

# BEACH BUZZ

Spring – Summer 2003

Volume 3, Number 5

a publication of B.E.A.C.H.E.S. Foundation and its Chapters  
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"Keeping Our Beaches Bare"

## Book Review:

# The Nudist Ideaby Cec Cinder

Book Review by Michael Kush

To some, the prospect of reading a 678-page book on nudism may seem somewhat daunting. Equally off-putting may be the chapter and section headings, such as: Naturheilbewegung (Allopathy vs. Naturopathy. Heart disease, cancer and the vis medicatrix naturae.) and Jugendbewegung (Hitler Jugend. Nudists and Nazis.) And Cinder's long discussions of the shortcomings of the modern medical system and the dangers of professional sports as practiced today may seem unwelcome digressions to some who may not be sympathetic to his views in these matters. (Yet perceptive readers should note these topics also bear on the nudist idea as Cinder understands it: as examples of abuses of the human body and spirit that nudism has often sought to counter.) Those who would let such preliminary impressions prevent them from buying this book are missing a real treat. In fact, I found this book to be eminently readable, and frequently entertaining.

It also passes the "browse test" – you can open the book almost anywhere and be absorbed for several pages. As an example, I just now randomly opened the book to pages 512-513, and encountered the story of a 1931 raid by the New York police on a private nudist gymnasium: "On the day of the hearing a column-head on the third page of The New York Times read: 24 SEIZED IN RAID ON NUDIST CULT HERE." (The police, alerted by an undisclosed informant, had climbed onto the gymnasium roof and observed nude calisthenics and volleyball through a skylight. After thirty minutes observation, they broke down the door after being refused admittance to the building.)

Fortunately acquitting the defendants because the activities had not been public, the magistrate yet felt constrained to comment: "What is all right on the beach today would have meant arrest three years ago." Cinder goes on to suggest: "He may have been referring to topless male bathing-suits, then still considered unacceptable – not to say unlawful – on many beaches, where bare male breasts were viewed with embarrassment." Seventy years later, mutatis mutandis, many of the details of this story will still have an uncanny resonance for nudists today.

Much earlier in the book, Cinder comments on the journey to Switzerland at age 26 of a late 18th century "proto-nudist", the great German poet Goethe. Here, he and his companions discovered the joys of nude swims in the many lakes. Advised not to continue this practice in more populated areas, "from then onward they bathed in isolated places in the mountains. But even when they used isolated mountain lakes...they were occasionally stoned by Swiss country people, hiding behind bushes and trees, who took umbrage at the sight of their nakedness." (Today, the followers of anti-nudity crusader Ralph Ovdal regularly gather to hurl not rocks, but copious verbal abuse, at the naturists visiting secluded Mazo Beach in Wisconsin. We believe the Swiss have since become much more tolerant in their attitudes.)

Not only does Cinder possess outstanding nudist credentials – editor of

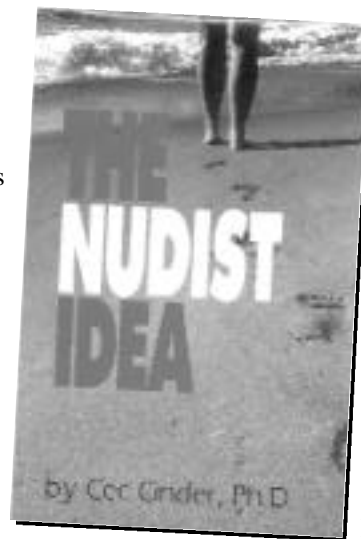
four nudist magazines in the 60's, a former editor of the ASA (now AANR) Bulletin, and a founder of Beachfront U.S.A. – but because of his wide reading and scholarship, he is able to show that the nudist idea is something much more than people just wanting to take their clothes off and sunbath nude. For the nudist idea

also embodies the unbiased mode of thinking that allows one to reach conclusions counter to culturally received notions and the self-confidence to assert one's beliefs in the face of ridicule, oppression, and tyranny. This theme is central to understanding Cinder's intent and accomplishment in this book.

