

# The Rushin' Prussian Conflict

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**D**uring the last spring we were all living under one roof, my father walked up into the loft and gave the four of us this startled look, as if he hadn't expected to find four boys playing pool over his garage. At the time, I took it for the bewildered expression of a man who discovers that he's merely a spectator in a brave new world peopled by someone else. Then he narrowed his eyes to give us the kind of appraising scrutiny we knew much better, either thriving under it on the playing field or avoiding it altogether by moving to one of the Coasts after graduation. I knew the Rushin' Prussian was back when he smoothed his flattop and asked, "Who wants to donate their lunch money in a little game of 9-ball?"

His nickname was coined by a local sports writer who must have had visions of placing Seth German up there with the "Gallopin' Ghost" and the "Four Horsemen." The nickname followed him uptown when he graduated and went into the insurance business with his father-in-law, who sent him all over the county like a Depression-era drummer. For years, local farmers were more than happy to close a deal with the young man who had led their team to a state title, but my father seldom spoke of his gridiron prowess around the house. This pleased the rest of the family, but I never got tired of hearing his policyholders tell me about his game-breaking runs and late touchdowns. I suppose that's why I eventually went into business with him, even though there was a space of about thirty seconds when I saw inside the source of his fame and wanted to be somewhere—anywhere—else.

Baseball was my father's first love. His second love was coaching baseball; we took whatever was left. My big brother Michael lost his taste for Little League after disputing my father's decision to play him at third base. He started on the

bench for the next two weeks, which, for a coach's kid, was like being banished to the third ring of Dante's Hell. He went away to college in the East and stayed there, except for yearly 3-day visits at Thanksgiving. Little brother Josh was probably the best natural athlete in our family, but he wasn't interested in baseball. My father had to draft four of his friends just to get him to play on the team. After one season, Josh turned to music, ignoring my father's lectures about wasting his God-given talent. Upon graduating, he moved to Seattle, where he manages a coffee shop during the day and plays with his band, "The Jacob Marley Dance Troupe," by night. Our littlest brother, Timothy, lives near the Gulf Coast in Houston. He was, and still is, into computers, but that wasn't an issue since my father had lost his taste for coaching by the time Timmy could play Little League.

I improved as a pitcher and a hitter during my Babe Ruth and Legion Ball years, with my father right there in the third base coach's box to make sure I worked hard. When I made the varsity team during my first year of high school, he volunteered to be an assistant coach, but the manager, Bobby Lapinsky, turned him down. He was forced to distribute his advice from outside the chalk lines for the first time, and I found myself demoted to the bullpen, where I had to watch Robbie Lapinsky start game after game with the same routine: two walks and a triple. My father and I started calling him "Double-Triple." We agreed that there were two kinds of coach's kids: the ones who belong in the starting lineup and those who see significant playing time only because their fathers are coaches. Another favorite theory was that the Lapinskys were sore at us because their teams from Little League on up had been winless against ours, with Robbie going zero-for-whatever against me. We also knew he was the only boy out of five children, making baseball mandatory for him if he had so much as a pulse.

In the spring of my junior year, Lapinsky the Manager spent a week in the hospital after an emergency appendectomy. He'd alienated the entire stock of assistant coaches at the school by that point, leaving him with no choice but to take my father up on his offer. The two of them had a long-standing feud dating back to the days when my father used to run over Bobby on the practice field, so you know how desperate he was for help. My father's first act of business was to start me since he felt it would be my only opportunity to show what I was really capable of as a pitcher. That was fine with me because I knew I'd worked hard enough to earn the chance, but in doing so, Lapinsky the Younger was bumped from his scheduled start.

"What the hell?" Robbie asked as he looked over my father's shoulder. He was tall and thin, with wispy blond hair and the petulant pout of a boy alternately mothered and mistreated by four sisters. "I'm supposed to pitch today."

"I'm giving you another day's rest, son," my father said quietly.

"Did you check with my dad?" Robbie asked.

"Don't have to," my father replied. "He made me the manager, so it's my call."

Robbie might have let it go there, but he could debate almost as well as he played ball. "You mean you're the acting manager," he said.

"Whatever," my father said as he continued to write, "it's still my call."

"An acting manager is the same thing as assistant manager," Robbie analogized, "and we all know how that's abbreviated."

"I would drop it, son," my father said calmly, "or you're going to be playing an abbreviated game today."

Never one to drop anything—except maybe a soft comebacker, Robbie paused to make sure that the entire team was listening. "I'm not your son and you can't bench me."

