Twitter Thread by Jess Nevins

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Good morning/afternoon/evening! We could all use some diversion today, I think, so let's talk about a complicated real-life redemption story.

To wit: Billy Jenkins, the Jewish Nazi cowboy.

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"Billy Jenkins" was the man's stagename. The name he was born with in 1885 was "Erich Rudolf Otto Rosenthal;" his father, a German Jew, was a café owner & variety-show artist. (We don't know much about his mother). I'll be calling him "Jenkins," as that was his chosen name.

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Jenkins grew up in Berlin and imbibed deeply of the German fixation with Buffalo Bill and all things Western. After college, in 1910 he left home (he hated his father) and traveled to the American West, where he spent several years learning tricks from every cowboy he met.

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In 1919 or 1920 (sources are unclear)—after WW1 ended, anyhow-- he returned to Berlin and went to work as a rider and animal trainer for various German circuses, including the very famous https://t.co/SwKfMahfmI Circus Sarrasani, where he became a star.

4/30

Jenkins was very talented, of course, but a large part of his appeal to German audiences was that he was one of them, a German, who'd gone to the American West, hung out with actual cowboys, and learned how to do everything that they did. And Jenkins loved their adulation.

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After a few years of that, amidst the tumult of Weimar Germany, Jenkins founded his own, very German, Wild West Revue, complete w/stunt riders, trick roping, sharp shooting, and trained birds of prey. Jenkins took the Revue on the road across Europe and won fans everywhere.
6/

By 1930 Jenkins was internationally famous as “The King of the Cowboys.” (He’s 45, but he’s not slowing down & is as capable as ever). Naturally, he wanted the fame to never end, so when a German publisher approached him about doing a pulp about his exploits, Jenkins agreed.

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That first pulp (“heftroman”) about Jenkins was BILLY JENKINS #1-4 (1930), and was a limited success. Jenkins loved the branding of it—it helped sell tickets to his Revue and to the dude ranch he ran on his own property in the Reinickendorf section of Berlin.

8/

Unfortunately, events caught up to him and made him betray himself. By 1932 the Nazis held the majority in the Reichstag and Hitler was in power. Jenkins's response was to join the Nazi Party and change his name to “Fischer,” his non-Jewish mother’s maiden name.

9/

Jenkins was what we today would call a "self-hating Jew." The source of his loathing for his father had always been his Jewishness, and the letters Jenkins wrote to his father were filled with “extreme antisemitic invective," per a historian familiar with them.

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So when the Nazis came along, Jenkins was happy to join them. He was blond, blue-eyed, and looked like a German folk hero come to life, so the Nazis were happy to have him. He got “Aryan” identity papers and was allowed to perform throughout Germany.

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The government allowed another pulp about him to be published. DIE ABENTEUEUR DES BILLY JENKINS (“The Adventures of Billy Jenkins”) #1-264 (1934-1939) was, in its way, a triumph of the German pulps, full of ideasplosions and fun storylines (and, thankfully, no propaganda).

12/

The fictional Jenkins is a secret agent for the US government who pretends to be a wanted criminal (sought after by the “Arizona Rangers” for a crime he didn’t commit) to lull the bad guys. He’s active from Alaska to Tierra del Fuego and finds adventure wherever he goes.

13/30

The fictional Jenkins has his own arch-enemy. Jenkins has a Cheyenne sidekick, Hunting Wolf, and a companion wolf named Husky. Jenkins' stories have very Gothic settings—decayed graveyards, abandoned mines, etc—and his adventures are fantastical.

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Jenkins fights carjackers, killer plagues, and zombies. He fights the KKK, finds the "lost treasure of the Inca," discovers a living mammoth in Patagonia, fights pirates in the Amazon and cowboy air pirates in Texas. [sic] He even finds Lost Race Aztecs in Mexico.

15/30

The Billy Jenkins pulp stories are a tremendous stew of imagination, cliches given new life and energy, concepts borrowed from *everywhere*, crossovers with other German pulp heroes, fun homages to classic German & English adventure fiction, and pure pulp gloriousness.

