

The making of a martyr

by Martin Proctor



*Nazis made a hero of a pimp and a deadbeat.
—Horst Wessel*

• • • Detective Inspector Blank, an old friend of mine from the *Polizei-Praesidium* (police headquarters) in Berlin had asked me whether I would like to see something from the unknown Berlin. It was a sunny summer morning in 1930 when we drove in Blank's police car to a cemetery somewhere in the northern outskirts of the city, a second car with plain-clothes men following close behind.

Knowing my friend Blank liked to spring surprises on me, I didn't try to find out what this undertakerish trip was about. At the cemetery we walked between the ivy-covered tombstones of long-deceased Schultzes and Meyers to a spot where a group of people stood round a yellow hole in the ground. Two women, covered with thick folds of mourning veils, stood bent over the open grave, supported by sturdy men.

The whole affair looked like the funeral ceremony of some honest suburban grocer but for the missing minister and the strange group of male mourners in black Prince Alberts, who now arranged themselves in a single row round the grave, holding their high hats on their massive chests with piously folded enormous black-gloved hands.

Their black coats and white ties gave them the appearance of hired attendants. They lifted their raucous voices into an unmelodious but sentimental chorus:

*"Ueb' immer Treu und Redlichkeit
Bis an Dein kübles Grab . . ."*

("Be always faithful and honest—Unto your cool grave . . .")

I saw that in the meantime Inspector Blank's men had quietly surrounded the mourners in a wide circle. The song was finished, the men clapped their high hats on their heads and began to file past the women to solemnly shake hands in sympathy.

The detectives stepped out into the open. The men in black stopped short and seemed gravely disturbed.

Quietly the Inspector walked up to the group from which one man, the biggest of them, slowly detached himself.

"Halloh Ali!" the Inspector greeted him.

"It's me, Inspector? Thought as much. Always me!" growled the man. "Can the others go home?"

The Inspector nodded.

"Don't let me keep them—today."

Turning his head, the giant called to the other mourners:

"O.K. boys, the Inspector wants a word with me. I'll be with you soon."

"I wouldn't be too sure, Ali," the Inspector said, as we fell in step with the man, the dicks closing in behind. "It doesn't look so good this time."

So far the situation was clear to me. Ali was a leader of the *Ring-Verein*, a mutual protective society of criminal gangs with posts all over the country. It had all the big criminals for members and took considerable fees from them, which money was used to assist members' families in times of fathers' "absences," and to pay lawyers' fees and funeral expenses.

Suddenly Blank turned to me.

"I forgot to introduce you, please meet Ali Hoehler, 30 years of age, six feet five, two crossed knives and a girl's head tattooed on his left arm, not to mention some other elaborate ornaments of rather indecent design. Last term, four years *Zet* (penal servitude), finished last November in the Fuhlsbuettel pen."

"Right, Inspector," Ali Hoehler nodded.

"And where is the gentleman from?"

Not having done any time to boast about, I only could tell him I was a reporter. Ali's eyes shone brightly when he heard the name of the favorite local daily.

"That's the paper I always read," he said flatteringly, "and so do members of my club. Can't you make it, *Herr*, that this—case won't run against me? Tell your reporter it has nothing to do with politics. To hell with politics!"

"Amen!" Blank said piously. "So you know what soup you're in this time, eh, Ali?"

"Sure, Inspector," Ali glumly admitted. "I've clean papers so far, it must be the little stink with the Nazi guy, this Horst Wessel, ain't I right?"

"Remember this affair?" Blank asked me.

I had a rather dim recollection. In the northern borough of Berlin, which had always been the uncontested political domain of socialists and communists, some Nazi squads had started frequent affrays with the inhabitants. Some months ago, one of the Brownshirt lieutenants, a *Stürmfuehrer* Wessel, had been killed in some kind of brawl. At his funeral the leftists had tried to get at the nationalist groups which attended the ceremony with their old Imperial flags and Hakenkreuz banners. Dr. Goebbels, then the noisy editor of a terrible, illiterate rag and the so-called *Gau-leiter* (district leader) of Berlin's Nazi party, as usual had made a speech with foam flying.

Ali Hoehler begged a cigarette.

"Yes sir, all this trouble comes from my soft heart. One thing leads to another, and where does it lead me? Right to the *Alex* (police headquarters)."

The Inspector looked at his wrist watch, and then at me:

"Would you like to hear Ali's own

story?" he asked me. "I've a kind of feeling it may be interesting—*sub specie historiae!*"

Detective Inspector Blank was a great Latinist who read Horace and Ovidius in his leisure hours. I didn't guess then that he also was a good political prophet.

Ali looked askant at the foreign words, but the Inspector added, to a detective:

"I'm figuring, Mueller, if we shall allow our newspaper friend here to invite us to a glass of beer?"

"Really, would you do that, Inspector? I'm terribly dry in the gullet!" Ali eagerly said, smacking his lips.