If my brother Michael had been there, he could have offered advice about what my father could do to a coach's kid, but he was already in self-exile, so Robbie sat out a game for the first time in his life. He stayed on the far end of the dugout with his best buddies, Jimmy Jones and Craig Nason, while I pitched a three-hit shut-out and went 3-for-4 in our first victory of the season.

Later that evening, I sat up late with my father. We had the windows open, and the house was full of warm April air. Josh was practicing his bass in the garage and Timothy was asleep upstairs. In the front room, my mother was finishing the last pages of a long novel for her reading club. My father and I were watching a Cub game on the West Coast, but he'd turned the volume down so that he could give my mother a pitch-by-pitch account of my performance. My throwing arm had that pleasant ache that I still associate with a good game. I guess it was about the happiest moment of my young life.

"So I put Jones and Nason in for the last inning and they committed a couple of errors to put runners on second and third with only one out—"

"Seth," my mother interrupted, "what was that on the porch?"

My father frowned and turned his ear toward the front of the house. Then we heard a loud scraping sound, accompanied by the snickers of suppressed laughter. He leapt to his feet and ran down the hall as if he were breaking into an opposing backfield. I was right behind him, and we got through the front door just in time to see three figures disappearing down our neighbor's driveway. Nothing was missing or damaged, but the glider had been moved to the other side of the porch.

"What was that all about?" my mother asked when we came back inside.

"We just had a pranking from Double-Triple Lapinsky and his cronies," my father said. "They're probably mad that your son showed them up on the ball field."

"As if you never did the same thing yourself," my mother admonished.

"It wasn't my fault that Bobby Lapinsky couldn't tackle me or hit my fastball."

"You know what I mean," she said with a smile.

My father returned her smile. "I might have tipped a cow or two in my day."

This brought a loud laugh from my mother, but before I could ask my father for details about his days as a prankster, he launched back into his replay of my shutout.

We won our other two games that week for our first winning streak of the season. My father kept Lapinsky and his buddies out of the starting lineup, which was probably why he found the glider and the lawn chairs turned upside down the next weekend when he went out to read the Sunday paper.

"Those boys ought to be benched for breaking training," my father said as he used the TV listings to sweep six cigarette butts into the classifieds section.

"Do you suppose these pranks are leading up to something?" my mother asked.

My father grunted. "Who cares? They could have burned down our house."

"It was just an innocent question," my mother replied, but she wore the same expression as the time she suggested he put hay on the floor of the bathrooms to absorb spills and soak up odors.

My father went inside to call the police. Soon he was shouting, "I don't care if boys will be boys; I want increased protection." My mother watched the whole exchange with her arms crossed over her chest. Her eyes were bright and she had trouble suppressing her smile.

"Why are you on their side?" I asked her.

"I'm not on anyone's side, dear," she said.

"Then what's so funny?"

"How history repeats itself in such foolish and childish ways."

I should have paid more attention, but then no one ever listens to a prophet in her own house. Lapinsky the Manager came back the next week and it was business as usual with Robbie throwing at my head during batting practice and Nason kicking dust in my eyes as I slid into second after belting a double on my last swing. Robbie started twice that week, partly to make up for the lost start and partly because he didn't last past the second inning either time. I spent the both games on the bullpen bench even though our entire pitching staff was exhausted. When they weren't making errors, Robbie and his buddies tossed rude looks at my father as he sat behind our dugout and pretended not to see them. While I watched this comedy unfold, I couldn't help wondering if my father's strategy had backfired.

The next weekend, we kept the porch light on and my father stayed up past one o'clock on Friday, but we had no visitors. On Saturday night, he went to bed after giving Josh and me three-hour shifts. He relieved me at one o'clock, but must have fallen asleep on the couch right away because I was still awake when I heard a car door slam out front. Then there came a series of crashes that brought everyone running downstairs. We found him flicking the porch light on and off repeatedly with no effect. He called the police and a cruiser pulled up about a half hour later.

"So much for you guys keeping an eye on my place, Jones," my father said.

"Anything missing, Prush?" Jones asked. He was in the Kiwanis Club with my father and knew him from his football days; he was also the uncle of Jimmy Jones.

"There sure as hell is," my father said. "They took the porch light out of the socket."

Jones stopped reaching for his notebook and took out his flashlight instead. Holding it above his head, he snapped it on and swept the beam across the flower boxes on the porch railing. There stood the light bulb, planted next to the tulips.

"A bulb among the bulbs. Now isn't that clever, Seth?" my mother asked. She always refused to use his nickname, both in public and private.

"Seems like I've seen that one before too," Jones said, "about twenty years ago."

My father ignored their comments as he unplanted the bulb, wiped it off, and screwed it back into the socket.

