

The mysterious Max Melbo

Steve Braunias on the life of a German author who wandered the streets of Ponsonby.

There was always so much going on with Volker Pilgrim, with his ideas and his superstitions and his habit of slipping into new identities, a man of exile and mystery and at least some measure of genius, who so many people adored, and who he touched even after his death in Auckland on March 6, a week before he would have turned 80, and there is yet more to come from him, in the shape of two books, one of them his first in English, and actually a third book desperately wanted by a publisher in Germany, where the Pilgrim story began, finishing in New Zealand, with no one around him in those last few days knowing much about who he was, but that was the way he wanted it, a small, agile man with large eyes and a lively intelligence who lived entirely and in a way beautifully on his own terms, which included sacrifice and poverty, and even though that was his choice, and even though there was so much to admire about the way he went about his life intellectually and morally and practically, it's at the very least poignant and to be honest it's actually heartbreaking to write this story in the presence of one of the few things he left behind: a plastic bag (how he loved plastic bags!) containing 12 pencils worn down close to the lead, none of them more than two inches long.

The bag was among his last remaining earthly possessions kept in a storage locker in Grey Lynn. I recently spent a bit of time trying to break into it, and twice went out to inspect another, larger unit at an industrial estate at East Tamaki, where a pair of bolt cutters was finally produced to snip open a lock to allow access to evidence of a life once lived at his final home address, in Ōtara, before he took up a kind of vagabond's existence in youth hostels and backpacker accommodation across Auckland. Both lockers – a large space in East Tamaki, a small space in Grey Lynn, which functioned as his office - contained a lot of plastic bags, also cardboard boxes neatly tied with twine. This is how a life can end, and what it leaves: very little of any use to anyone.

Well, he always travelled light. Ridiculous to focus on a set of pencils in a plastic bag; surely the point is to focus on what those pencils wrote. Volker Pilgrim – also known as Max Melbo, the name he went by after he left Germany and settled in Melbourne (Melbo was his tribute) – was an author who dedicated himself to the rich and teeming life of the mind. One of his friends recommended that he take up fiction as the perfect form for his wild imaginings, his strange visions. But he wrote non-fiction. He was once a best-selling author and made very good money. There were books on the evils of mother love and, for balance, books on the evils of father love. I took another souvenir away from his Grey Lynn storage unit, or office: a copy of one of his four mammoth volumes which analysed the psychological motives of Hitler, who Pilgrim saw as a sexually deranged serial killer driven to hysteria by the psychiatric treatment he received at a military hospital in the last days of World War I. Each book is about 800 pages. Each has a different coloured cover. I have the red volume. The translated subtitle of the book on my desk next to the 12 pencils is *From the love of men to the pleasure of killing*.

I was with Campbell Smith and Pilgrim's friend Sabine Hillebrandt when the Grey Lynn locker was forced open. Smith owns Verandahs Parkside Lodge, a backpacker hostel in Hopetoun St, Ponsonby, where Pilgrim, known then as Max Melbo, made his last stand in a small upstairs room with the window always closed. There was a sense of decency and fairness about Smith. He was with Max when he died, of cancer, and he was with the body when it was buried in a plywood coffin, and he has stayed close to his memory ever since, spending massive amounts of time and effort to settle the affairs of his curious former tenant.

One day we went through Max's papers and looked for names. I found a card for Sabine. I phoned her that evening. She was excited to hear I was calling about an old friend she met through the German consulate in Auckland but hadn't seen for many years, since he mysteriously disappeared from her life; a few days previously, I had blurted out news of his death to one of his former landladies, and her shock taught me the good grace of breaking it

gently to Sabine. "Oh," she said sadly, and later in the conversation, she wept. The three of us met the following week one afternoon in the car park outside Storage King on Richmond Rd, Grey Lynn, which for Max had been a five-minute bus trip from his lair at Verandahs. "Most people dump stuff and go," said Storage King manager Chris Winter. "Max would stay an hour, maybe longer. It was like there was nowhere else he'd rather be." He would perch on top of a ladder and go through his papers, reading and writing, a slender, bony, cheerful old man with a shaved head and gentle manner.

