Slaughter on a Snowy Morn

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Pity The Poor Immigrant

28 June 1914 was not a good day for Archduke Franz Ferdinand. His morning drive through the broiling streets of Sarajevo had been marred when a Serb terrorist hurled a grenade at his car. Quick action by the archduke – he knocked the grenade away with his hand so that it exploded harmlessly in the car's wake – prevented a disaster, but the heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne was still quivering with rage when he reached the town hall. As the mayor began his welcoming address, Franz Ferdinand interrupted him testily. 'What is the good of your speeches? I come to Sarajevo on a visit, and I get bombs thrown at me. It is outrageous!'1 The archduke's ill-humour was short-lived and so was he. That afternoon the Serb nationalists tried again. And this time they succeeded. A motorcade bearing the archduke and his wife, Sophie, on a tour of the blistering city was so poorly guarded that a nineteen-year-old fanatic named Gavrilo Princip had no problems in opening fire with a pistol. Both royals were mortally wounded. There was nothing to suggest that the assassination of an unpopular royal in a little-known Balkan country would trigger the start of history's bloodiest conflict. Yet barely five weeks later Europe was in flames.

It all happened with bewildering haste. On 28 July, Austria- Hungary declared war on Serbia. Russia, tied by treaty to Serbia, then mobilised its forces. Four days later, Germany, straining at the leash for a chance to flex its military muscle and allied by treaty to Austria- Hungary, declared war on Russia and France. On 4 August, when

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German troops overran neutral Belgium, treaty obligations forced the final European heavyweight, Britain, into the fray.

From one end of the continent to the other, recruiting offices on both sides were stormed by millions of bright-eyed, eager young men, all bursting with patriotic fervour. 'Don't worry,' they reassured anxious relatives, 'it will be over by Christmas!' By the spring of 1915, what would become the 20th century's cruellest cliché had been well and truly buried beneath a welter of blood and bullets. March of that year saw the great armies of Europe digging in along a line that stretched from the North Sea to the Franco-Swiss border. All along this Western Front, the Great War slowly degenerated into the Great Stalemate, as mechanised slaughter on a scale hitherto unimaginable made any kind of advance prohibitively expensive in human terms.

A few yards of blood-drenched soil gained one day: those same few yards lost the next. It all seemed so pointless.

Across the Atlantic, most Americans were convinced that Europe had gone crazy. But not everyone felt this way. Many of that nation's more recent immigrants agonised over the reports that filled their daily newspapers each morning. For them the battlefields – Marne, Tannenburg and Ypres – were not just marks on some vague map but the stuff of childhood memories. And as the fighting intensified, no immigrant group was more affected than the 8 million American citizens of German birth or extraction. They were trapped in a kind of citizenship no man's land, walking on eggshells every step of the way. Many of the more thoughtful kept a wary eye on Washington, DC. Although the nation's overriding mood was for non-involvement in the war, they knew that the capital's elite power-brokers – overwhelmingly pro-British – were exerting relentless pressure to intervene. The press, too, had sided with Britain and her allies and slanted their coverage accordingly. It was a case of common language; common cause. They fed off an Allied propaganda machine that ran rings around its German counterpart when it came to moulding American opinion. Every act of war was skilfully morphed into yet another example of Teutonic barbarity. Well, what else could you expect from the homeland of Nietzsche, Treitschke and all those other militaristic anti-Semites?

Such unremitting bias infuriated the German-American community. In New York City, an immigrant pressure group railed against those influential papers that had 'an English correspondent tied to its stirrups', and vowed to establish a daily newspaper that 'would tell the truth about Germany'. Elsewhere in America the pretence of neutrality was, at times, paper thin. When Harvard University portentously announced that, in the interests of impartiality, it was withdrawing all invitations to visiting German professors, it notably did not extend this embargo to lecturers from France. All in all, it wasn't a good time to be a German in America.

Just ask Charlie Stielow.

