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Boxer, Beetle

Written by Ned Beauman

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BOXER BEETLE

NED BEAUMAN



SCEPTRE

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. . . we are all accustomed to believe that maps and reality are necessarily related, or that if they are not, we can make them so by altering reality.

Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*

Dissonance is the truth about harmony.

Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*

1

In idle moments I sometimes like to close my eyes and imagine Joseph Goebbels' forty-third birthday party. I like to think that even in the busy autumn of 1940, Hitler might have found time to organise a surprise party for his close friend – pretending for weeks that the date had slipped his mind, deliberately ignoring the Propaganda Minister's increasingly sulky and awkward hints, and waiting until the very last order had been despatched to his U-boat commanders on the evening of Tuesday, 29 October before he led Goebbels on some pretext into the cocktail lounge of the Reich Chancellery. A great shout of '*Alles Gute zum Geburtstag!*', a cascade of streamers, some relieved and perhaps even slightly tearful laughter from Goebbels himself as he embraced the Führer, and the party could begin.

All this is conjecture, of course. But what is certain is that at some point on that day Hitler presented Goebbels with his birthday present: an exquisite fifteen-volume illustrated edition of the complete works of Goethe, published in Stuttgart in 1881 by J. G. Gottafchen, bound in red Morocco leather with a gilded spine and marbled edges.

One can't help feeling sorry for the soldiers of the 101st US Airborne Division who, nearly five years later, broke into a boarded-up salt mine near Berchtesgaden and splintered the schnapps crates piled inside to find not gold bullion, nor the Holy Spear of Destiny that pierced Christ's side, nor even a single consolatory bottle of schnapps, but instead Goebbels' personal library, stashed there in haste when the war began to turn against the Nazis. None the less, somebody was dutiful

enough to make sure the books escaped the bonfires, and they were shipped back to the Library of Congress in Washington. (Meanwhile, the vast majority of Hitler's sixteen thousand books, along with his skull and Eva Braun's underwear, were captured by the Red Army and to this day lie mouldering in an abandoned baroque church on the Uzkoe estate near Moscow, which I can only assume is, by some distance, the spookiest building in the entire world.)

The book collection wouldn't even be unpacked until 1952, when the job was given to a college student on work experience who probably wished he was helping out at a summer camp. By then the Gottafchen Goethe, with its fond inscription by Hitler and scattered marginalia by Goebbels, had escaped on to the open market. And some fifty years later it passed into the hands of Horace Grublock, the London property developer who until his violent death earlier this year was an irregular employer of mine.

Between 2002 and 2007 Grublock gave me three volumes (from *Prometheus* through to *Iphigenie auf Tauris*) in exchange for errands, promising that one day, if I were loyal, I would collect the whole set. It was humiliating, but Grublock said he'd never sell – and even if he did, the sort of dealers who could handle the Goebbels Gottafchen Goethe wouldn't have taken so much as a telephone call from the likes of me, Kevin Broom – and even if they would, I could never have afforded it – so I had no choice. That's why, one day in September, when Grublock called at ten o'clock on a Thursday night, back when I'd never even heard of the town of Roachmorton, I ran for my phone with toothpaste still dribbling from my mouth, knowing it had to be him.

'Fishy,' he said.

'Yes, Horace?'

'You remember that private investigator who's been doing a spot of work for me? Zroszak?'

'I think so.'

'He's supposed to check in every evening by telephone. But he's missed two nights now, without any warning. I've tried to call him myself and there's no answer. Drive over and see if he's all right.'

'To his office?'

'He doesn't have an office. He works out of his home, like a suburban palm-reader. It's in Camden. It'll only take you ten minutes.' He gave me the address.

'What's he doing for you?'

'You know perfectly well I can't tell you, Fishy. As contingently loyal as you may be to me, I know your real allegiance is to your internet friends. Unless by any chance you've heard of a fellow called Seth Roach?'

'I hadn't.'

'That's that, then. Off you go.'

I am often asked the question, 'Why would you become a collector of rare Nazi memorabilia unless you are yourself a secret Nazi?' Or, anyway, I expect I would often be asked that question, if anyone knew about my hobby beyond Grublock, my former cleaning lady Maria, and (as Grublock calls them) my 'internet friends'.

