the Unitarian Church, which he finds to be a welcoming community, and is a member of Jewish Voice for Peace. He hopes to discuss Bennoâ??s story in high school classes, keeping the truth of the Holocaust alive.

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