

What's the Hurry?

*Louis Begley has managed to live two parallel lives: attorney and author. He explained in Vienna how he did it: Without any hurry.*

By Ana Tajder

When it comes to living parallel lives, all successful and all different, few have outdone attorney and novelist Louis Begley.

Begley was a partner at Debevoise & Plimpton, a distinguished New York Law firm, when he surprised the literary world with his first novel *Wartime Lies*, about a young Polish Jew caught up in the inferno of the Holocaust. The novel appeared in 1991, when Begley was 57, and was very well received, winning the PEN/Ernest Hemingway Foundation Award for a First Work of Fiction and the Irish Times-Aer Lingus International Fiction Prize.

Begley continued writing and practicing law for 16 years, working during the week and writing on weekends before finally retiring in 2007, at the age of 73.

Last February 10, Begley was invited to read and discuss with the audience at the Hauptbücherei am Gürtel, in Vienna. After presenting several excerpts from *Wartime Lies*, he was asked about the autobiographical aspects of this book. He got quite annoyed, presumably because he had been asked this very question hundreds of times in the past 18 years. He later on specified that on principle, one should not confuse the literary merits of a book with the biographical facts concerning the author.

By the same token, though, some parallels cannot be overlooked. Just like Macek, the main character in *Wartime Lies*, Begley was born in 1933 in Poland to a wealthy Jewish family, and both escaped the Nazi army. Begley's family fled Poland in 1941 and, after a long odyssey, settled in the United States in 1947.

Seven years later, Begley graduated from Harvard College in English literature, summa cum laude. In 1956, he entered Harvard Law School on a scholarship, graduating in 1959, magna cum laude.

Begley still looks the lawyer, in his dark blue jacket and red tie, reserved and quietly authoritative. But the audience in Vienna quickly succumbed to his boyish charm.

"Why did it take so long to write your first book?" he was asked. He smiled.

"What was the hurry?" he answered.

Later on during the discussion, he did explain that initially he had lacked self-confidence and wasn't actually sure that he had anything to write about. His life in the USA did not seem interesting enough to him, and the wartime experience was, as he said, "unmentionable. I didn't think anybody wanted to hear about it."

Well, everybody in the room did. He read from the book in a low and soft voice – a trademark technique the rumours say he used in court to grab attention.

Although Stanley Kubrick bought the film rights for *Wartime Lies* and invested \$11 millions in pre-production, the film never got made. The director decided to let the media hype about Spielberg's *Schindler's List* calm down, and do *Eyes Wide Shut* first. He died soon after the movie was finished.

But another film based on a Begley novel did get made: *All About Schmidt*, starring Jack Nicholson as Warren Schmidt who is forced to deal with an ambiguous future as he enters retirement. Soon after, his wife passes away and he must come to terms with his daughter's marriage to a man he does not approve of and the failure that his life has become. Originally set in Hamptons and Manhattan, the movie version was reset to the South-West, angering many Begley fans who found that this completely changed Schmid's character. With all its commercial success, Begley sees the limitations. A movie can only resemble a novel,

he said. But it can never be as good, simply because a film and a novel are two very different things. But Hollywood itself he found fascinating.

“There is money flowing like a huge vast river, and you only have to stand by with a little cup.”

In the last two decades, Begley wrote several more critically acclaimed books, including the novels *The Man Who Was Late* and *A Matter of Honor* and *The Tremendous World I Have Inside My Head: Franz Kafka: A Biographical Essay*.

For many years Begley and his wife, Anka Muhlstein, have made Venice their favorite European destination. At one point, they were asked by his German publisher whether they wanted to write a book about the city.

At first he refused.

“We are not travel or restaurant writers. Also, I write in English and Anka in French, so we found the idea absurd.” But then he wrote a speech for a charity event to save Venice and Anka wrote an essay about its restaurants and their owners. The publisher was delighted and asked for one more short story to complete the job. Trusting the book would only come out in German, Begley wrote a story he described as “very pornographic.”

Soon after it came out in Germany, however, the book was also published in the UK and then in America. “And now I have to avoid all those women in the States”, he smiles..

Begley’s charm faded as he began talking about his latest book, *The Dreyfus Case: Îles-du-Diable, Guantanamo, History’s Nightmare* (to be published in German by Suhrkamp in May). Alfred Dreyfus was a French artillery officer of Jewish descent who was sentenced to life imprisonment for allegedly having been a spy for the German Army. The case against Dreyfus was so weak that French counter-intelligence manufactured evidence against him. In 1894, Dreyfus was sent to the penal colony at Devil’s Island in French Guiana and placed in solitary confinement.

“You put yourself at danger when you write a polemic book”, he says. But then he brightened: “But I never enjoyed writing a book this much!” When Yale University Press asked him to write something about “Why the Dreyfus case matters”, he was not interested at first. But as he researched the case, he realised that it was not only an fascinating detective story about how dishonourable behaviour was used to protect honour, but also a compelling parallel to what was going on in Guantanamo.

At the end, the audience came full circle: But how did he actually *decide* to write his first book at such an advanced stage of his life?

“I never had the nerve to say, ‘Now I am going to write a book’,” he said. “I just did it.” And how did he feel when it was finished?

“I was surprised.”

Of course he was - he had just embarked on a new life.