"You could smell him before you saw him," Winter said. He looked homeless. He dressed homeless. "He'd shave, and he washed himself, but his clothes could almost stand up by themselves," said Smith. Max kept the storage door closed during his visits, so passers-by couldn't look in, and he used one of the strongest locks known to man, a Super Sesamee, which Winter tried to get at with bolt cutters but barely made a scratch, and had to cut open the door latch instead.

We took turns on top of the ladder making brief inspections of the contents. I found a plastic bag full of plastic bags. It was like a riddle within a riddle. Smith said, "One day I said to him, 'Max, you need a new plastic bag,' because he was carrying one around that had ripped and he'd put duct tape on it. 'Oh, no, no, no Campbell, this one is from New York.'"

Strange and desperately sad to think of this shaman from the Old World wandering the expensive streets of Ponsonby, clutching at plastic bags and filling them with pencil stubs. I wished I'd known him, but who really did? Outside, in pale autumn sunlight, we discussed the man they knew as Max, his eccentricities and his peregrinations, his secrets and his disappearances, and Sabine said, "He was a man who we all only knew a little bit of."



Pilgrim's battered suitcase.

The central problem of his life was his birth as Volker Elis von Pilgrim on March 14, 1942, in Wiesbaden to an aristocratic family who was very close friends with the second most powerful leader in the Nazi death machine, Hermann Goering. I spoke with numerous friends of Pilgrim's living in Germany and they all brought it up, all noted the disgrace and shame of it contributing to his decision to cut all ties with his family and leave for the other side of the world.

Wolf Osburg of Hamburg published the four Hitler volumes. He described it as an honour, but could not describe it as a success. They sold poorly. "It's like jewels which the future will find. But," he laughed, "don't ask my wife!" What would she say? "That we have invested so much in such a mad project." He would dearly love to find a manuscript of Pilgrim's autobiography, and publish it. His special interest is the Goering connection. I have seen a draft of an autobiographical manuscript. It makes only glancing references to his family's dark background – in 1936, his father, Hans, entered "the military of the Third Reich and climbed [to] the rank of major".

Much of the manuscript is dense and incoherent. There are vast passages of philosophising, psychoanalysing, sheer blathering. The sordid name of Goering doesn't even come up. Pilgrim is more interested in insights: "The baron," as he calls his father, "was disposed to become a Nazi."

Sometimes, though, he chooses to give detailed and also very lyrically presented information, as with the circumstances of his conception: "On his 35th birthday on 16 June 1941, surrounded by hundreds of soldiers in the barracks of Jueterbog, Hans-Dietrich von Pilgrim, Baron Baltazzi, son of the Prussian officer and Imperial adjutant, Kurt von Pilgrim, and the sculptress, Amaly Freiin von Reibnitz, spent his most beautiful day and then his most beautiful night with his 28-year-old wife Hildegard von Pilgrim, Baroness Baltazzi, daughter of the State Archive Director and publishing historian, Dr Wilhelm Smidt, and the housewife Lisbeth Toeche, who did not consider her own social excellence necessary, since she was the daughter of the (Brahms friend) Joseph Joachim pianist, Helene Labes, and the imperial court publisher Toeche-Mittler. Nine months later Baron and Baronin's son was born, whom they baptized 'Herbert Volker' and called 'Matz'."

Good old Matz! He describes a weird and thrilling childhood: "The Baroness did something unusual for women. As soon as her son was a few months old, she began to travel with him... She lived on estates, in castles and villas. She presented her son in former ruling houses of all kinds."

Pilgrim thinks about the meaning and consequences of these travels, and writes, "My whole life moves back and forth between dualities or circles around multiplicities. The Baroness' travels between places and people were continued by many other back-and-forths: between nobility and bourgeoisie, Nazi family and Staazi society, East and West Germany, being German and being in New Zealand, Jewish and Greco-Roman identity. It got even worse when I claimed to be male and female, straight and gay, human and animal!"

