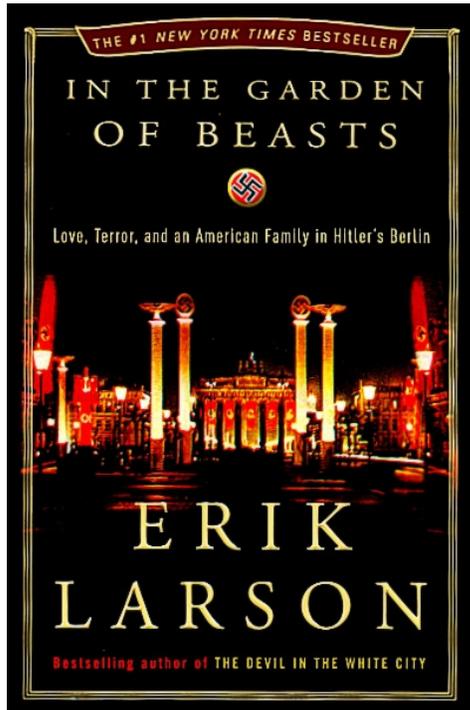




Making up history: Erik Larson's book *In the Garden of Beasts*



I appreciate the approach of American writers to history that they consider the readability of their results as a matter of course which attitude differs a lot from their German colleagues. Until now I did not encounter a problem with the necessary balancing act between facts and narrative. The books I have read drew a fine but visible line between facts, their interpretation and pure speculation.

Having authored myself non-fiction dealing with contemporary history, I know the temptation of creating the links lost through the decades to connect or emphasize certain events. The most effective antidote against this sweet poison is to stick to common sense and in cases of doubt to seek proof

instead of an uncritical acceptance, even if it fits in the plot nicely.

Thinking these to be the standards of U.S. writers about history, I was deeply disappointed by Erik Larson's *In the Garden of Beasts. Love, Terror and an American Family in Berlin* (New York, 2011) and the fact that his work with its lurid title and browbeating dust cover became a #1 New York Times bestseller. This judgment is an achievement in itself because *Beasts* had been recommended to me by a knowledgeable American friend for it contains accounts on events in Nuremberg during the Nazi era. While reading it, my eagerness first turned into irritation and finally anger because I do not like to be taken for a fool.

In the Garden of Beasts is mostly - and fatally - based on the published and unpublished recollections of the American ambassador in Berlin since July 1933, William E. Dodd and his daughter Martha. To put it politely she was a dazzling personality, in a blunter characterization by the Soviet secret service NKVD *a typical representative of American bohemia, a sexually decayed woman ready to sleep with any handsome man* (*Beasts*, p. 360 f.) who turned the ambassadors residence shamelessly into a love nest with frequently alternating partners, much to the amusement of the German domestics who probably spied for the Nazis.

The 450 pages book almost entirely neglects 3 ½ years of Dodd's tenure till December 1937. Instead Larson deals with the events until July 1934 on 340 pages highlighting the bloody *Röhm Putsch* during which the Dodds at best had the roles of repulsed spectators in the theater box. For the time until Dodd's dismissal he leaves meek 10 pages, probably to gratify the spectacular title of the volume which is an allusion to the *Tiergarten* (= zoo) park and the exclusive neighborhood surrounding it where the Dodds lived (what a pun ...). By doing so he simply ignores important incisions in the development of Nazism like the racist *Nuremberg Laws* in 1935 or the Olympic Games of 1936 to mention only those two.

Maybe his main sources had not much to say about these facts which would confirm the impression that Larson chose the wrong witnesses for his subject - an US ambassador not up to his job which he craved from FDR as a paid retreat to finish a history book about the Old South, and his nymphomaniac daughter with twisted political views, initially attracted to Nazi thugs who even tried to flirt with Hitler. For her good luck the *Führer*, as is generally known, preferred German shepherd dogs, Mickey Mouse films and mass murder to romance so she had to put up with a lower ranking criminal, head of the Gestapo Rudolf Diels, before she turned into a fervent communist and the lover of a Soviet spy.