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The series was brought to an end in 1939 for the crime of being too independent and not slavish enough to and propagandistic on behalf of the Nazis—a fate numerous insufficiently enthusiastic German pulps suffered that year. Then WW2 began.

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In 1940, Jenkins (now 55 years old, and still spry) tours occupied Poland with his Wild West Revue. In Lodz Polish guerrillas bomb Jenkins' train carriages. Jenkins suffers 2nd degree burns trying to rescue his trained birds from the fire the bombs set off.

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In 1943, though, new attention is paid by the Nazis to "blood purity." They find out about Jenkins' father. Jenkins learns that he's under suspicion, and he & his long-time stage partner and romantic partner Frieda Schoenmann disappear. The Nazis never find either of them.

19/

For the next two years Jenkins & Schoenmann live in hiding in Nuremberg, sheltered by Jewish friends. During those two years Jenkins apparently realizes what an asshole he'd been, and reconnects with his Jewish roots. He even starts using his birth name.

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Was this change of heart legitimate? God alone knows—but I would tend towards the affirmative, if only because he had nothing to gain from embracing his Jewishness while the Nazis were hunting for him & wanted to send him to the death camps.

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There are rumors about what Jenkins got up to in Nuremberg in 1944 and 1945, of course. But I tend to dismiss the rumors as Jenkins' embroidering of his life. (He did some of that, though he's hardly the only celebrity to make his own life sound more heroic than it was).

22/

After the war Jenkins is not sought after by the occupying forces, by the Germans, or by groups of Nazi-hunters. He's treated by everyone as just another citizen, despite what he did between 1932-1943.

Keep this in mind. It'll become significant in a moment.

23/30

In 1946 he makes his first public appearance, at a Purim party for the Jews of the town of Hof. He & Schoenmann are both in their Wild West Revue outfits (cowboy hats, chaps, riding boots, etc), but they have big Stars of David visible on their shirts.

24/30

Jenkins and Schoenmann don't reform the Revue—the animals are dead, the performers are dead or fled. But they continue to live well, and when a German publisher reprints DES ABENTEUER DES BILLY JENKINS he's happy for the added income but not desperate for it.

25/30

In 1949, a new Billy Jenkins pulp appears: DIE ABENTEUER DES BILLY JENKINS, #1-370 (1949-1963), with all-new stories deliberately hearkening back to the stories of the previous series of that name.

By comparison, the Shadow only appeared in 325 issues.

26/30

Jenkins lives well until his death in 1954. Never has any trouble from any German legal authorities, and the Israelis never come after him. All this despite being one of the most famous Nazi idols and celebrities from 1932-1943.

How did he manage that?

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Well, here's where it gets a little murky.

Y'see, there were a lot of stories floating about the Western intelligence communities in the late 1940s & early 1950s that Jenkins was *protected*. At the highest levels. And had a big Do Not Touch sign around his neck.

Why? 28/32

A lot of those stories hinted at Jenkins doing some work during those years for the https://t.co/rnnvbKIImR BND (the West German spy agency).

Work of the wet variety, against https://t.co/BuhF5Uw5oJ Stasi (East German spy agency) operatives.

29/32

In other words—according to the then-current stories floating about the intelligence community in the West—Jenkins did some covert killing for the BND. Reportedly, turning Stasi agents into cowboy sauce with his bare hands! And while he was in his sixties, no less!

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Ridiculous? Maybe. But there were a *lot* of stories abt this floating around. Where there's smoke there's fire, & Jenkins as a BND agent wld explain the peculiarities of his post-war life, his lack of need for money, the fact that he was never put on trial for his actions. 31/

Did all that earn him redemption? In the eyes of the German (and possibly Israeli) governments, it apparently did. Not up to me to say whether he really earned it or not. But I think it's clear that he was trying in some way to pay off the moral debts he'd incurred.

32/32