What? To understand or appreciate Pilgrim as an expressive artist is to go along with the ride of his exclamations, his excitements, his extraordinariness. His publisher Wolf Osburg described him: "He was the most complicated man I can think about." (A feature of this story is English as said and written by Germans.) Berlin publisher Ulfa von den Steinen was introduced to him in Bavaria in 1982: "I soon felt I had met the most interesting person on earth." Pilgrim later introduced her to his ex-boyfriend Alexej, a psychiatrist; they fell in love, and have been married for over 40 years. (Pilgrim exclaims in his autobiography, "My 3 gay relationships were with 1 semi-gay and 2 non-gay men!") Zurich record label owner Veit Stauffer said, "I am his number one fan." Meeting and knowing him since 1978, he said, is one of the cultural highlights of his life. Berlin novelist and translator Frank Heibert met him in 1979 ("he was a good friend of my then-boyfriend") and like Wolf Osburg, like Ulfa von den Steinen, like Veit Stauffer, like everyone talked to for this story who knew him for any time, found him stunning: "This person was so unique, there really can't be anyone like him in the whole world."



Pilgrim, second from right, in a Werner Herzog directed film.

Osburg, von den Steinen, Heibert, Stauffer, Pilgrim: they were all intellectuals who formed part of the great post-war cultural revolution in Germany, creating wildly exciting new music (Neu!, Kraftwerk), new literature (Heinrich Boll, Gunter Grass), new fashion (Karl Lagerfeld), and new cinema (Pilgrim has a minor role in *The Enigma of Kaspar Hauser*, from 1974, one of the first films directed by Werner Herzog). Pilgrim was raised after the war in East Germany, on the Communist side of the wall, but fled to the West at 18. He was selected for a piano master class at a music conservatory. He got married. He got divorced on account of the realisation he was gay. He led so-called "men's movements", arguing for ways to achieve a gentler, kinder, "unpatriarchal society" that included his notion that men can only be liberated by living out their suppressed homosexuality. He is cited in such European LGBTQ+ studies as *Feeling Like a Child: Dreams and practices of sexuality in the West German alternative left during the 1970s*, by Joachim Haberlen, who writes pithily, "Popular left-wing sex-advice author Volker Pilgrim advocated masturbation for both men and women."

His books made him well known but his appearances on German TV talk shows made him famous. He writes at length about that subject in his autobiography. It's like reading about the German equivalent of contemporary US talk shows from the 1970s when writers such as Gore Vidal and Norman Mailer provided intelligent, controversial commentary for a watching nation, but the most revealing point Pilgrim makes is when he reveals the first time he went under an alias, and used the family's royal honorific of Baltazzi: "When 'Volker Elis Pilgrim' became too well known, I didn't want to be in the telephone book under that name. Nobody found me under 'Baltazzi'. I was using nobility as the opposite of its function 100 years earlier - not as prominence, but as a way to hide and disappear from bourgeois public life."

He changed his name to Ellis Dohna in 1999, then to Max Melbo in 2002. Throughout his manuscript, he alternates between writing about himself in first and third person. There's a disconnect with his own name - and a disconnect, too, with people who know and love him. A constant pattern in his life was deserting his friendships, not with any argument but by simply disappearing. He did it with Wolf Osburg, with Ulfa von den Steinen, with Veit Stauffer, with Frank Heibert, with everyone talked to for this story who knew him for any time.

"I haven't seen him in ages," said Sabine Hillebrandt, when I phoned her. "We had quite a lot of contact for a while and then he disappeared." There was a pause, and she said, "Has he passed away? What happened?" I told her. She said, "When I heard your voice message, I... After all these years of silence around him... I had hoped not but I thought maybe that was the case. It's a real shame. I actually googled him a few times to try to find out where he was because he really like disappeared, and like never contacted me again. I emailed him in

February actually because his birthday was coming up on March 14. I've done that a few times and never heard back. I thought of him on that day..."