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Although this 36-year-old Berlin-born farmhand was insulated from the worst of the Hun-baiting – he couldn't read and could barely write his name – his empty pockets provided eloquent proof of the hardening animosity. It was the same right across upstate New York, as German immigrants, especially those like Stielow, anchored to the bottom of the economic scale, suddenly found themselves on the business end of some witheringly mean stares from their neighbours.

The past winter had been the toughest that Charlie could remember. By the beginning of March 1915, his back was pressed tight to the wall. Troubles were piling up like snowdrifts at his door and there was no sign of a spring thaw. Debts, domestic worries, the threat of imminent homelessness, no job, no prospects, no money, Stielow had 'em all, in spades. What he didn't have was luck. Nothing new about that, though. Somehow Dame Fortune had always danced tantalisingly out of reach for this burly farm worker. For most of his adult life, and even before that, he'd bent his back in the windswept fields that lie south of Lake Ontario. He followed the crops and the picking seasons, managing to save just enough money each summer so that he and his family could hibernate through the vicious winters, all the while praying for spring to come early. As a way of life it was brutal, but it was an existence that Charlie shared with hundreds of other indentured farm labourers in this part of the world, and he'd always scraped by, somehow. Until now.

In Niagara County agriculture was king. If you were rich, you owned a farm; if you weren't, you worked for someone who did. Charlie epitomised the contract farm worker. The system was rigid and simple: hire on for a calendar year with one of the wealthy landowners, do a good job, keep your nose clean, and maybe there would be the option of a renewal if the boss liked you. Usually Charlie got asked to stay, because he was broad-backed, honest, didn't complain and could work like a mule. He'd been with one landowner, Ernest Schrader, for the best part of five years, until that relationship fizzled out in the spring of 1914. There was no rift, Charlie just needed a change. He already had another job lined up with a new boss named George Terrell. The pay was nothing special, just $28 a month, but the job did come with feed for Charlie's cow and a pen for his hogs.

As always, Charlie worked round the clock during his time with Terrell and looked set for another lengthy stay when, suddenly, in an unprecedented and wholly unexpected splash of entrepreneurial verve, the lowly farmhand traded a hog for one of Terrell's horses, signing a note for $30 to cover the difference. Charlie Stielow was stepping into uncharted, possibly treacherous waters. And the expansion didn't stop there. Reasoning that two horses would generate more income than one, he promptly doubled the size of his team by buying another animal, this time from a trader named Charles Speck, who lived in nearby Lockport. He financed the deal by mortgaging the entire rig – both horses, his wagon and harness – to Speck and by signing yet another promissory note.

This was a high-risk strategy and, who knows, it might have paid off, except that calamity struck – Charlie got laid off. Terrell, caught in a financial crisis of his own, had to cut costs ruthlessly and that meant canning the hired help. Overnight, Charlie's cash flow dwindled from meagre to non-existent, and with no funds to

make the payments, his world began to implode. Speck, as unsentimental as he was pragmatic, attached Charlie's harness and wagon, a manoeuvre that pushed the farmhand to the brink of financial ruin. No doubt about it, grabbing even a small slice of the American dream was proving awfully elusive for Charlie Stielow, just as it had been for his parents.

Julius and Hannah Stielow were working a farm on the outskirts of Berlin when Charlie entered this world on 15 October 1878. Whatever joy Charlie's arrival brought to the family was counterbalanced by the harshness of their bleak existence. The 'Iron Chancellor', Otto von Bismarck, might have pulled off one of history's great feats of political legerdemain in unifying the disparate Teutonic states under a single German flag, but precious few benefits had filtered down to those families that barely had one foot on the lowest rung of the socio-economic ladder. Hunger was commonplace, poverty rife.

The Stielows rubbed their groaning bellies and, like millions of other Europeans before and since, cast envious eyes westwards, beyond the Atlantic. Miracles were possible across that ocean, so they'd heard, and like almost everyone else floundering at the bottom of the financial barrel they had no problem in suspending disbelief. Every spare pfennig was stashed with just one goal in mind. It was a struggle but their diligence paid off. Two long years after Charlie was born, the Stielows had enough in the family kitty to pay for the steerage-class tickets that allowed them to join the vast migratory flood to America.