Some five minutes later we sat round a marble table in a rather empty café, which was absolutely against all Prussian police rules and laws. We were undisturbed and comfortable, only Ali, with detective Mueller sitting close to his right flank, had to lift his glass with his left arm. To improve the general safety, Blank had ordered his chauffeur, another trained man, to join the party.

I admired Ali's drinking technique. After politely asking whether he might have imported Pilsen beer instead of the light Berlin stuff, he drank one glass after another, letting the foaming liquid run into his mouth in one continuous splash, without any visible swallowing.

He grunted comfortably.

"*Prost, meine Herren!* That's good stuff. I guess it will be some time till I taste it again. How much will I get, Inspector?"

Blank shrugged:

"One never knows in these days, Ali. I should say, from three years up to—to the worst."

"Rot, sir!" Ali was indignant. "My old potato off for this little squabble? No sir, it was pure self-defense, and I tell you, it's two or three years and not more."

Then he began: "It was like this, gentlemen. After my last term I invited my club to a party in our old joint in the *Mulackstrasse*, the Galsk restaurant. Know the place, Inspector?"

The Inspector nodded, adding for my information:

"The meeting place of one of the toughest gangs in the *Ring-Verein*."

Ali went on: "Well, we had a swell party, with good liquor and heaps of juicy *Eisbein* (pig's trotters) and everything. About ten o'clock somebody of my club says to me: 'A guy from the "Baer" to see you, Ali!'"

"Headquarters of another gang, mostly safe-burglars, in the *Dragonerstrasse*," Blank explained to me quickly.

"The fellow from the 'Baer' tells me they have a woman over there, and she wants them to help her. I didn't like to break up my party, but he says, it's a real club affair. Well, to make the story short, I go over to the 'Baer.' There's a woman all right. I didn't know her, but she tells me she's the Widow Salm from the *Grosse Frankfurterstrasse*, and she's a *Schlummermutter* (rents rooms). Her old man, Salm I mean, had told her if she ever was in a fix, she should go to his old pals in the 'Baer' and the boys sure would help her.

"Now she has a lodger, she says, a Nazi

who hasn't paid his rent since five months, and she can't get rid of him. If she asks him for her bit of dough, the Brownshirt bloke says his comrades will come and knock her apartment to pieces.

"I ask the boys in the 'Baer' if they are too yellow to clean that little house-stink themselves. The woman cries she's afraid; this guy bullies her around.

"'What's the name?' I say.

"She says: 'Horst Wessel, such a lankish, blond fellow. Calls himself a student, but he never goes to the University.'

"'Is he alone?'

"'No,' she says, 'he has a slut with him, but they won't pay.'

"I say, 'What's her name; perhaps Erna?'

"She hollers, 'Yes, Herr Hoehler, that's her, Erna Jaenecke!'

"Now I was boiled up properly, gentlemen. I had something to settle with this Nazi guy, this Wessel. My little ponies had told me—"

"You know that Herr Hoehler is the protector of several ladies in this district," the Inspector incidentally remarked.

"My girls had always complained that this guy's Erna walked in their *Strich* (beat). Well, one day my Betty came, a peach of a girl, and cried. This Erna had tried to hit her with her bag and had said my Betty should scam, or else her man, this Horst Wessel, and his Nazis would come and wipe the street with her, she says.

"When I heard about that stink with my Betty, I got angry. The next evening my Betty had to go home early because this Erna had thrown some dirt on Betty's new coat and spoiled her whole business. You must admit, *meine Herren*, I had something to get even with this *Nutte* and her friend, this Wessel.

"I said, 'All right, Frau Salm, I'll fix that for you. Tomorrow you can hang out a new Room-to-rent card.'

"I called a few friends from my club, only as *Spanners* (spotters) in case the Nazis would show up and start trouble. Then I went upstairs with Frau Salm. I wanted to meet the fellow single-handed and tell him to lay off quickly and beat it with his sweet Erna. There are enough streets in this burg where a girl can make a decent penny. Ain't I right?"

"Go on, Ali, we haven't so much time left," the Inspector said.

"O. K., Inspector! Frau Salm showed me where he roomed and I knocked. The fellow opened only a crack in the door and called out: 'Whattayawant?'"

"And I see how the Lude slips his right hand in his back trouser pocket. Well, gentlemen, we all know what this means. So I pulled my gun and let him have it right in his kisser. It was pure self-defense, everybody must see that.

"He fell down, somebody in the room yelled like hell, and I ran downstairs.

"The next day there was a lot of nonsense in the papers, I mean in the Nazi rags, that the communists had tried to murder one of the young Fuehrers of the movement. Communist my armhole, Inspector. They never paid me anything.

Why should I go communist?

"Well, my friends told me I'd better lie low for a time. This Wessel lived for some weeks, then he died. Too bad for me. The bonesetters in the hospital must have muffed something."