But he had died the previous week. No one from his previous lives knew. Pilgrim was forever collapsing his tents and moving on, like a kind of intellectual version of Christopher McCandless, the American trapper made famous by Jon Krakauer's book *Into the Wild*, which traced his restless movements up until his starved and lonely death in August 1992 in a bus in the Alaskan backcountry. Pilgrim headed into a wilderness, too, of poverty and no fixed abode, when he left Europe behind for the Antipodes, to live out the years of the 12 little pencils wrapped in plastic. "Max used to say," said Campbell Smith of Verandahs Parkside Lodge in Ponsonby, "My whole life was a comedy but the last few years has been a tragedy."



Volker Pilgrim, pictured in the green jumper, at a party in the 1970s.

Almost nothing is simple or exact in the fluid, complicated life of Volker Pilgrim, including why he staged so many disappearing acts. His friends all contributed different reasons, different guesses.

His publisher Wolf Osburg provided two quite exact motives why Pilgrim left Germany. One: "He came from a family very, very close to Hermann Goering. To survive he came to the point of a sharp cut." He meant an abrupt exit. Two: "And if that was not enough, he was abused in his family." Pilgrim's manuscript for his autobiography moves almost warily around that darkness but he spoke about it openly with his friends. His family – Nazis, tormentors - disgusted him. He no longer wanted to breathe the same air as they did. But there was more to his disappearances than that. "It's really difficult to explain," said his number one fan Veit Stauffer, over the phone late at night from his home in Zurich. "For me personally, maybe I would say it was a bit over the top. I mean - it was a bit heavy, to keep the distance. He had sleeping problems and in his book *The Vampire Man* he had a sense that someone would put out his power during the night. Maybe I don't know if people call this black magic. I'm not sure. But it was a fact that he had the idea that he must be as far away as possible, that he changed his name, that nobody could find him."

Ulfa von den Steinen also touched on the Vampire book: "He felt he was being haunted by people who came close to him. He wrote a book about it, *Der Vampirmann*, the man persecuted by vampires. It is his personal story. This is why he cut relations with all his friends who knew

him well personally, even with us and other close friends. He gave up living in a home of his own because the vampires might find him there, and he moved from one hostel to the next.

"This strange belief was quite isolated from the rest of his life which was not really eccentric. He simply followed his own beliefs, such as not taking medicines, not accepting money from any of us but living what he was, a moneyless homeless person."

These comments were made in reply to questions that I had emailed her. Earlier, she had provided a brief memoir of her old friend, dating from their first meeting, in Bavaria, in 1982. It's a beautiful and touching document from someone who knew him better than anyone except her husband, Alexej.

She wrote, "He made me read his new manuscript about his partner of many years who had recently left him. That's when I first heard of Alexej (whom I hated for having left Volker). Volker stayed with me until August when he decided to emigrate to Australia.

"Volker was a remarkably superstitious intellectual, and a woman he had consulted read his hand and predicted he would be successful overseas. She also made frightening predictions about catastrophes such as the end of the world and the destruction of Europe. He was therefore determined to leave our cursed continent and wanted me to go with him. When I declined, he had the intuition that I should meet Alexej. That was 40 years ago and we live happily together.

"Volker and Alexej first met in the early 70s. Volker was involved in the social movements of the time, had published successfully, was often seen on TV and his play was performed in Hamburg. He had a doctorate of law and a diploma as a concert pianist; he had left communist Germany (DDR) and he was recently divorced. Alexej, a few years younger, had finished his medical studies and was working in a Berlin clinic for his specialisation as a psychiatrist. Together they developed new theories on family, sexuality, gender, etc. Volker published very controversial new ideas, one book they authored together. He earned quite a lot of money but always gave it away.

"After our marriage in 1983, Volker often stayed with us for prolonged periods – in Munich, then for many years in the Canary Islands. We spent months with him in Melbourne. Around 2008, he decided to cut most of his European relationships, even with us. He had begun to feel persecuted and to avoid personal contacts. A few years ago, his researches on Hitler led him back to Berlin and to us.

"Until he stopped sending or answering messages last October."



Pilgrim's German Democratic Republic passport from the 1960s.

He lived in Melbourne for about 17 years. Ulfa said, "Max was selling balloons to children for his living. He did all sorts of things below his capabilities. He taught himself to be a poor man." He continued to publish and collaborated on a large operatic score with one of Australia's most celebrated composers, George Dreyfus.