They landed at the immigration centre at Castle Garden, on the southern tip of Manhattan, in early 1881. All around them New York was in the midst of its first great building boom. Apartment houses were mushrooming everywhere as the middle classes abandoned their fine single residences and took to apartment living with well financed relish. The non-stop construction guaranteed plenty of work for those newly arrived off the boat and meant that thousands of immigrants would spend their entire lives within a few miles of the landing stage at Castle Garden. But the Stielows were country people. All they'd ever known was farm life. New York with its hectic bustle and roaring growth wasn't for them. They had their eyes fixed on the lush farmland of western New York State, already a magnet for so many of their fellow countrymen. Their 4,000-mile odyssey from Berlin terminated in Niagara County.

The county is home to one of America's curious topographical idiosyncrasies: more of its jurisdiction lies below water than above it. This is because the county's northernmost boundary stretches far out into the icy depths of Lake Ontario. The trade-off comes in fertility.

The part of the county that remains dry – the Ontario plain – provides some of the best growing soil in the north-east, and it was this fecundity that attracted the first European settlers in the early 19th century. The Stielows set up home in Wolcottsville, a small hamlet subsumed by the larger township of Royalton, which lies some twenty miles south of Lake Ontario and twice that distance north-east of Buffalo. Owing to the large number of Germans hereabouts, Wolcottsville was known locally as Prussia, and most newcomers clung to their native tongue. As a

result, Charlie grew up in a German-speaking household, an act of parental short-sightedness that left him permanently handicapped when it came to coping with the language of his adopted homeland. For the rest of his life he would retain a slight accent and often adopt a clumsy and irregular form of phraseology.

The Stielows were hard workers, thrifty and resourceful, and after a few years spent tending other people's crops and stock, they had scraped together the deposit for a two-acre smallholding of their own. Here they raised Charlie, his brother Gus and sister Mary, along with two much older half-sisters from Hannah's first marriage, Pauline and Augusta Krause.

In 1902 Julius Stielow died, as much from hard work as anything else, and nine years later he was followed to the grave by Hannah. Her death opened up a deep family rift. Originally, she had willed the farm – which had grown in size to ten acres – to Charlie alone, but just before her death some last-minute estate-juggling meant that it was left jointly to all five children, an unsatisfactory compromise that triggered a bitter argument.

The feuding lasted for years. When the dust finally settled, Charlie retained a fifth share of the Wolcottsville farm and got to stay in the main house, with his wife, Laura, and their two children. But for how much longer? Settling with his siblings had taken every cent he had and more. As a result the farm was mortgaged up to the chimney stack and, in March 1915, with news of Charlie's horse fiasco common knowledge in Wolcottsville, the woman from nearby Middleport who held the note on the property was threatening foreclosure.

If Charlie couldn't find some money fast, not only would he be flat busted and out of work, but he and Laura and the kids wouldn't even have a roof over their heads. Adding to his headaches was the bittersweet realisation that in a month's time there'd be one more mouth to feed, seeing as Laura was pregnant with their third child.

Charlie Stielow was close to his wits' end, but not quite. He still had one ace left to play. On 2 March 1915 he set out on a five-mile trek from Wolcottsville, skirting the northern edge of the Tonawanda Swamp – at that time the largest marshland in New York State – until he reached Newton's Corners, in the village of West Alabama. Here, close to where the Newton family had opened the inn that gave the district its name, local businessmen and farmers gathered every Tuesday for the weekly auction. All kinds of farm machinery, horse tack and feed found its way to the auctioneer's gavel, but Charlie wasn't in the market for bid and buy on this March morning; he was after a job. The auction also acted as a kind of ad hoc labour exchange. Charlie worked his way through the milling crowd until he saw a familiar face. He and William Warner swapped problems for a while, and when Charlie explained his predicament, Warner thought for a moment, then recalled that 'Phelps wanted to get a man'.

In such a close-knit agricultural community all the big farmers had big reputations, and Stielow didn't need any further clarification.

