

ELEMENT

A man with dark hair and a light beard is the central figure, shirtless and wet. He is wearing a traditional Chinese dragon robe with intricate yellow and black patterns. He is posing in water, with splashes around him. The background is a dark, textured wall.

ISSUE 19 / THE CHARM ISSUE

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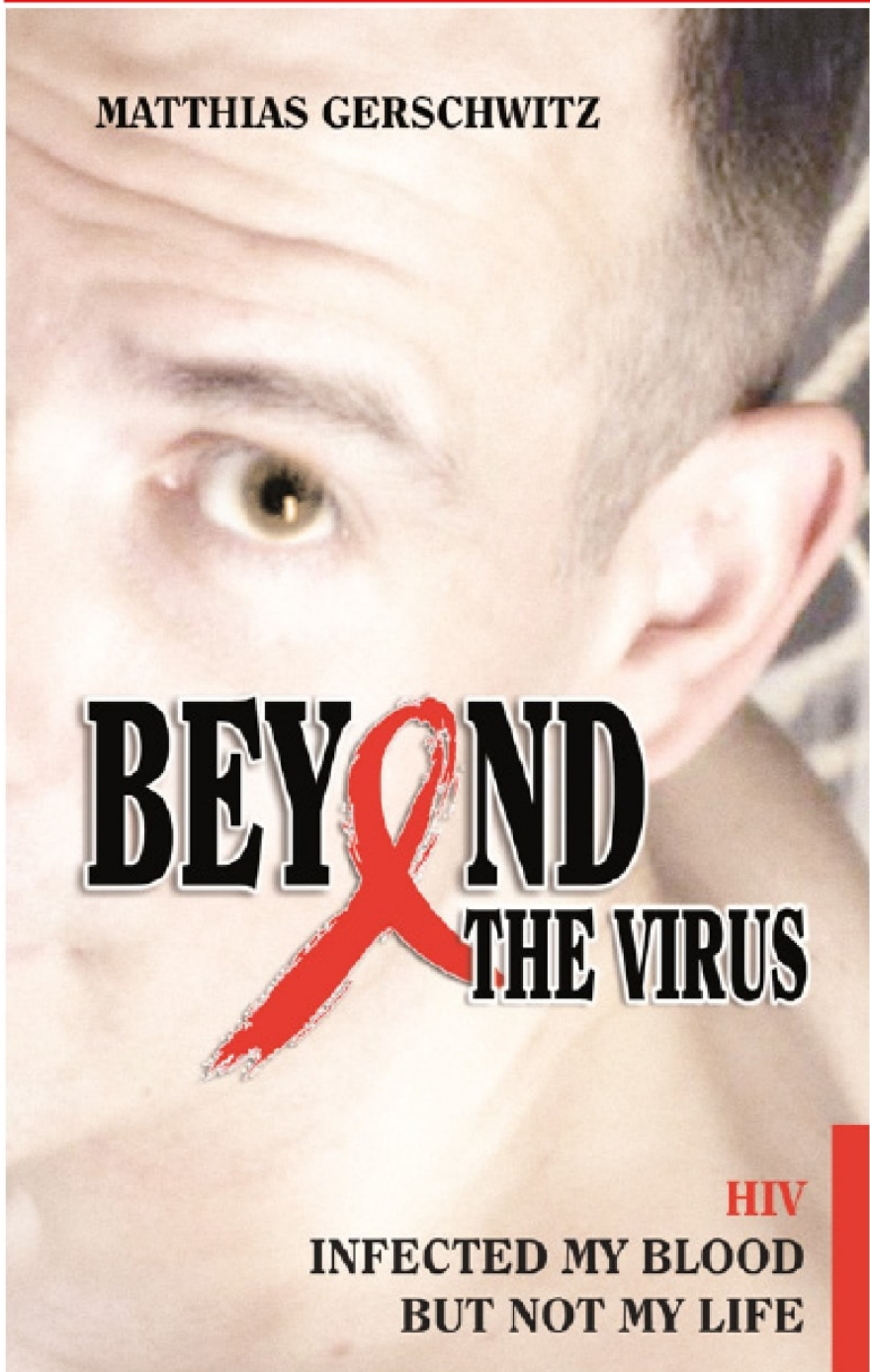
YUM YUM BOYZ:
GREAT PLACES
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ABOVE AND BEYOND THE VIRUS

Text | Darius Zee

MATTHIAS GERSCHWITZ

**BEYOND
THE VIRUS**



**HIV
INFECTED MY BLOOD
BUT NOT MY LIFE**

I am sure many of you have heard of what HIV is – but have you ever wondered what it is like to live with HIV?

In this September 2016 issue, I had the chance to speak with Matthias Gerschwitz. Matthias, who is based in Berlin, is the author of the book "Beyond the Virus" – a culmination of his personal experiences living as a HIV-positive person. Matthias was tested HIV-positive in 1994 and lived with the virus for 15 years before he published the German edition of this book in 2009.

Today, the book is available in English internationally – and in Matthias's words, this book is "meant for those who are newly in direct or indirect contact with HIV, and others who want to know more about the virus".

Matthias is one of the only few Germans to disclose his HIV status publicly. To date, he has held more than 200 lectures at high schools and other educational establishments in Germany and Austria to raise awareness of the virus.

Let's see what Matthias has to say about HIV, and hopefully at the end of the article you will have some takeaways from our conversation with him!

ELEMENT: WHAT INSPIRED YOU TO COME UP WITH THIS BOOK?