If I had discovered the testimonies of such a hair-raising menagerie whose inmates in the case of Martha Dodd even took pride in authoring their memoirs I would have taken those pages and proceeded them adequately to a script for reincarnations of the Marx Brothers - with Harpo playing the U.S. diplomat's daughter. The sincere writer decided otherwise and tried hard to give this frivolous burlesque play the appearance of a classic Greek tragedy. The result is that its actors emerge as half pitiful, half comical puppets, most of all Ambassador Dodd as a wry and squeamish history professor at the wrong time in the wrong place who desperately tried to make good on his failures at actively pursuing a consistent policy towards the Nazis after his return to the United States. To add to this pathetic impression, he later ran over an Afro-American girl with his car claiming it to have been her fault.

While still functioning in Berlin he drove his staff mad with his showy frugality, his inability to gather first hand information from Nazi bigwigs and to analyze the political development. Though Larson portrays these deficits as professorial values, Dodd and his family spent a considerable amount of time at balls, receptions and dinners thrown by the chosen few of the German capital. Accordingly, important subjects of *Beasts* are what people wore on such occasions. Also of crucial interest are the many tears that are shed in the course of events, in first place by men: William Dodd cries twice, at the funeral of Woodrow Wilson and of his wife who before her interment isn't much more than a footnote. Rudolf Diels, the scare-faced

Gestapo hangman seems like a wimp given the frequency of his tearful confessions to his lover Martha. And Boris, the Soviet spy with whom she played a passionate comedy for some time, complies fully to the image of the Vodka soaked Russian crybaby. Having endured all that schmaltz I confess that I took some satisfaction from his execution by Stalin.

So far one could shrug off the whole story as a travesty, a cheap version of *Cabaret* or Billy Wilder's ingenious *To be or not to be* ("Schuuulz!") - on the same level as the extensive credits the author is giving his dog recently felled by liver cancer (*Beasts*, p. 374). But this is not the wonderland of freewheeling fiction, the reenactment of a legend from remote times and exotic places or the sentimental memories of a deceased pet. The author promises to lift the heavy weight of an authentic narrative about the darkest years of the 20th century when real people suffered real pain, when they were persecuted, tortured and murdered. As a consequence there is the indispensable necessity of truthfulness without ornaments or omissions.

As it is to be expected from the above, Larson fails on a grandiose scale ignoring the elementary rules of the trade: Check, check again and cross check! Instead he retreats to an eclectic philosophical view of history and the sources he drew upon: *Neither work* [Ambassador Dodd's published diary & Martha's recollections] *is wholly trustworthy* [*Beasts*, p. 370] and *I read as many memoirs of the era as I could [...] while keeping in mind that memoirs of the Nazi era tend to contain a good deal of self-engineering* [*Beasts*, p. 373]. In spite of this insight he carried on to copy those ego-documents without any critical appraisal of his own. Reading a lot about history does not cause understanding it, let go the ability to outline it, if one lacks the background and a broader perspective.

The fact that embarrasses me most about *In the Garden of Beasts* is that it will eternalize a tale with which I am confronted since I do research on Nuremberg in the 1930s. To illustrate the reason for my ire and the author's flowery style I quote the episode in its entirety (*Beasts*, p. 95 - 99). The date of the event must have been midnight August 13/14, 1933, when Martha Dodd, her brother William E. junior and her interim-lover Quentin Reynolds, a Chicago newspaper correspondent in Berlin, made a car tour through southern Germany:

At about midnight they pulled to a stop in front of their hotel in Nuremberg. Reynolds had been to Nuremberg before and knew it to be a sleepy place this late at night, but now, he wrote, they found the street "filled with an excited, happy crowd." His first thought was that these revelers were participants in a festival of the city's legendary toy industry.

Inside the hotel Reynolds asked the registration clerk, "Is there going to be a parade?"

The clerk, cheerful and pleasant, laughed with such delight that the tips of his mustache shook, Reynolds recalled. "It will be a kind of a parade," the clerk said. "They are teaching someone a lesson."

The three took their bags to their rooms, then set out for a walk to see the city and find something to eat.