Charles B. Phelps lived just across the border, in adjoining Orleans County. He owned a decent-sized spread on Salt Works Road, and, if you believed the rumours, had saved nearly every cent he'd ever made. For most of his life he'd run the farm on his own, but in recent years advancing age had caught up with him – he was now aged 70 – and getting the crops in on time needed outside help. This posed a dilemma. Because the cussedness of his personality was legendary, most local farmhands gave Phelps a wide berth. As a consequence, the old man was forced to dip into a pool of casual labour known locally as 'swamp angels', a rag-tag bunch of pedlars and itinerants who roamed the back roads of upstate New York. These swamp angels drank hard, played hard, and many of them stole pretty hard as well. Phelps didn't trust them an inch. Neighbours grew accustomed to seeing the crusty old-timer lay into the help when dissatisfied with either their work or their demands, which was most of the time. Come payday, Phelps could always be relied upon to stage a spirited defence of his wallet.

Curses and threats were commonplace as disgruntled ex-employees trudged off down the road, shouting back over their shoulders with beer-stained breath at their tight-fisted tormentor.

Phelps might have been the doomsday option, but for Charlie Stielow, penniless, out of work and stretched to the limits of his endurance, he represented a flicker of hope. And in what had been a gloom-laden world, that amounted to quite a lot.

Eight days later saw Charlie Stielow making his way north-east along Salt Works Road, in the direction of West Shelby. The long, weaving highway had been named for the well where locals came to buy their salt, essential for preserving meat through the long, harsh winters.

As he tramped steadily northwards into Orleans County the scrubby pines of the Tonawanda gave way to lush, rolling countryside, a place where almost anything grew in the rich, loamy soil. West Shelby was one of four hamlets – East Shelby, Millville and Shelby itself were the others – that together made up the township of Shelby. In 1910 the accumulated population was recorded as 3,945, though each year that number shrivelled by just a few as low-income families, beaten down by the hardships of indentured rural life, packed their bags and headed for Buffalo in search of a more certain income in the canning factories and on the docks. Those that stayed remained rooted in the 19th century. Many houses had not been hooked up to the electricity grid, automobiles were still a novelty on the dirt lanes, outnumbered by buggies and horses, and most people, like Charlie Stielow, got around on foot.

He trudged to a halt outside the Phelps place, a mile south of West Shelby. It was an imposing two-storey frame house set some way back from the main dirt road. A solitary tree with spiky, bare branches towered over the driveway, while several similar trees ran in a straight line alongside the house. On the north side of the property a telephone post signalled Phelps's one and only concession to modernity. There was no evidence of electricity cables. Around the back, a gated fence divided the various barns, sheds and an orchard from the main living quarters. And beyond all this, the sweeping, snow-flecked fields stretched clear to the wooded horizon. Even on a grey, wintry day it was an impressive landscape.

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Not that Charlie noticed. He was too busy sizing up the house. The overarching impression was one of extreme isolation, bordering on desolation. Apart from a small, deserted-looking cottage that stood directly opposite on the other side of Salt Works Road, the nearest neighbour on Phelps's side of the road was more than 300 yards to the north. The seclusion was deliberate and desired. For the most part the families who lived along Salt Works Road were well-to-do farmers, the kind who expected their privacy, and respected the privacy of others.

Phelps certainly fell into this category. A lifelong bachelor, he occupied this large house with just his 50-year-old housekeeper Margaret Wolcott for company. Miss Wolcott was clearly blessed with almost supernatural reserves of patience, judging from the way she'd managed to endure her boss's tantrums for more than five years without quitting, although her lack of any close family might have eased her critical faculties in that respect somewhat.

As Charlie Stielow clumped up the long driveway, he saw that the front of the west-facing house had been boarded up for the winter, a common enough cost-cutting exercise, designed to keep out the frigid winds that came howling off Lake Ontario and preserve valuable heat (it would later be found that Phelps had caulked up the front doors for the same reason). Charlie slowly worked his way around the north side of the house until he located an unsealed door. He climbed the couple of steps and knocked, then retreated to ground level to wait.

