

Dark skies overhead

The past day had been exhausting and difficult. I called my wife in Leipzig in the evening, as I always did when I was away on business. This time I called from a hotel in Magdeburg. In a halting and trembling voice she told me that she was sitting by the radio at that very moment, listening to a broadcast from the seat of government in Berlin where people were celebrating. Adolf Hitler had been appointed as the new Chancellor of the Reich. There were a torch parade, the endless cheers of the people, and one speech after another. „We are done for,“ I said, „I'll come home early tomorrow.“

When I hung up, a crackling noise in the telephone sounded gloomy and malicious. For a moment I closed my eyes. When I opened them, I noticed the calendar on the wall in front of me. An ad for Hapag was on it, with letters forming a square, and above it, a colourful ship sailing away. Beneath it was the date, January 30, 1933.

I knew the meaning of my wife's report as I had also heard it on the loudspeakers in the afternoon. Already I have had some bad experiences at a time, when only a handful of some 500,000-600,000 Jews living in Germany understood how much of a common threat were the names of the NSDAP and Adolf Hitler. Most of Germany's Jews tended to view the Nazis as a rather harmless group of ludicrous fanatics.

Since my return from World War I in 1918, I had served as the manager of a film rental agency in Leipzig. I worked tirelessly to help the business grow from its modest beginning to a well-known company. Early in 1932 we purchased the Charlie Chaplin movie „City Lights“ for the extraordinary sum of 250,000 dollars. It was a top-notch work that we and the entire German film industry thought would become a success. And it met all of our expectations – until the bad times began.

One day the Nazis, far from seizing power at that time, made what they thought was an astonishing discovery, namely that Chaplin was a Jew. They assumed that this discovery would appeal to a receptive segment of the population predisposed to anti-Semitic ideas. In their „campaign of enlightenment,“ some groups with decisively nationalist leanings claimed that Chaplin was a communist. They also shouted that Chaplin was a multi-millionaire. They tried to demonstrate that their striking method of deception was blossoming. It allowed them to come up with the most contradictory charges and to publicize them. However, no matter how hard their party media tried and their speakers ranted, the Nazis failed time and again to discredit the “Jewish millionaire-communist” and his film. Then, for the first time, the Nazis resorted to a tactic that would lead to a far greater triumph one year later. SA troopers appeared in front of all movie theaters that showed the Chaplin film. They wanted to „enlighten“ the audience, i.e. they were determined to harass the viewers and to prevent them from entering the movie theater. When this failed, the Nazis quickly made use of „intellectual weapons“ that delivered a special punch: they used smoke bombs and firecrackers. When they introduced similar impressive weapons, the ensuing panic was even greater, and soon their goal was within reach. Owners of movie theaters who refused to lease Chaplin's film were frightened by such terror and personal threats. To avoid further complications, they gave in to the pressure of this manipulated „public opinion.“

The financial loss suffered by my company was substantial. It went bankrupt, in part due to the movie studio „Ufa“ that was infested with Nazis as early as 1932. Thanks to the Nazi movement my personal loss was considerable. I could not file any claims against a company that was going bankrupt. All of this was only the prelude of worse things to come. Although I was employed by the newly founded company, the political sky remained dreary. Soon darker clouds would appear overhead. Berlin was on the march, at least those Berliners who were convinced that the salvation of Germany would come once Hitler assumed power. They were cheering now, especially the young people, but also many women.

It is not my task to investigate how the German people, having been so trusting and politically so non-judgmental, had fallen prey to the world's most satanic piper. Perhaps everybody had been deceived, and not only those who cheered. Others had no real idea of the magnitude of the impending disaster. There were a few who believed that Hitler and his movement would last far longer than a few months. One was comforted by the thought that people who pretended to know everything and who promised the world to everybody, would be ruined economically in only a short time; and people cited other reasons in the hope of making everyone relax. Doesn't it seem today as if all foreign countries became victims of the same delusion?

But it is not my intent to „investigate“ this and to deal with theories and hypotheses. Instead, I hope to report objectively on my fate, and that of my wife, and to focus on members of society during the Third Reich who had not often been in the world's spotlight.

The gutter overflows

On April 1, 1933 the NSDAP declared a „national boycott,“ an act of revenge for alleged injustices committed by Jews. Julius Streicher, who was assigned by Hitler to lead this action, delivered a speech whose lies went beyond anything said before. One can only comment on this speech using psychiatric guidelines. Once again the SA-troopers showed up, this time in front of Jewish stores and blocked the path of customers who wished to enter. There were still some customers who, in a gesture of open protest, had the courage to buy a few things in stores whose windows were defaced with gigantic letters that spelled the word „Jude.“ Often shoppers were photographed, particularly in smaller towns, and soon after that, their pictures would be on public display at some centrally located place in the city. Below the pictures one could read the words, „Slave of Jews.“ During the whole day, howling gangs of the SA marched in the streets and marked all houses belonging to Jews. Jewish people seen in public were ill-treated. Jewish intellectuals, doctors, lawyers, merchants, artists: all were suddenly exposed to the terror by the scum of society and cast into the streets by the „national revolution.“

The film distributors were not spared from these actions that were reinforced by a variety of new tactics. Ambitious party members and aspirants pressed forward in their demands to have their Jewish employees dismissed immediately. They insisted on gaining full power of attorney from the theater owners who had refused its release.

One such aggressive Nazi excelled in spreading hatred. He was a man who repeatedly had stressed how grateful he was to Jews. Shortly before World War I, when he was facing a bleak future, Jews had hired him and made him into what he was today: a reputable businessman with an above average salary. The change in the political climate was a signal for this previously respectable man to finally prove his gratitude in practical terms. As it turned out, he had been a secret member of the Nazi party for some time, and he had used his connections to make himself the “dictator” of the entire company. He considered it to be his highest challenge to cleanse the company of all non-Aryans, i.e. to cleanse it from those to whom he owed everything. Operating on a small scale at first, he took advantage of all tactics the party officials and government later used on a much grander scale. These tactics finally consolidated the entire world against the German people. What this man demanded from me was quite simply the renunciation of all of my legal rights. If I refused, my arrest by the SA was sure to follow. Yes, by the SA, not by the police! He quickly collaborated with like-minded cohorts, who exploited this opportunity unscrupulously, making personal profits from fraud and blackmail without being penalized. Soon he had ascended to one of the highest offices in the film industry.