





- THOMAS BORN -

# HE NEVER LOST A FIGHT

*Text* STEFAN KRÜCKEN *Photography* ACHIM MULTHAUPT

Dr. Stress and Mr. Trouble: Thomas Born, one of St. Pauli's greats, karate master, erstwhile Hollywood star, should have been dead long before he grabbed Madonna's breasts.

Our conversation starts with a story. The night he marched into the Eros Centre with "SS Klaus" and "Angie" Becker there had been trouble: two women had started a brawl, and the pimps from "Bel Ami" were demanding their unpaid wages. At the time, he was the leader of the "Stress and Trouble" division of the "Nutella gang," Thomas Born, alias "Karate Tommy," the fist of St. Pauli.

The light was dim, a bar to the left, a few shadows in the semi-darkness on the right.

Suddenly a shot was fired. "It hit SS Klaus right between the eyes. Part of his brain landed on my jacket. One of the men raised his pistol: "Bye-bye Tommy!" he said.

Thomas Born pauses and waves the waitress over. "Can I have another cola?" In front of him on the table is a bowl of ice cream, two scoops of lemon, two scoops of vanilla with whipped cream. He insisted on sitting out on the patio of this café, in the exclusive residential area of Rotherbaum in Hamburg. At



the table next to us two elderly women are enjoying their apple pies. Annoyed, they looked over at the 1.86-metre-tall man with the close-cropped hair and pumped-up arms who keeps talking about guns, pimps and prison.

Born is 54. He looks exactly the way you'd imagine an experienced doorman to look. He has been in films, TV series, and on theatre stages, no one ever needed to put make-up on him. A scar punctuates the left side of his face, the result of a knife attack, a closer inspection identifies other mementos of encounters with clubs, knives and cudgels. But Born, actor by chance, not profession, looks fit, in shape. Three rounds on the sandbag are enough, he says, grinning, "enough, that is, for your average guy." Sitting next to him is his new girlfriend, Anya Yakubovska, 26, a Polish woman he met a few months ago in a fitness studio.

"Sorry, where was I?" asks Born.

"SS Klaus, brain on your jacket."

"Oh yeah, right. I ducked to the side, pure survival instinct. I felt a bullet hit me, a few peppered the wall. The gun jammed, and I saw the door, eight steps away. I ran through it," explains Born. He survived, despite the bullet in his abdomen, a wound on his upper arm, and all sorts of other injuries you sustain when jumping through a closed solid-wood door. His companions were all dead. On the night of October 22, 1982, an unwritten law was broken on the Reeperbahn: No gun-fights. "After that, everything changed," says Born. Altruism there only exists in return for cash. After the double homicide in Eros Centre and the dubious acquittal of the murderers, the neighbourhood became militarised, and when

large amounts of cocaine and heroine swept across the district between Reeperbahn, Spielbudenplatz and Grosse Freiheit at the beginning of the 1980s, any romanticism about racketeers was long gone.

Born has an anecdote to tell about everything: the honour of crooks, respect, courtesy and solidarity in the world of pimps and prostitutes; his stories well worn, his voice a gruff bark. He talks about "Gaiter" and "Cement Head," "Four-Finger Heinz" and "Stubble Jürgen." "In my world that's the way it is. I help out when a friend calls and says "Hey Tommy, four armed people are hanging out in front of my brothel." You load up, put it [the gun] in your belt, and head on over. Helping out here doesn't mean lending someone your bicycle for a Sunday, not like you respectable folks."

Born eats a few spoonfuls of his lemon ice cream and cautiously looks around. In fact, he looks around every few minutes. By now, the elderly ladies at the nearby table are eating their apple pie much faster.

"Respectable folks," that is to say, the bourgeois, hypocritical, those, in Born's opinion, who would make a pass at their best friend's wife the minute his back was turned.