I'm not a secret Nazi. I feel sick when I think about what they did. So do you, probably. And if just the thought can provoke a spurious little shiver of survivor's guilt, imagine what it's like to pick up an SS dagger in your hand. I don't know of any experience like it: you feel as if you're doing something terribly wrong, and yet you know it can't be wrong because you're doing no harm to anyone. It's stupid and exhilarating and revelatory. Normally you can't get a proper look at your own conscience because it only ever comes out to gash you with its beak and you just want to do whatever you can to push it away; but put your conscience in the cage of this paradox, where it can slither and bark but it can't hurt you, and you can study it for as long as you wish. Most people don't truly know how they feel about the Holocaust

because they're worried that if they think about it too hard they'll find out they don't feel sad enough about the 6 million dead, but I'm an expert in my own soul.

I should also add that prices for Nazi memorabilia can go up 10 or 20 per cent a year. Try getting a return like that on the stock market. I trade on internet auction sites, exploiting the stupidity and laziness of dabblers who don't realise or don't care that they could get a better price from a real dealer. Like all capitalists, I treat the free market like a rich old grandmother, insisting I adore the bitch, calling her sprightly, but more than happy to exploit her lethargy and dementia for profit. If she tries to grope my business interests with her Invisible Hand I just give her a slap. In my day job I specialise in the Allied forces from the Second World War, but I also do the Crimea, the Great War and Vietnam, plus the occasional Japanese samurai sword. (I would never buy or sell any Nazi stuff merely for profit.) I used to work in accounting, but I hated taking instructions from clients, and more importantly I thought it would be convenient if my employment were coextensional with my vocation – this way I can justify the hours I spend at my computer scouring catalogues and auction listings and messageboards. And that pays my rent, but I never have the liquidity to make any really big deals, and often I have to save for months just to afford, say, one of Ilsa Koch's cigarette cases.

So, among collectors, I am a worm – and particularly so in comparison to Stuart, my best friend, who rivals even Grublock. Every once in a while a week will go by when I'm too angry to speak to Stuart because he has refused to bid for some irresistible treasure, letting it fly away to Tokyo, never to be seen again. He could afford almost anything: the only child of a hedge fund maestro, he supplemented his inheritance with a considerable legal settlement after an accident with an office coffee machine left him paralysed from the waist down. I often wonder whether I'd give up the use of

my own legs in exchange for, say, the gold fountain pen with which Adolf Hitler and Rudolf Hess wrote *Mein Kampf*, and I'm fairly that sure I would. It's not as if I leave the house very often, and Stuart always seems perfectly cheerful despite his disability (adding weight to my persistent suspicion that his paid carer will take extra for giving him hand jobs). Conversely, I also often wonder whether I'd give up such a prize in exchange for a cure for my trimethylaminuria; and, to tell the truth, as much as I hate my trimethylaminuria, I think I'd be willing not only to live with the disease, but to inflict it on Stuart too, if I could get my hands on that pen.

I mention all this only so that you can understand that I am not like Grublock. Not like him at all. Once, I heard my former employer explain his vast collection to an investor from Russia. 'In a sense, I suppose, I am a Nazi,' he said thoughtfully. 'I admire their ambition. Their courage. Their style, in the Nietzschean sense. They allowed no exceptions to their vision, and that is a lesson we should all learn. And of course I love the architecture, although sadly most of it only exists as blueprints.'

'But you also hate Jews?' said the Russian.

'Certainly not. As I said, I have great respect for certain aspects of Nazism, but not for their odd, embarrassing phobias. All that is irrational, and I'm no irrationalist. You can easily tell the collectors with those leanings. They have the books purportedly bound in human skin and the bars of soap purportedly made from human fat. Idiotic. It's almost impossible to tell tanned human skin from tanned pig skin, and the soap myth is simply that. But they so want it to be true that they will waste their money anyway. That is, if they're not deniers – in that case, you'll find none of the nasty stuff but probably some contemporaneous documentary "evidence" proving that Dachau was just an experimental vegetable garden, or some such rot.' He drained his gin and tonic. 'No, I certainly don't hate Jews. I feel sorry for the

Nazis' victims, in as much as it's possible to feel sorry for a mass of proletarian foreigners who died decades before one was born. And I admit that Hitler was probably mad, or evil, or an utter bastard, in as much as there is any difference between the three, and in as much as it makes any more sense to apply those words to a dead dictator than to apply them to an earthquake or a hurricane. And I think it was wrong to try to take over Europe, in as much as any one man's chosen political aims can be any more or less legitimate than any other's.'