"And would you believe that he knocked the lawn chair into the yard when he threw open the screen door?" my mother asked.

"Upside down gliders, planted bulbs, and flying chairs were all pretty famous pranks once upon a time," Jones said, "but I guess that'll be the end of it."

"Why?" my father asked. "Are you guys doing psychic training now?"

"Cherry bombs are illegal in Iowa," Jones replied.

"That wouldn't stop Robbie Lapinsky—or your nephew—from blowing up my mailbox."

"If he comes back, you'll let us handle it, right Prush?"

"You guys have done such a good job of protecting and serving so far, why not?"

"I mean it, Prush." He looked at my father for a moment and then said, "Bad things happen when citizens take the law into their own hands. G'night, Mrs. G., boys."

"Will someone tell me what's going on here?" Josh asked as Jones drove away.

Adopting her story-time voice, my mother said, "Once upon a time, there was a feud between Seth German and Bobby Lapinsky that started with glider moving and ended with cherry bombing."

Josh rolled his eyes. "Gosh, Dad was a real hell-raiser, wasn't he?"

"I guess you could call him a local trend-setter," she replied and they laughed.

The old pranks did sound pretty tame to me, but I didn't like to see them laughing at my father. "What are we going to do?" I asked.

He didn't reply, but I could tell he had a plan.

Our house had a military undercurrent during the next week. On Monday, my father brought home a brand new mailbox that was guaranteed to withstand the blast of an M-80, which he said was ten times more powerful than a cherry bomb. On Tuesday, he modeled the commando outfit he was going to wear on guard duty. On Wednesday, my mother planned a weekend retreat to visit her sister in Des Moines. On Thursday, my father set the mailbox on a sawhorse strategically placed at the top of the steps to catch the streetlight just right. On Friday, Josh and I ate the dinner our mother left in the oven and tried not to stare at our father, who had blackened his face and was wearing a black watchman's cap and sweater even though the high had been 85 degrees that afternoon. It was so quiet at the table that we could hear the cicadas outside.

"I keep expecting him to break into an Al Jolson song," Josh whispered to me.

"Coach told me I might start next week," I finally said to break the silence.

"About time," was his only reply.

"Maybe you shouldn't put out the mailbox this weekend."

"It's my house, so it's my call."

I wanted to say something like, "Your call is going to hurt my career, Dad," but it seemed pointless. Instead, I asked, "What are you going to do if you catch them?"

"I hold onto them by the collar until the cops get here."

"All three of them?" Josh asked.

"Maybe you want to go into the backyard for a few falls after supper," he said with wide, suddenly white eyes, "and I'll show you."

I have a chipped tooth and Josh sports a scar on his shin from the last time we went "into the backyard." Only Michael escaped unscathed because he was strong enough to throw his arms around my father's neck and ride out the wrestling match.

"Besides, you two aren't planning to play pool while I'm defending our house, are you? Joe, I want you up in the beech tree, and, Josh, I want you by the front door with your finger over the speed dial button."

"What if I programmed the number for pizza delivery instead of the cops?" Josh asked. This got no comment, so he whined, "Why can't I be the second shooter on the Grassy Knoll?"

"Because you're not half as damn clever as you think you are and because you'd probably let those boys run right over you, crack your head on the sidewalk, and then your mother would never speak to me again."

"You could always tour with a vaudeville show if she threw you out," Josh retorted.

"I think there's a family on the other side of town that is actually looking for an out-of-work comedian to perform at their dinner table," my father replied.

"What would I do for material if I left?" Josh asked.

At this point, I took my dishes into the kitchen, leaving the two of them to their war of words. I went out to the garage and shot a couple racks of pool to clear my head. On one hand, I wanted to see those guys get what was coming to them, but on the other, I wanted the chance to start again. I kind of hate to admit this, but I almost wished my mother had asked me to drive her and Timmy to Des Moines.

At nine o'clock, my father hid himself in the darkest corner of the porch and I blackened my face before climbing into the beech tree for the first time since junior high. Over the next three hours, I tried to remember every pitch I'd ever thrown. Toward the end of the second hour, Josh started to laugh softly in the front hall and I heard my father hiss at him to be quiet. After that, the only sounds were the thrumming noises of the night birds feeding on mayflies and the *chk-chk-chk* of our neighbor's sprinkler.

Around midnight, a beat-up Ford truck with one headlight cruised past our house. It came past again fifteen minutes later and the porch got so still that even the breeze stopped crossing it. The truck passed once more and we all held our breaths for another half hour until we heard the sound of tires rolling to a halt five houses up the street.