He grew up in very respectable circumstances, born in an upper-class suburb Blankenese in Hamburg. His father was a fighter pilot in the German air force; his mother came from a family of medics. At the age of three his family moved to Berlin. At school, the young Thomas realised that he had something that others didn't. "I had a kind of criminal energy." Together with "a fat boy" from class he organised coin games in the

lavatory, where the alliance of Fatty und Born served as the bank. After a few weeks, Born took over the business by breaking his partner's nose in the classroom. Another career as the teenage boss of the "Kundry" gang, named after a street in the district, didn't do much to improve his grades. A perplexed school psychologist attested to his "innate predisposition for fighting."

His family moved back to Hamburg. Born changed schools several times and completed his German school-leaving exams with a grade of 3.5. "With these grades I could only go into the timber industry." He did, however, experience success on the judo mat and in his karate class. He sought out adrenaline-fuelled activities, and wanted to follow in his father's footsteps in the military. He signed up, wanting to become an "ace fighter pilot," then, following the advice of his brother, he became a paratrooper. Night jumps, combat training, manoeuvres in the Bavarian Forest – soon even that became boring. To get out of his service time, he choked his sergeant until he was unconscious.

Born opened the "Karate Institute Hamburg," with his savings. This soon became widely known around Germany. Nowhere else was the training as hard as with the captain of the German Karate National Team, who was also European kickboxing champion, and collected titles as a judo master. When rumours circulated that he was organizing illegal fights in the back courtyards of St. Pauli, the karate association kicked him out. Born could not have cared less by that time. A bouncer from St. Pauli found him a job working as a bodyguard for a big shot in the Reeperbahn, for 5,000 German marks. There were

huge fights in Frankfurt's Bahnhofsviertel, another one in St. Pauli at this time. Afterwards Born was regarded as the best muscleman in the district. "I didn't go after the neighbourhood, it came to me."

You smile continuously when talking to Born, especially when he tells his stories with such frighteningly graphic eloquence. His narrative is hilarious, constantly changing direction.

He once helped out the daughter of an American mafia boss in a sticky situation. He received an invitation from the boss to come to America, but on the flight to Los Angeles was intercepted by two FBI agents, whose facial expressions and appearance he parodies. Stories like this are interspersed with random snippets where he'll happily talk about the character "Kundry" from Wagner's opera "Parsifal" or Christian Morgenstern. The next moment he's talking about the time a Turkish gang was threatening one of his establishments. He drove his Harley-Davidson through the window of a kebab shop, trashed the interior and gave the clan boss a dressing-down. As he tells the story he jumps up, spreads his arms, his eyes get a cold, strange gleam, and proclaims with a voice shaking with aggression:

"Listen to me, listen to me very carefully: Never do that again, or I'll come back and KNOCK THE MINCED PORK OUT OF YOUR HEAD." Morgenstern and minced pork. Coffee cups clatter at the table next to us. The elderly ladies look upset and are desperately trying to signal to the waitress. Born turns around and says: "Sorry, but that's how it has to be said."

Everybody harbours different personas, but Born's wild streak is a real tour de force, bubbling up to the surface

with the utmost ease. You can see why the “Nutella gang” considered him to be the perfect candidate for leading their group “Stress and Trouble.” The “Nutellas” – so named because the other gangs suspected them of being so young that they still spread Nutella on their bread – ran a dozen brothels with nearly 220 prostitutes. At the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s, the gang controlled the neighbourhood, thanks to the tenacious grip the six partners held over the area. Once a large gang of Africans styled as American pimps in white suits and big hats tried to take over the neighbourhood. The “Nutellas” roused the big-shot pimps and hardmen from the prostitute business all over West Germany. After a “major battle” and a few warning shots, the problem was quickly sorted. He talks about Ferraris, Lamborghinis, and Cadillacs, about beautiful women, about a mountain of banknotes stacked on the table every two weeks and divided among the partners. It’s important for Born to point out that he never took money from a prostitute. “I was never a pimp, let’s make that clear.”