He arrived in New Zealand in April 1999. He rented a house at 71 Hamlin Rd, Ōtara, and although his publishing career had halted in 1993, he kept writing, working on an autobiography, a manuscript detailing his abuse, and then, consumingly and obsessively, his Hitler researches.

Pilgrim's publisher Wolf Osburg takes up the story. "In 2008, at the Leipzig Book Fair, Pilgrim suddenly appeared at our booth. My sales manager excitedly asked me if I knew who was standing some distance away from us. I was instructed by him that it was Volker Elis Pilgrim. So he had once again ventured from New Zealand to his old homeland."

Pilgrim outlined his intentions to write a four-volume study of Hitler's sexuality. They workshoped the idea at a home in the Black Forest. Osburg: "We set out to convince Pilgrim that the work had to be reduced by about half. At first, he let us do it, but then I received an email. Pilgrim formally terminated the collaboration with the words: 'Imagine that I were Beethoven and two conductors went over there and crossed out my work.' He was right, that same evening I drove to see him in Berlin-Spandau... Two incredibly exciting years followed... I will never forget a day of this work in my life."

Frank Heibert found the books too dense and just too much. "I felt that the very interesting hypotheses he had come up with got lost in the way he presented them - a pity." It was his suggestion that Pilgrim turn it into a novel. Veit Stauffer thought the books were Pilgrim's masterpieces. "In the beginning I was sceptical. I thought should I really read another book about Hitler? Then I realised how important his work was. But German readers thought, 'Well now he is crazy.' For historians and psychologists, it was over the top."

I duly spoke with a German clinical psychologist. Eva Maiwald works at a clinic in Notting Hill, London, where she lives with her partner, Oscar-nominated New Zealand screenwriter Anthony

McCarten (The Theory of Everything, Bohemian Rhapsody). She was staggered by the length of Pilgrim's four-volume set on Hitler, and said, "From a psychologist's point of view, I would definitely say he's highly obsessive. He never was a man of few words. I'd also guess he'd meet the criteria for a personality disorder. Nothing wrong with that, you can still have brilliant ideas."

Obsessive, disordered, brilliant – as a character sketch, it had a passing resemblance to Volker Pilgrim aka Max Melbo. But no one who knew him spoke of him as volatile or chaotic, as someone with sharp edges. In person, he was soft, kind, gentle. Sabine Hillebrandt made friends with Max in the early 2000s, in Auckland, when she was working at the school of languages. "He'd visit me with his old battered backpack at university. Sometimes I'd drop him off later at Ōtara and other times we'd buy some food and have a meal and a glass of wine at my house on the Shore. He had this cheekiest smile and grin. We had so many good laughs."

He was working hard on his memoir of abuse when they were friends. He'd disappear for a year, then email her saying he'd been too immersed and in too much pain writing his book. He eventually disappeared altogether. He made contact again with his friends in Europe during his Hitler researches. By that time, he'd left the house in Ōtara, and stored his possessions at a storage locker. He got his Gold Card in 2012. He'd taken up an itinerant life, staying in Auckland lodges and hostels, sometimes for months at a time, always moving on.

He cut off everyone back in Europe last October. Ulfa, Veit, Wolf and others wondered why their friend once again slipped into the shadows. He told no one the truth. He was dying.



Veit Stauer's collection of books by Volker Pilgrim.

Verandahs Parkside Lodge in Hopetoun St, Ponsonby, is a grand old Victorian villa with lovely stained glass, the whole pile made of kauri. It's perched on the banks of Western Park. Max arrived on August 18, 2019. His upstairs room looked over dappled glades of oak trees and romantic paths but the view he was most interested in was inside his head.

"He didn't seem to mind to be poor," Sabine Hillebrandt said, "if that meant he could do what he felt he was here for." He bent his head to the task of writing; all he had on him were suitcases, paper, pencils. When he was taken to hospice to die, he emailed Verandahs' owner Campbell Smith on February 19 this year, in uncertain English, "Please not destroy my big and small suitcases! They are subjects of remembrances to Australia. When they are empty they are more fragile than they are full. I know they are to be replaced. But I must do it by my self..."