The absurd thing, by the way, about Grublock's collection, which occupied the upper floor of his triplex penthouse, was that it outdid the Nazis themselves: never in the history of the Deutsches Reich would half so much finery have been gathered together in one room. It was more as if some Las Vegas entrepreneurs had started a casino in the eighties called Hitler's Palace. The centrepiece of the simulacrum was a glass case containing the Luftwaffe uniform of General Walter von Axhelm, including his Knight's Cross and his emerald-encrusted ornamental hunting dagger with a blade that belonged originally to Napoleon. Beside it was Grublock's most valuable treasure, a gorgeous porcelain falconry chest made for Hermann Goering. The rest of the room was crammed with more uniforms, medals, weapons, torture devices, ornaments and paintings, all lit by small dim spotlights. The walls were draped with long red silk banners with black swastikas on white circles. It was a wonderland. So when Grublock wouldn't even give me a hint of what Zroszak was doing for him, I could be sure that the detective was on the trail of something truly extraordinary.

I changed back out of my pyjamas and went downstairs to the car. Happy Fried Chicken, over which I live, was full of drunkards as usual – its popularity used to baffle me until I found out one of the cooks sells cannabis. It was a cold night, and as I drove over to a block of flats near the canal London

felt like a whispered conversation between street lights. I wanted to listen to the radio (there's a pirate station I like called Myth FM) but I could find nothing on my crippled car system but shreds of white noise. The London air must be heavy with static, I always think, the electromagnetism rising from cars and microwave ovens and telephone wires – another thin dead residue of the city, like rust and dust and soot – I have no doubt the rats and pigeons and cockroaches have learned to navigate by it.

When I got to Zroszak's flat I buzzed his intercom but no one answered, so I waited in the cold until a girl in a grey dress came out and I grabbed the outer door as it swung shut behind her. She wrinkled her nose as she went past. Upstairs, the door of 3B was slightly ajar. The lock was broken. I knocked, but again there was no answer, so I said 'Mr Zroszak?' and pushed the door open.

Inside the small, sparse flat I saw Zroszak kneeling behind a desk as if he were praying, with his head slumped forward so that his face was hidden. There was dried blood on the edge of the desk and a dark stain where it had dripped on to the carpet. As I moved closer I could see the greenish black veins bulging on his forehead, and smell the rot already coming on like an old dull blade being slowly sharpened. All this was quite familiar from the many television dramas I watch about glamorous forensic investigators – the ones which almost make one want to be murdered just to have such a sexy woman hold your lungs in her soft hands, the ones where they primp the crime scene like an ageing film actress, with powders and tweezers and respectful murmurs – but I wasn't a detective and I just wanted to turn around and run away.

Shaking, I dialled Grublock.

'Fishy.'

'He's dead,' I said.

'Oh, fucking hell. How?'

'Shot, I think. With a gun.'

'Fucking hell. Bloody Japanese, I bet. One of those awful little consortiums. They get up to vulgar nonsense like this all the time. Well, thank you, Fishy. Go home. I'll send someone over who knows what they're doing.'

I hung up. Looking around, I realised that the place had been ransacked. The drawers of Zroszak's filing cabinet were open but empty, and there were no books on any of the shelves. On the desk, next to the murdered man's head, were a sketchpad, a pencil, a rubber and a book called *How to Draw Dogs and Cats*. Apart from that, if there had ever been even the slightest trace of Zroszak's personality in his comfortless flat, it was missing now, like the moral of a story forgetfully told.

If I could find out anything important, I thought, Grublock would probably buy me a Panzer tank for Christmas. But even if Zroszak's killer or killers had missed anything, there was no way I could search for clues with Zroszak's body there. Just the thought had me running to the tiny kitchen for an ice cube to suck on – my late mother's trusted remedy for anxiety.

The light in Zroszak's freezer was broken, and the ice tray was stuck to the bottom surface. I pulled on it hard, and it came away with a little cough of frost. As it did so, something dropped to the tiled floor.

I bent down and picked it up. It was a sealed foil packet, like an astronaut might have for his tomato soup. I cut it open with my Swiss Army knife. Inside was a yellowed sheet of paper, folded in quarters. I smoothed it out on the kitchen table and glanced over the typewritten text. The letter was headed with the address of the Führerbau on Arcisstrasse in Munich, dated 4 October, 1936, and directed to somebody called Philip Erskine at a street in Clerkenwell. When I saw the signature of the sender, I scrabbled desperately for an ice cube.

Dear Doctor Erskine,

I have received gifts from popes, tycoons, and heads of state, but none have ever been so singular or unexpected as your kind tribute. It is a reminder that the conquests of the scientist are every bit as important to our future as the conquests of the soldier. I hope you will keep me informed of the progress of your work – perhaps one day the Third Reich will have a position for you. How is your German?

Fond regards,
Adolf Hitler
Reichschancellor

I spent the next half hour searching every inch of Zroszak's flat. His body didn't matter any more. But I found nothing.