The crowd outside had grown larger and was infused with good cheer. "Everyone was keyed up, laughing, talking," Reynolds saw. What struck him was how friendly everyone was - far more friendly, certainly, than an equivalent crowd of Berliners would have been. Here, he noted, if you bumped into someone by accident, you got a polite smile and cheerful forgiveness.

From a distance they heard the coarse, intensifying clamor of a still larger and more raucous crowd approaching on the street. They heard distant music, a street band, all brass and noise. The crowd pressed inward in happy anticipation, Reynolds wrote. "We could hear the roar of the crowd three blocks away, a laughing roar that swelled toward us with the music."

The noise grew, accompanied by a shimmery tangerine glow that fluttered on the facades of buildings. Moments later the marchers came into view, a column of SA men in brown uniforms carrying torches and banners. "Storm Troopers," Reynolds noted. "Not doll makers."

Immediately behind the first squad there followed two very large troopers, and between them a much smaller human captive, though Reynolds could not at first tell whether it was a man or a woman. The troopers were "half-supporting, half-dragging" the figure along the street. "Its head had been clipped bald," Reynolds wrote, "and face and head had been coated with white powder." Martha described the face as having "the color of diluted absinthe."

They edged closer, as did the crowd around them, and now Reynolds and Martha saw that the figure was a young woman - though Reynolds still was not completely certain. "Even though the figure wore a skirt, it might have been a man dressed as a clown," Reynolds wrote. "The crowd around me roared at the spectacle of this figure being dragged along."

The genial Nurembergers around them became transformed and taunted and insulted the woman. The troopers at her sides abruptly lifted her to her full height, revealing a placard hung around her neck. Coarse laughter rose from all around. Martha, Bill, and Reynolds deployed their halting German to ask other bystanders what was happening and learned in fragments that the girl had been associating with a Jewish man. As best Martha could garner, the placard said,

"I HAVE OFFERED MYSELF TO A JEW."

As the Storm Troopers went past, the crowd surged from the sidewalks into the street behind and followed. A two-decker bus became stranded in the mass of people. Its driver held up his hands in mock surrender. Passengers on the top deck pointed at the girl and laughed. The troopers again lifted the girl - "their toy," as Reynolds put it - so that the riders could have a better view. "Then someone got the idea of marching the thing into the lobby of our hotel," Reynolds wrote. He learned that the "thing" had a name: Anna Rath.

The band stayed out on the street, where it continued to play in a loud, caustic manner. The Storm Troopers emerged from the lobby and dragged the woman away toward another hotel. The band struck up the "Horst Wessel Song," and suddenly in all directions along the street the crowd came to attention, right arms extended in the Hitler salute, all singing with vigor.

When the song ended, the procession moved on. "I wanted to follow," Martha wrote, "but my two companions were so repelled that they pulled me away." She too had been shaken by the episode, but she did not let it tarnish her overall view of the country and the revival of spirit caused by the Nazi revolution. "I tried in a self-conscious way to justify the action of the Nazis, to insist that we should not condemn without knowing the whole story."

The three retreated to the bar of their hotel, Reynolds vowing to get savagely drunk. He asked the bartender, quietly, about what had just occurred. The bartender told the story in a whis-

per: In defiance of Nazi warnings against marriage between Jews and Aryans, the young woman had planned to marry her Jewish fiancée. This would have been risky anywhere in Germany, he explained, but nowhere more so than in Nuremberg. "You have heard of Herr S., whose home is here?" the bartender said.

Reynolds understood. The bartender was referring to Julius Streicher, whom Reynolds described as "Hitler's circus master of anti-Semitism." Streicher, according to Hitler biographer Ian Kershaw, was "a short, squat, shaven-headed bully ... utterly possessed by demonic images of Jews." He had founded the virulently anti-Semitic newspaper Der Stürmer.

Reynolds recognized that what he, Martha, and Bill had just witnessed was an event that had far more significance than its particular details. Foreign correspondents in Germany had reported on abuses of Jews, but so far their stories had been based on after-the-fact investigation that relied on the accounts of witnesses. Here was an act of anti-Jewish brutality that a correspondent had witnessed firsthand. "The Nazis had all along been denying the atrocities that were occasionally reported abroad, but here was concrete evidence," Reynolds wrote. "No other correspondent," he claimed, "had witnessed any atrocities."