Matthias: People often ask if I authored this book to come to my own terms with HIV, but that is not true. I had already been positive for 15 years by the time I wrote this book in 2009 - and in these 15 years, I discovered that the prejudices and ignorance people have about HIV had not changed at all, even though there was already research and treatment available. My idea was to write about HIV not as a scientist but from a personal experience. I wanted to target those who were either not related to a HIV-positive person yet or those who had just been confronted directly or indirectly with a positive test result.

ELEMENT: SINCE ITS LAUNCH, WHAT WERE THE KIND OF REACTIONS YOU RECEIVED FROM THE PEOPLE AROUND YOU AND MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC WHO HAVE READ YOUR BOOK OR LISTENED TO YOUR LECTURES?

Matthias: The book has been quite a hit with females - mothers, aunts, sisters or best (female) friends who obtain information about HIV through my book. The reactions were overwhelmingly positive - people admired my courage to go public. I often get invitations to visit school classes to tell my story. Teachers are quite happy to receive me, since they are often not up-to-date with information about HIV and students can get quite excited to meet a HIV-positive person in real life.

During the question and answer session in my lectures, I often get asked if my optimism and cheerfulness in tackling HIV is just a mock-up - they often cannot believe that a HIV-positive person can be as carefree as I am. Even though I am generally an optimistic and happy person, I tell them that I am just one of the 83.000 people living with HIV in Germany, so I may not represent how other HIV-positive people lead their lives, and I try to give people insights into this virus to make them understand. That has seemed to work slowly, but steadily.

ELEMENT: WHAT ARE THE PREJUDICES AND FALSE VIEWS PEOPLE HAVE ABOUT HIV (AND HIV-POSITIVE PEOPLE) IN THE PAST? ARE THESE PREJUDICES AND FALSE VIEWS ERADICATED NOW, OR DO THEY STILL EXIST?

Matthias: There are quite a few - for example, "HIV is lethal", "A person tested positive will eventually infect others", "With HIV you are not as strong anymore" and "Only gay people get HIV". Every now and then someone pops up saying HIV-positive people should not be allowed to have sex anymore, since they will infect other people. It is the old rhetoric where cancer is considered as "fated" and HIV is considered as something one should feel guilty about.

Even though the first HIV-positive people were gay men, at least in the Western world, more than 50% of all HIV-positive people world-wide are women. So much for homosexuality! HIV back then was an excuse used to build up another front against gay men or drug addicts, who were already discriminated by society. In Germany where I am from, politicians in the early 1980s even pursued the idea to concentrate all HIV-positive people in special camps (but they did not





ELEMENT: IN A SOCIETY WHERE FEW PEOPLE WANT TO TALK ABOUT HIV, HOW DOES IT FEEL TO BE THE ONE OF THE FEW TO SPEAK UP ON SUCH ISSUES? WAS IT EASY, OR SCARY?

Matthias: It was not scary at all, for me, as I am very used to standing in front of an audience. I had to play the piano and violin in public sometimes in my younger days, I work in marketing and advertising now, and sometimes I hold lessons or speeches. What's more, I am sometimes also involved in cabaret performances!

Of course it is different compared to telling people about a part of your own life, but it is this whole thing about voyeurism where people are eager to look inside other people's lives - so I try to make the best of it: I tell a story, let people learn about important things, and even make some money out of it.

ELEMENT: DO YOU THINK HIV PREVENTION EFFORTS TODAY FOR THE LGBTQ COMMUNITY ARE ADEQUATE? WHAT ELSE DO YOU THINK CAN BE DONE?

Matthias: I can only speak for Germany, but the situation may be similar in some other countries: It is not necessarily the LGBTQ community that has a lack of information. On the contrary, I have found that gay people are very aware of the risks and know pretty well the do's and don'ts, at least when it comes to sexual encounters. But advocacy for prevention efforts must reach others too - there is a lot of work to be done with the heterosexual community; I am currently working for an internet HIV forum and sometimes really get upset about how little heterosexuals know about HIV.

Also, prevention should not be just about HIV - since new medical developments like PrEP (pre-exposure prophylaxis) also cause some people to abandon the use of condoms, there are other STIs which we need to advocate prevention for. Prevention starts with eradicating the stigma on the infection as well as on the infected. Efforts should also centre around the fact that the infection stays a lifetime - but there are means to protect oneself, and first and foremost is respect. When it comes to HIV, the most positive thing is to stay negative.



ELEMENT: WHAT IS ONE ADVICE YOU WOULD GIVE TO FELLOW PLHIVS (PEOPLE LIVING WITH HIV)?

Matthias: Accept the situation, even if it feels like a punch in the gut – because you will not be able to change the situation by grumbling. A positive test result is like a restart of one's life, but not necessarily for the worse. Look forward, develop life plans, celebrate friendships, and never use HIV as an excuse for life. Every HIV-positive person should know that he or she is not alone – there is a life beyond the virus.

ELEMENT: WHAT IS ONE ADVICE, THEN, YOU WOULD GIVE TO HIV ACTIVISTS IN ASIA AND AROUND THE WORLD?

Matthias: Stand up, go public, and talk about HIV. Let the exchange of ideas, perceptions and experiences begin. Some ideas may not work in Asia, but they may work in Europe, and vice versa. Always keep in mind that we all have one goal – which is to make HIV activism unnecessary, when HIV and all the problems related to it are eradicated. I am not quite sure if I will live long enough to see that (I am turning 57 this year!), but it is important never to lose sight of that goal.

In my lectures all over Germany and Austria, I have learnt that it takes direct contact to change false views. With social media, it is so easy for others to criticize without being in direct contact with those concerned – but when I am on stage, no one dares to attack me even when I may be vulnerable. Be brave to create the change this world needs!



More on "Beyond the Virus" can be found at www.beyond-the-virus.com