With a baseball bat tucked under his arm like an over-sized swagger stick, Robbie looked left and right as he moved down the sidewalk. After a few steps, he dropped to one knee and lifted his face as if to sniff the breeze before advancing a few steps crab-wise. Leaping up suddenly, he raked across the dark windows on both sides of the street with the bat. Then he flipped it under his arm again and waved up Jones. Holding their bats like rifles, they broke into a trot and advanced like a SWAT team—minus the loud "*hutt-hutts*," of course—as they used trees, bushes, and parked cars for cover. It's a wonder Josh was able to contain his laughter because if we had an infrared camera, we could have won the \$10,000—and maybe even the \$100,000—prize on that funniest videos show.

Finally, they stopped playing war and stalked toward my mother's peonies. Robbie pretended to draw a bead on the defenseless buds and Jones did an imaginary golf swing into one of the baby's breath planters on the porch steps. Then they both turned their attention to the mailbox, which gleamed in the night like the Holy Grail.

Robbie handed the bat to Jones and started up the steps as he reached into his front pocket. He lit the bomb and chucked it inside the mailbox. My father leaped out of his chair and snapped on his flashlight before Robbie could close the door. Robbie jumped up and out and I swear his feet didn't touch the ground again until he was nearly ten feet away from the porch. Jimmy had already dropped both bats and was running with his knees so high that they must have bruised his ribs—even though he was covering as much ground as an accountant on a treadmill.

My father vaulted the railing, clearing it with the grace of a man half his age. He landed with a small, but clearly audible "ug." He took one step and fell over, yelling loud enough to make me stop my gawking. When I dropped out of the tree and lunged for Robbie, there was a popping sensation in the middle of my calf. I watched the rest of the spectacle from the ground as I tried not to throw up.

Jones threw himself onto the running board of the truck as if someone had turned off his treadmill. Robbie chased the getaway vehicle for a block and a half before he was able to jump into the back. Josh came out onto the porch with the phone in his hand, but he was laughing so hard that he couldn't talk to the dispatcher. As for the mailbox, nothing but a thin veil of smoke rose from its open mouth.

Before the EMTs took us to the hospital, my father insisted that Officer Jones bag the bats and the mailbox as evidence. Looking like a bad Halloween gag, we were sitting side-by-side in wheelchairs when Bobby Lapinsky brought Robbie and his buddies into the emergency room. All three had dazed looks and were bleeding from cuts on their foreheads. When the ER nurse started to take Robbie back for treatment, my father stood up, only to grunt and sit down again.

"Whoa!" he shouted. "How come he's going ahead of us?"

Bobby looked a man who'd been awakened from a bad dream, only to find himself in a worse one. "Possible head trauma has a higher priority than some leg injury."

"I just ruptured my Achilles tendon thanks to your son. Why don't you arrest them, Jones?" my father asked.

"He should arrest you for entrapment, Prush," Bobby said.

"How would you know, unless you were driving the truck?" my father asked.

"The boys called me on the CB after you scared them so bad they wrecked it."

"Man, seeing you two here is like *déjà vu* all over again," Jones said, "but he's right, Prush. You already had a perfectly good mailbox, so the other one was obviously a decoy."

The room went silent and the blood drained from my father's face. A second later, I discovered the real meaning of the bewildered look I'd seen the year before: it was the expression of a man who realizes he's failed his children despite his best efforts. For about thirty seconds, I believed that he and his stupid jock feud had failed me. Why else would I be there with shoe polish on my face and my foot up in the air while he argued with his old enemy? Then it looked like he was about to slide out of the wheelchair, so I put my arm around my dad's shoulders, which didn't seem so legendarily broad for once.

"If you were acting so maturely," I asked as I turned toward Robbie, "why were you driving to Newton as if you needed an alibi?"



He and I stared at each other as we stood at the crossroads of the Lapinsky-German feud. We contemplated each other's wounds and wondered what was next if we were already in the hospital after the first round. As if we didn't like where that possible future might take us, we shook our heads and that was the end.

We took our truce to the ball field, where I rooted for Robbie from the bench while my torn calf healed. He found a groove and went 3-1 with an ERA of 2.05 over his next four starts. Content to be in the bleachers for once, my dad started supporting him as well, going so far as to ask Robbie to sign the cast on his ankle after he and I combined for a shutout victory in our first district playoff game. Robbie put his name next to mine and wrote, "Keep on Rushin, Mr. Prussian." We lost in the second round of the play-offs, but Robbie and I went to state as novice debaters the following fall, when my mother surprised us all by starting to use my dad's nickname for the first time.