His editor agreed it was an important story but feared that if Reynolds tried to send it by cable it would be intercepted by Nazi censors. He told Reynolds to send it by mail and recommended that he omit any reference to the Dodd children in order to avoid causing difficulties for the new ambassador.

Martha begged him not to write the story at all. "It was an isolated case," she argued. "It was not really important, would create a bad impression, did not reveal actually what was going on in Germany, overshadowed the constructive work they were doing."

Martha, Bill, and Reynolds continued south into Austria, where they spent another week before returning to Germany and making their way back along the Rhine. When Reynolds returned to his office, he found an urgent summons from foreign-press chief Ernst Hanfstaengl.

Hanfstaengl was furious, unaware as yet that Martha and Bill also had witnessed the incident.

"There isn't one damned word of truth in your story!" he raged. "I've talked with our people in Nuremberg and they say nothing of the sort happened there."

Reynolds quietly informed Hanfstaengl that he had watched the parade in the company of two important witnesses whom he had omitted from the story but whose testimony was unassailable. Reynolds named them.

Hanfstaengl sank into his chair and held his head. He complained that Reynolds should have told him sooner. Reynolds invited him to call the Dodds to confirm their presence, but Hanfstaengl waved away the suggestion.

At a press conference soon afterward, Goebbels, the propaganda minister, did not wait for a reporter to raise the issue of abuse against Jews but did so himself. He assured the forty or so reporters in the room that such incidents were rare, committed by "irresponsible" men.

One correspondent, Norman Ebbutt, chief of the London Times's bureau in Berlin, interrupted. "But, Herr Minister, you must surely have heard of the Aryan girl, Anna Rath, who was paraded through Nuremberg just for wanting to marry a Jew?"

Goebbels smiled. It utterly transformed his face, though the result was neither pleasant nor engaging. Many in the room had encountered this effect before. There was something freakish about the extent to which the muscles of the bottom half of his face became engaged in the production of his smile and how abruptly his expressions could shift.

"Let me explain how such a thing might occasionally happen," Goebbels said. "All during the twelve years of the Weimar Republic our people were virtually in jail. Now our party is in

charge and they are free again. When a man has been in jail for twelve years and he is suddenly freed, in his joy he may do something irrational, perhaps even brutal. Is that not a possibility in your country also?"

Ebbutt, his voice even, noted a fundamental difference in how England might approach such a scenario. "If it should happen," he said, "he would throw the man right back in jail."

Goebbels's smile disappeared, then just as quickly returned. He looked around the room. "Are there any more questions?"

The United States made no formal protest of the incident. Nonetheless, an official of the German foreign office apologized to Martha. He dismissed the incident as isolated and one that would be severely punished.

Here comes the punch line: None such action took place at the time in Nuremberg - period. I checked the archival sources for the existence of a young Gentile woman by the name of Anna Rath - negative. I browsed all 1933 issues of *Der Stürmer* for a hint to this humiliation before or after - there is none though it would have been a feast for the pathologic anti-Semites there. I asked the few emigrants still around who could have learned about this outrageous story - they had not.

In addition to these undeniable findings there are some blurry points and plain mistakes in Dodd's and Reynold's reports which Larson nevertheless quotes eagerly:

How could a crowd of such a size been summoned at midnight to the heart of an *otherwise sleepy place* like Nuremberg which was and is not Berlin with a buzzing night life. Given the then available local media posters, leaflets or newspaper ads would have been the means of choice but what were they supposed to say - *Let's have a lynching tonite?!* What would have been the reaction of the German police to such an appeal trying to roll call an uncontrollable, emotionally charged mob? This was 1933, not late 1938 and *Kristallnacht* - foremost it was before the *Nuremberg Laws* were decreed here in 1935. Because Jewish-Gentile couples were regularly defamed in *Der Stürmer* even before 1933 the more strange it seems that the case of Anna Rath which led to such a violent outbreak wasn't even mentioned. At that time even German state prosecutors would have been compelled to prevent this case of deprivation of liberty and mayhem against a Gentile woman. And why did the Nazis drag her into hotel lobbies at midnight, by incidence first in the one where Reynolds had booked a room?