After a few moments Phelps appeared. He was tall and spare, with a bony face that glowered over a large beard that reached to his chest.

In his gruff way he demanded to know what Charlie wanted. He was looking for work, was the answer. Phelps ran a flinty eye over the caller and liked what he saw. The man standing sheepishly at the foot of the steps was built like an ox, five-ten or so tall and about seventeen stone, all of it muscle. Best of all, so far as Phelps was concerned, he was clearly cut from a different cloth than those damned swamp angels who just drifted through with their sticky fingers and cavernous pockets. There looked to be nothing shifty about him. Charlie had a cannonball-round face, under-slung with the beginnings of a double chin, thin tufts of dark reddish hair plastered flat across his head and a Zapata moustache that gave him an almost cartoonish look. But it was a pleasing overall appearance, one dominated by the eyes; deep and blue, and exuding an earnest, almost childlike honesty. His clothes – dungarees and a heavy, padded jacket – might have been shabby, but at least they were clean. Phelps grunted his approval and invited the stranger into the welcome warmth of the large kitchen, then sat down and listened while Charlie haltingly outlined his work experience.

Since leaving school at age twelve, unable to read or write, he had spent his entire life working on farms from one end of Niagara County to the other. There wasn't anything he didn't know about picking apples or hoeing potatoes; he could plough fields, work a team, slaughter livestock, dig irrigation ditches, fix wagons; in fact, he could turn his hand to just about anything agricultural. For close on a quarter-

century, Charlie Stielow had been a hard-working son of the soil, unnoticed by the world at large, and in all that time he'd never once run foul of the law.

After some hemming and hawing, Phelps agreed to hire Charlie for one year, beginning on 1 April. The terms were surprisingly generous, an indication of just how much Phelps was impressed by the newcomer: Charlie could live rent-free in the tenant house directly opposite, have pasturage for his cow, feed for his horse, all the potatoes and fuel he needed for himself and his family, and in addition he would receive $400 a year. Charlie stammered his thanks, hardly able to believe his good fortune. Shoving all the dark rumours he had heard about Phelps welshing on promises to the furthermost recesses of his mind, he stuck out his big, work-callused paw and shook on the deal.

But the crafty Phelps smelled an opportunity. Why not, he suggested to Charlie, move into the tenant house as soon as possible; that way he could carry out a few chores around the farm – without pay, of course – until his yearly contract commenced on 1 April? It probably didn't occur to Charlie that he was being taken for a sucker, and if it did, well, he kept his disappointment to himself. Over another handshake he agreed to take up occupancy the following Saturday, 13 March.

When Laura Stielow heard the news that evening her relief was almost overwhelming. Here, at long last, she saw a chance for some much-needed domestic stability. She'd been sixteen years old and three months pregnant with Ethel when she and Charlie married in 1902. Roy had come along one year later. Since then, matrimonial life had been one long, relentless grind. In the dozen years since they were married, she and Charlie had lived in ten different homes.

The constant upheaval had worn away at her frail, tiny body and left her nerves wound tighter than piano strings. This time around, with another baby due in the next few weeks, she was determined that things would be different.

Laura's delight lasted all of 48 hours. On the following Friday evening Charlie came home, all out of breath and giggling in that strange high-pitched way of his. He excitedly told how he'd been selling a few household effects to a group of pedlars, when one of them mentioned that some temporary paid work was coming up locally that week. Was he interested? Charlie laid out the proposition to Laura: maybe they ought to delay moving out to the Phelps place until his official start of 1 April? This way, maybe he could make a few extra bucks to take with them?

Laura's Lilliputian stature concealed a fiercely determined nature.

Her brown eyes flashing angrily, she prodded her big, dumb husband a couple of times in the chest and insisted that he adhere to the original agreement. Old man Phelps wasn't the kind to be monkeyed around with, she said. If he thought Charlie was playing him for a fool, he might turn nasty and hire someone else. She didn't want to hear any more of this nonsense!