The time had come to reckon with his possessions. One afternoon when I went through his papers with Campbell and his girlfriend, Sandy Schroeter, I found a stack of liquor licensing

applications made out by Emma Newborn. They were for her touring show *Life's a Bitch* – Newborn is one half of a comedy duo who play farm dogs, and stage their act in rural woolsheds. I was curious about Max's connection and called Newborn at her office at Old Government House, where she works as custodian.

"All of that is very strange," she said. "I cannot tell you why he's got those papers or how he came to have those papers." And then she worked it out. "Once the tour was over I put the forms in a paper recycling bin at the back of Old Government House. It's very public. Lots of people walk past. If you were looking for some scrap paper, then he could easily have reached in and grabbed it."

He filled scrap paper, book margins, the backs of business cards (he had a huge collection, wrapped in plastic bags) with writing, mostly in pencil, and had a unique colour-coded system for his diaries – alternating passages in red, green, and blue ink. They look like art objects, like the obsessive arrangements of a disordered mind. In her book *The Silent Twins*, about twins who shut out the world and wrote millions of words in their diaries, author Marjorie Wallace writes, "There was no space left on the page, just a dense mass of words, neatly and carefully formed, like tiny black stitches running in seams." Pilgrim's stitches were in bright colours.

He wrote at his desk in his narrow room with a high ceiling. The single bed, the closed window... Former manager Lorraine Ryan remembered, "He'd pop down the stairs at mealtimes. He wouldn't do any cooking or anything. He had a little bag of fruit and crackers in the fridge - he actually had a lock on it, which is unusual. He was very quick. He'd sneak down really fast, not talk to anyone, and sneak back up to his room."

He walked and took the bus, spending happy hours sorting through his papers at Storage King down the road, shopping for organic food at Harvest Wholefoods in Grey Lynn. Campbell Smith got to know him but not very well. "He was a very quiet man. Very polite. You'd almost have to corner him to get any information out of him... We'd have other writers stay as guests, and they'd try asking Max questions, but he wouldn't sit down for coffee or give much away.

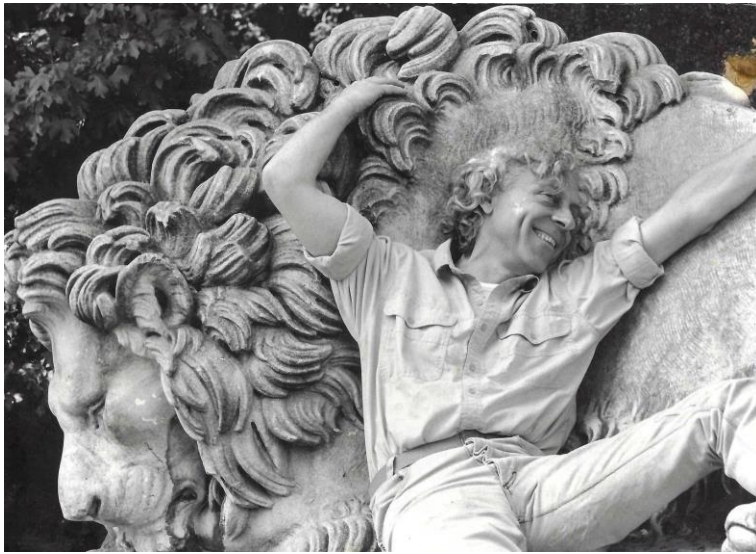
"But he was a lovely guy. He'd shuffle along with his little backpack. He always wore a baseball cap, an old jacket, long pants, big, fluffy socks, and slip-on jandals - you'd think he was homeless. He came in one day wearing this beaten-up face mask. I said, 'Max, for heaven's sake. That one's really gone. Let me get you a mask.' And he said, 'Oh no. No, it's amazing what you find on the street.'"