Not only the detail that there never were *two-decker buses* in Nuremberg (but of course in Berlin) adds to the suspicion that the whole story was made up. Other than the author of *Beasts* I am allowed to fantasize a little: Imagine Martha and Quentin stranded in Nuremberg in that hotel bar, idling away their time with a few martinis (or *diluted absinthe?*) in an otherwise unbearably unglamorous, dull town. As any journalist Reynolds was always looking for a good story. Dodd considered herself to have, among the others mentioned before, also a

talent as a writer. Just for fun they started throwing ideas for a scoop at each other and like the bartender for their drinks they mixed the ingredients: The well deserved ill fame of Nuremberg as a hotbed of Nazism, allusions to the local toy industry, the only thing an average American might have known about this town in the early 1930s, SA men parading at night with torches and brass bands as they had seen them on several occasions in Berlin, and the female protagonist, stitched together from contemporary expressionist movies, fragile, vulnerable with a powdered white face and short hair - Pola Negri abused at night by two uniformed Frankensteins in a place packed with inhabitants who act like lobotomized zombies. The best thing would be that different from Berlin (or Munich or Hamburg) no competitor of the foreign free press was around here - Nuremberg drew international attention only afterwards during the party rallies - to scrutinize the report.

But why did the Nazis only half-heartedly tried to deny the *news* (though Goebbels did not explicitly confirm it at his press conference - watch the wording)? First, they gave a damn for the truth this or that way around. Second, independent from a deeply cynic ideology, how can one prove that something did *not* happen when it was in the newspaper? Reynolds knew that the children of the American ambassador could never been cited as witnesses without awkward diplomatic imbroglios. His offer to Hanfstaengl to call Martha was a mere poker game on how far German officials would go to refute his story. Eventually Goebbels decided on tactics of belittlement. After the Nazis could not prevent Reynolds' article from being published, their only alternate choice could have been to officially disavow the incident charging him and his newspaper to have lied and thus kicking up even more dust by forcing the publishers and in the end maybe the American government to react.

As this story shows, an one time publication quoted often enough is sufficient to keep it alive for 80 years in which the tale of the beauty and the beasts made it from the press into novels and textbooks.

Talking about books: In 1937 Joshua Podro (1894 - 1962) published *Nuremberg, The Unholy City. A Chapter in Jewish Martyrology* in London. As one of the secretaries of the British section of the *World Jewish Congress* he seized on every opportunity to portrait Nuremberg as the origin of all evils against Jews since the Middle Ages and to that purpose drew from any source, even questionable ones. In his rage against the town Podro, being a scholar and a journalist, was very knowledgeable about details of the local conditions and naturally happy to quote newspaper articles confirming his views. There is not one word about the Anna Rath incident in his *Unholy City*. Was it because being an expert on the evolvment of anti-

Semitism he did not believe it and therefore did not want to compromise his book by iterating Reynolds' and Dodd's concoction?

Never mind: Reynolds became famous for being the first foreign correspondent to actually witness a violent anti-Semitic turmoil in Nazi Germany (starring a female Gentile). Towards the end of her life even Martha Dodd herself who certainly loved to be involved in a spectacular story like this, maybe thought it to be real (like the rest of her published recollections of those wild youthful days).

The publishers were poorly advised to print Larson's manuscript without checking the facts, relying solely on his bestselling fame. The memories of ex-lovers are no proper instruments for cross checking the veracity of a story.

Also a caveat goes out to American readers of books about recent German history: Stay critical, even if the plot sounds good and the cover looks impressive.

And please, please no Hollywood movie with Tom Cruise as Quentin Reynolds and Uma Thurman as Martha Dodd!

Gerhard Jochem

For further reading - the autobiographical sources of the fairy tale

- *Martha Dodd: Through Embassy Eyes*. New York 1939.
- *Quentin Reynolds: By Quentin Reynolds*. New York 1963.

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