The dressing-down from Laura clearly had its intended effect. Overnight, Charlie came to realise the wisdom of her words, and the next morning he got his Democrat wagon – a high, horse-drawn, lightweight two-seater – out of hock, loaded it with the family's mainly second-hand furniture, and set out on the five-mile journey to West Shelby. Laura, shrugging off her eight months' pregnancy like it wasn't there, drove a second horse-drawn wagon they had rented from a local hotel keeper named Fred Pechuman.

Riding alongside Laura were her two children, her 53-year-old mother, Mary Jane Green, and her younger brother, Nelson Irow Green. The Greens had travelled over that day from the family home in Royalton Center, to help Laura settle in after the move. Mary Jane intended to remain throughout her daughter's confinement and beyond, until Laura regained her strength. Nelson jabbered non-stop all the way over. He didn't have anything to say; he just talked a lot. Just over a week shy of his nineteenth birthday, he was lean and strong, and not much else. Like Charlie, he'd also known nothing except farm labouring since leaving school, and, like Charlie, he was functionally illiterate. Where they differed was in mental acuity.

Nobody ever accused Charlie Stielow of being smart, but compared to his brother-in-law he was a tower of intellectual strength. When a newspaper report later branded Nelson as 'not mentally bright',4 it was a cruel, if accurate, assessment. He had the mind of an infant and an almost foetal suggestibility, but come harvest-time his grown-up brawn more than compensated for any cerebral shortcomings. And it was the same when it came to moving house. Nelson could work all day and not break a sweat. On days like this he was invaluable.

With flakes of snow swirling around them the two wagons crossed the county line and rolled slowly up Salt Works Road. Phelps was on hand to greet them and show them the ropes, and that Saturday the Stielow family got to spend their first night in the small two storey tenant house. They later learned that Phelps had only bought this property the previous week from a neighbour, for $1,700. It had stood empty ever since the previous occupant, Kirk Tallman, a Canadian apple picker who'd had a falling-out with Phelps, had left in a huff. When the time came to close the deal, Phelps had drawn just $500 from the bank, paying the $1,200 balance from banknotes he pulled randomly from various pockets. His attorney shook his head in disbelief: the damned old fool might not trust banks, but did he really need to advertise his prejudices so publicly? Local gossip had always insisted that old man Phelps kept thousands stashed in his house. Stunts such as this did nothing to quash those rumours.

Once inside the tenant house, Mary Jane Green directed the sleeping arrangements. She was a forceful woman, short on patience and, having given birth to no fewer than twelve children, she was used to taking charge. She announced that she and Laura would share a small downstairs bedroom; that way she could keep an eye on her heavily pregnant daughter. Charlie and Nelson were ordered to bunk down together in another ground-floor room, while the two children made do with an upstairs room. That night after supper everyone retired early, worn out by the exertions of what had been a long day.

Next morning Charlie got up early and familiarised himself with the layout of the farm and his duties. Most of Phelps's acreage was given over to potatoes and a small herd of cows. In the back yard he also kept a few chickens for his own use. It was the middling kind of farm that Charlie had worked on all his life. He didn't foresee any difficulties.

Just after dawn on the Monday, Phelps, in a rare act of magnanimity, hitched up his own lumber wagon and drove Charlie back to Wolcottsville to pick up more personal effects. Two days later he repeated the favour, when he and Charlie went back for the final time and collected the Stielow family's last few odds and ends, including the kitchen range. No doubt about it, the boss and his new employee were already acting like the best of pals.

When Charlie and Laura Stielow settled into their new house on that March weekend they had just three dollars in the world between them. But they felt like royalty. As far as they were concerned, the crisis had passed. After years of weary struggle, a glimmer of light flickered at the end of what had been a perilously long tunnel. They had a roof over their heads, a new baby just around the corner, and Charlie had just landed the best job of his life. The family's future had never looked brighter. So it was with some surprise that, just four months later, Charles Frederick Stielow found himself on death row at Sing Sing prison, awaiting an appointment with the electric chair.

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