A few years later, in 1982, a special police team captured him. He was put in solitary confinement for four months in a high-security wing. In the cell next to him lay a terrorist. Inmates were only allowed to walk around the courtyard in handcuffs, accompanied by two guards; In 14 days Born was allowed to shower only three times. “You really have to concentrate in prison,” says Born. Especially mornings when he woke up, saw the floodlights slide past the bars, and had to suppress the urge to fly into a rage in the constraints of his cell. He drew up a training plan for his day: he

did pull-ups and push-ups, wrote letters to his wife and read poetry, one after the other. He hired three lawyers, one of which was engaged solely to collect evidence against the charges.

The court finally found him guilty of tax evasion, fraud, inducement and coercion of prostitution. The public prosecutor’s office wasn’t able to prove the other charges. After two years Born was released and was planning to remove his furniture from former brothels, when he received a phone call from California. On the other end of the line was Burkhard Driest, Hollywood star, actor, screenplay writer – and former bank robber. Driest had seen a TV report on Born. “I’ll send you a business-class ticket. You can live with me.” We’ll write a screenplay about your life.”

In Malibu; the neighbourhood of Hollywood stars such as Sylvester Stallone and Sting, the stories get even more unbelievable. One morning Driest and Born drove to the supermarket. At the checkout, a woman grabbed Born’s breast and said: “You’ve got great muscles, man.” Born, who found this behaviour improper, grabbed the woman by the breast and replied: “You’ve got great boobs, woman.” When he came out to the car park, Driest stared at him flabbergasted: “Why did you just grab Madonna by the tits?”

There are so many of these stories, cocktail parties where “the German jailbird” was the main attraction, the time his girlfriend “Miss Fitness USA,” took him to her friend, Madonna’s house where he devoured litres of ice-cream in her kitchen (“Madonna had a whole fridge full”). The screenplay project fell flat, for various reasons, but mainly because Born flew back to

Germany to witness the birth of his first son Monty.

The patio of the ice-cream parlour has emptied. A wasp buzzes around his empty bowl. “Come on, piss off,” murmurs Born and swats it away. The wasp knows not to stick around.

In the evening Born and his girlfriend Anya stroll down Grosse Freiheit, its street-lamps not yet aglow. Born walks with a rolling gait, wearing a black leather coat, a cowboy returning to his hometown. He walks in as “Karate Tommy.” The older bouncers greet him affectionately. “Everything okay, Tommy?” A bald-headed muscleman approaches him shyly and asks if he can take a picture of them together with his mobile phone: “You used to be my idol!” Born grins contentedly.

He is still a part of the neon world of St. Pauli. His story is set here, but he no longer belongs. Various foreign gangs now control St. Pauli.

Born helped director Dieter Wedel find contacts amongst his pimps and prostitutes before shooting the successful TV series “King of St. Pauli” a homage to the neighbourhood. Actors like Heinz Hoenig helped him make contacts in the film industry, Born always more than convincing when playing muscle roles. He didn’t need to act.

In the last few years the offers have dwindled, the friendship with Hoenig fell apart. Times are not good for Born right now. He still runs his collection agency. The tax authorities have frozen his accounts again, his driving license was taken away two years ago, and he is looking for a new flat. He commutes every day from a small town near Hamburg. In his golden years, the old Porsche that Anya drives him around in wouldn’t have

been given space in his backyard. He’s working on a comeback, talks about a new film job, about a biography he wants to publish. He’s good at fighting back. He’s not one to spend time gazing at the past, and perhaps it’s better that way. “My old friends are all either long dead or physical wrecks,” he says, sounding reflective for the first time. He walks past the Eros Centre, the building in which “SS-Klaus” and “Angie” Becker were murdered. “Sometimes I think,” says Thomas Born, looking up at the facade, “it’s a miracle I’m still alive.”

*www.stefankruecken.de*