His room smelled. He refused to change his sheets. He kept fruit on the carpet. Smith said, "We wanted to clean the room but he complained because he said he wanted to keep to himself. He valued his privacy." More likely he actually craved privacy, and craved darkness, because towards the end of last year he was sick. His papers reveal an appointment at Auckland Hospital on December 16 (hospital paperwork: "Lives alone. Works as writer") and cancer treatment on December 21 (he kept the menu card for pumpkin and ginger soup, and Moroccan spiced lentils). On January 19, he went to see cancer specialist Professor Andrew Hall in Botany.

I phoned Hall. They met for just half an hour, but Max made a vivid impression. "He said he'd taken multiple busses across Auckland to get here, and he arrived looking pretty casual. He was quite bedraggled, let's put it that way." A woman's voice said something in the background. "My secretary said she thought he was homeless. He was obviously a guy who spent more time thinking about life than dressing up for it.

"He was a very pleasant chap actually. But he wasn't on his best form. He was plainly frail. He developed a nasty cancer, which I presume is what he died from? Okay. He was seeking a second opinion. We were able to have a good talk. He had a lot of fears and concerns, as we all

do when we're dealing with cancers, and wanted to see if there was any other way we could manage it. But there wasn't."



Pilgrim in Kassel, Germany in the 1970s at the first performance of his opera Rathenau.

The last time former Verandahs' manager Lorraine Ryan saw him was on New Year's Eve. "I was walking down Hopetoun St, and he was in front of the lodge, and he was like, 'How wonderful! The end of the year and I get to see you!' He actually got down on one knee like he was going to propose to me or something. People were looking. I said, 'Up, up, up, Max!', and he was just like, 'It's so wonderful! Wonderful!'"

The cancer was advancing. On February 6, he made his last entry in his diary: "Today my weakness increases day to day." On February 15, he made it home to the lodge but collapsed at the bottom of the stairs. He was found by Cassandra Paille, a young traveller from France. She had got to know Max and loved their talks. I spoke with her on the phone and she introduced a French version of spoken English to this story. She said, "I was going to the shopping and he was downstairs, and he don't look well. So I help him, but he was falling on the ground because he was in really bad condition. So I tried to put him on my back."

He made it to his room. Campbell Smith called an ambulance. He was taken to hospital. Both Campbell and Cassandra visited him, and again when he was transferred to a hospice in Westmere. "He told me he did not have any regrets about his life," said Cassandra. "He told me he was at peace. He get a very good life, and he's not scared to pass away." They emailed each other on February 17. Max wrote, "Thank you thousand time for being my bridge between life and death." And: "Your face and your entire body are the expression of life." Also: "We don't now whether I come back."

But they did know. He wasn't coming back. Campbell Smith tried to arrange a will. At first, Max wanted to give half his estate to Veit Stauffer, and the other half to Sandy Schroeter, Campbell's girlfriend, who had always been kind to him and brought him fruit, and who could talk with him in German. Later, he changed his mind, and said he wanted to give it to "the people of New Zealand". He had \$8500 in his Westpac bank account. The funeral cost \$8100.

He died on a Sunday morning. Campbell and Sandy were with him. They arranged his funeral. He was buried in a plywood coffin. They took vegan cake, and the funeral director brought a flask of coffee. It was a warm day in late summer. Laid to rest, a man of many names and few means, haunted by Nazis and vampires, reinventing himself as a vagabond ("His writing was very successful until the 80s, afterwards much less, so he had to improvise and was very good at it," said Frank Heibert) but remaining the same dedicated artist, always thinking, always pressing words on to paper with the lead of pencils that were never thrown away.

When I first got in touch with Ulfa von den Steinen, she wrote, once again beautifully and with feeling, "We are thrilled at the idea that someone in his beloved and self-chosen New Zealand takes an interest in his life – something he had hoped for in vain to happen in Germany. In order to give you some background, maybe we should start the other way round, ask you about your interest in him as a person and as a possible literary subject. What do you have in mind? A story about a poor and lonely old man who has had a previous life elsewhere as a celebrity? A prolific and debated writer of the late 20th century in Germany? An early figure of male and of sexual emancipation? His life-long analysis of Hitler and of his Nazi family? A man who liked to change his identity in order to find the real one?"