For example, the chapter on the Nature Cure Movement

(Naturheilbewegung) of

the late 19th and early 20th centuries documents the great success of natural treatments – diet reform, exercise, and not least exposure of the body to sunlight – in treating such ailments as tuberculosis and lupus, before the advent of modern pharmaceuticals, in the days when physicians gave scant notice, and very often ridicule, to such methods of therapy and disease prevention. There are also many wonderful quotes from nature cure advocates along the way, such as Arnold Rikli's "Light, Truth and Freedom are the motive forces towards the highest development of physical and moral health." What a marvelously "naturist" quotation that is! Or read the words of Dr. Saleeby, author of Sunlight and Health:





“The idea that the nude person with pigmented and properly functioning skin is not clothed soon leaves one.

Conventional ideas of modesty receive their death blow.” We should not forget that many early advocates of nudism emphasized its benefits to both physical and emotional health.

The late 19th and early 20th century was a golden age for German nudism. Cinder reveals that even the Iron

***“What is all right on the beach today would have meant arrest three years ago.”  
– New York magistrate, 1931***

Chancellor, Otto von Bismarck, preferred swimming nude, and commented on the bathing suit in a letter to his wife: “I don’t like that wet thing on my body.” Mixed-gender nude recreation and artistic performance became acceptable, and even fashionable. The many youth groups that emerged in Germany around this time – the “Wandervoegel” – often engaged in nude swims as they tramped in hordes around the German countryside. The Nazis banned the nudist movement in Germany by the so-called “Goering Decree” in 1933. Yet Leni Riefenstahl’s film on the Berlin Olympics of 1936 – three years after the “Goering Decree” – presents a practically nudist paean to the classical Greek ideal in the prologue: males wearing scant g-strings as they run and hurl the discus, and women athletes exercising completely nude. More interesting still, in an interlude the film later depicts modern young “Nordic” athletes skinny-dipping and relaxing nude in the sauna, with here a totally casual

attitude toward the revelation of male genitalia. As Cinder points out, the Nazis were not anti-nudity so much as they were against the established nudist organizations in Germany, which often displayed leftist, internationalist, or “free-thought” tendencies. Thus the anti-nudity decree was really a means to eliminate organizations potentially hostile to the Nazi philosophy. Nudism was not universally persecuted in Hitler’s Germany, as long as it was clad in a garment of acceptable Nazi tailoring. Whether it was then true nudism as we would define it is a moot point. After all, nudism before always seemed to contain an element of revolt against dogmatic authority, conformity, or industrial modernity, and an emphasis on what we would today call “self-realization.” (And it still does for many of us.) For adults, it was an escape from the dreary regimentation of the factory or the office; this aspect the Nazis could not countenance. For youth, it was an escape from the rigidly authoritarian state-sponsored school system; this was counter to the Nazi intent to build a nation of obedient warriors. The Nazis disbanded most of the youth groups, and then absorbed their members – at least those deemed of suitable racial purity – into the Hitler Youth, thus turning a movement that had originally emphasized individualism and joy into one dedicated to fanatical devotion to the state and to the person of Adolf Hitler. (I should point out, the chapter on Nazism also contains a wonderful treatment of the absurdity of and lack of scientific basis for the Nazi views on racial purity.)

That takes us up to page 300. The second half of the book presents the development of the “naturist” idea in Britain and the United States, culminating in the “Free Beach” movement of the 60’s and 70’s, bringing us into more familiar

territory. These pages contain fascinating insights on the rise and persecution of naturism, and on such related topics as the Legion of Decency of the 1930’s, which sought to eliminate (as they saw it) the trash and filth being foisted on the innocent American Christian public by the Jewish movie producers of Hollywood. (Now, where and when have we heard a similar argument before?) Here, as throughout this book, many curious details of the history of the nudist movement are presented. Yet, as Cinder himself points out, this is not primarily a book about the nudist movement, but about the nudist idea. And that idea at its best is one of freedom, individuality, self-reliance, and self-respect – troubling concepts to those who would enforce a rigid uniformity of thought and culture in any country, and at any time in history. ✨

**The Nudist Idea is available online at the Beach Shop at [www.sffb.com](http://www.sffb.com)**

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**Or, send a check or money order made out to: “SFFB Legal/Political Action Fund” to:**

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**The Nudists Idea**  
hardcover, 678 pages  
\$25.00 + \$4.50 S&H