He shook his head.

"Then I lammed it to Prague, really a nice little town. I met a girl I knew from Berlin—she was a good worker, I must say that for her. But she pestered me all the time, she'd love to go back to Berlin, only on a short trip. There you've my good heart again, Inspector. If I go out of my way to help other people, what happens? I get the beef. That's why I'm here again—Aw, let's go, Inspector!"

It was Ali Hoehler's last glass of beer and last breath of freedom, although not of us knew it at that time.

At the trial, a whole group from Ali's club was indicted for having slain Horst Wessel or abetting the murderer. Besides Ali, who told his story much in the same way as he had told us, his best pal, Erich Rueckert, was in the first line of defense because he had gone up with Ali as far as to the door of the apartment on the critical night.

Ali Hoehler's girl friend, Elsa C., was on the stand because she allegedly, at Ali's party, had incited the men "to get even with the Nazis." Among the other men accused as abettors was a Jewish man known as Kupferstein (which wasn't his real name), fence's agent for the club.

The trial lasted several days. Ali Hoehler stuck to his version, describing the affair as a quarrel with a business rival who had tried to shoot him first.

When Erna Jaenecke, main witness of the court, Wessel's "fiancée," as the presiding judge called her, was on the stand, counsel for the defense only asked her:

"Fräulein Jaenecke—what means of living had you when you and Horst Wessel were living together? It is well known that Wessel himself had no means or income!"

The witness blushed deeply and remained silent.

"Does that mean that you refuse to answer my question?"

Erna Jaenecke nodded. The lawyer turned to the judge.

"That's all, your Honor!"

Ali Hoehler was sentenced to six years of penal servitude for manslaughter, illegal possession of arms and pimping. He was a fifth or sixth offender after all. His friend Rueckert got the same. Frau Salm, Wessel's landlady, got 18 months in prison.

Elsa C., Ali's girl friend, Kupferstein and some others got away with four months each, the best proof of their slight guilt in this case where the Prussian judges were *stramm national* (strictly nationalist) and loved to hand out stiff sentences to "show it to the red underworld."

For quite a time Horst Wessel's person seemed forgotten in the Party. But a song, allegedly written and composed by the deceased Nazi lieutenant, became the popular battle-song of the Brownshirt squads all over the country. In fact, the Horst Wessel song is an amateurish hash of bars and words taken from numerous folk and

soldiers' songs, an artless and clumsy *mixtum compositum*.

Then Dr. Goebbels had his big idea. The movement and the Berlin district especially needed something to inflame the masses. Here he had a Stormtroop leader, an "idealist and poet," fallen in the battle against the underworld of anti-Nazis—and the ballyhoo started, featuring the sacrificial service of the angelic Brownshirts against the materialist tendencies of the democrats and socialists.

Today Horst Wessel is the approved and official Martyr-Saint of the Party and of the new Germany. The city hospital where he died is renamed after him; places and streets everywhere bear his name.

The Horst Wessel *Lied*, protected and copyrighted by a special law, is always sung together with the other national anthem, the *Deutschland-Lied*. (I remember that some years ago several boys were put in jail for having "jazzed" the holy Wessel song on a dance floor.)

Oh, yes—after Hitler came into power, the case was reopened against all civil and criminal laws of the country. Ali Hoehler had already died in jail before the new hearings started. Nobody except some Gestapo men will know how this giant was brought to a painful death.

His pals Rueckert and Kupferstein were sentenced to death and promptly beheaded, because the Fuehrer wanted a Jewish head to roll in this eminently "national matter."

Nothing is reported about Elsa C., Ali's girl. I hope she was able to escape.

Frau Salm, the landlady who at the time of the Nazi revolution should have finished her term, was rearrested and put in a concentration camp. After several transfers she now is in the camp Mohringen near Goettingen (Thuringia) where she probably will remain for life.

Her apartment in the mouldy house in the *Grosse Frankfurterstrasse* has been seized by the Nazi government and declared a "national shrine." Hitler's *SA* battalions march up here to gape at the modest desk where the national martyr according to the official saga, sat working when he received the mortal wound "for the Cause and the Fuehrer."

The hero's "fiancée," Erna Jaenecke, wasn't called at the second trial. In the meantime she had met a Brownshirt who happened on duty as guard-of-honor at Wessel's heroically modeled tomb, when she came one night to put flowers on the grave.

The man, a romantic as Nazis usually are, became engaged then and there and married her. But if he had hoped for some personal gains as Horst Wessel's successor, he was disappointed. By order of the Party, the couple was quickly removed into unknown regions. Today nobody dares to mention the martyr's ex-girl.

Today the family Wessel is forgotten. Goebbels, master promoter and inventor of the whole stunt, knows well enough that living relatives of a saint, especially when not allowed to capitalize on the aureole, may easily deflect the rays of the martyr's glory into ridicule—or truth.

June 1, 1939

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