Even that narrows it down. There was always more to him. Everyone spoken to for this story volunteered the same word to describe him: "Lively." His eyes were lively, his manner was lively, his mind was definitely very lively. He maintained a fantastic industry right up to his death, with two books set to be published in 2022 – in Germany, with a new publisher, a study titled, in quite possibly badly translated English, *The Serial Killer's Orgasm Shortcoming*, and in the US, an English version of his book *The vampire man: Sleep, depression and femaleness*. (His German publisher has not returned calls or emails.

His US publisher is Austin Macauley, which demands author payments to publish their books. Max made a deposit of \$4400 for the privilege. They claimed to have no record until I emailed a copy of the deposit.) As well, he was working on a condensed, more accessible version of his four Hitler volumes, and Cassandra Paille thought he might be writing his autobiography: "He was writing a new book. He didn't want to tell me. I don't know. He was making notes. I think it was about his life."

I was haunted by Pilgrim during this story. Haunted, in particular, by the pitiful and distressing sight of the 12 pencils. Frank Heibert had said, "Nothing material had any meaning for him. Nothing." But it wasn't true. He was a hoarder. To hoard is to store memories, to hold them intact – the hopeless suitcases were "subjects of remembrances" of Australia, his plastic bags contained tickets for the subway in Berlin. He loved to go through the locker at Richmond Rd. It was his museum, his library, his archive. It contained sadder things than pencils and plastic bags within plastic bags – he had a collection of flattened tin cans. Hoarders have a mantra: "I might need that." He collected junk but everything he owned carried a message of usefulness and function.

Campbell Smith, once again displaying a goodness of heart, has taken it upon himself to dispose of Pilgrim's belongings. Much of it will go to the dump. But along with his partner, Sandy Schroeter, and the help of former Auckland University lecturer in German literature, Friedrich Voit, he'll go through every document, every piece of paper, in case it needs preserving. The Schwules Museum (Gay Museum) in Berlin is interested. Campbell also intended to send boxes to Wolf Osburg. I mentioned that to the publisher, who wailed, "I have no storage! I have a garage. I'm happy to take two or three boxes, and I can do it, but not more. That is my dilemma. My wife will kill me!"

There was a constant wariness from his friends about this story. As Ulfa asked, "What do you have in mind?" They were protective, cautious, of contributing to a portrait of "a poor and lonely old man". One day Campbell Smith took me up to Max's room. The narrow bed was enough to bring me to tears. I described the room on the phone that night to Veit Stauffer.

He said, "I understand he was looking like a homeless. In a way maybe this is the price he was paying. But I think he was fine with that. It was not a problem for him.

"But it's not helping if you write he was looking like a homeless. Maybe it should be treated with respect."

I said, "I understand that. But telling you about his room – it's just that it was very moving."

"Ja, ja," he said. "I like your words. That you were moved and sad when you came into this room. I believe I would feel the same if I would see it."

He emailed photos of another Volker Pilgrim – the famous author and talk show guest as he was in Germany, looking young and suave, his head full of good ideas. He also sent through a photo of his bookcase crammed with 19 books by Pilgrim, not even including the four Hitler volumes. One of the strangest men in Europe set himself free to become a pauper in New Zealand, ending his mission in a small upstairs room in a Victorian pile in Ponsonby, with fruit on the carpet and filched documents to write on the other, blank side, wandering the streets in unwashed clothes with plastic bags in his pockets, always paying by cash (to Campbell Smith, to Harvest Wholefoods, to Chris Winter at the Grey Lynn lock-up, to Professor Hall, the cancer specialist in Botany), slipping back to Verandahs Lodge and ignoring the piano in the front room ("I tried to get him to play it," said Campbell Smith. "I didn't get to hear him but one of the guests did and said he played beautifully"), closing the door of his room to write in peace until he could write no more. Two pencils in the plastic bag I keep on my desk, as a souvenir of the genius and loneliness of an aristocrat who chose poverty, are sharpened at either end.