



The Lady from Zagreb (A Bernie Gunther Novel)

By Philip Kerr

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From *New York Times*–bestselling author Philip Kerr, the much-anticipated return of Bernie Gunther in a series hailed by Malcolm Forbes as “the best crime novels around today.”

A beautiful actress, a rising star of the giant German film company UFA, now controlled by the Propaganda Ministry. The very clever, very dangerous Propaganda Minister—close confidant of Hitler, an ambitious schemer and flagrant libertine. And Bernie Gunther, former Berlin homicide bull, now forced to do favors for Joseph Goebbels at the Propaganda Minister’s command.

This time, the favor is personal. And this time, nothing is what it seems.

Set down amid the killing fields of Ustashe-controlled Croatia, Bernie finds himself in a world of mindless brutality where everyone has a hidden agenda. Perfect territory for a true cynic whose instinct is to trust no one.

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Editorial Review

Review

Praise for *The Lady From Zagreb*

“The great thing about these novels is they don’t feel researched, they feel lived in.”—Marilyn Stasio, *The New York Times Book Review*

“Kerr unspools a whopping good historical thriller here, brilliantly evoking not only wartime Berlin, but also Switzerland and Croatia, as well as portraying the German cinema in a time of peril. And, of course, there is the ever-fascinating Bernie, neither as tough nor as cynical as he pretends to be. Bernie Gunther may be the best-loved SS officer in the history of genre fiction (granted, he has little competition), and his fans will be eager to catch up.”—*Booklist* (starred review)

“Although he holds his own among other noted noir authors, such as Jonathan Rabb, David Downing, Alan Furst, and Joseph Kanon, Kerr’s magic lies in how he addresses core ethical questions. What is the right conduct while operating within the filthy underbelly of Nazi Germany? How could Kerr’s sardonic, tough-talking, anti-Nazi PI survive in a criminal state with his moral integrity and honor intact? Noir devotees, immerse yourselves in the cynical, amoral angst Kerr skillfully portrays.”—*Library Journal* (starred review)

“Superlative . . . Kerr combines a murder mystery that Raymond Chandler could have devised with a searing look at the inhumanity of the Nazis and their allies, presented from a unique perspective.”—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

“Kerr has become a master at concocting gripping, morally hazy World War II-era crime thrillers full of nuanced players.”—*Kirkus Reviews*

Praise for Philip Kerr

“Kerr is the only bona fide heir to Raymond Chandler.” —Jonathan Ames, *Salon*

“Bernie isn’t one of those detectives who gets to solve crimes and put things right. Instead, he just tries to behave decently in a world where the serial killers run the governments and history itself may be the biggest crime of all.” —John Powers, NPR’s “Fresh Air”

“On any continent, in any decade, no one does melancholy better than Bernie Gunther, and melancholy, after all, is the hard-boiled mystery fan’s emotion of choice.” —*Booklist*

About the Author

Philip Kerr is the author of nine widely acclaimed Bernie Gunther novels, most recently *The Man Without Breath*. *Field Gray*, the seventh in the series, was a finalist for the 2012 Mystery Writers of America Edgar Award for Best Novel. Kerr has also been a finalist for the Shamus Award for Best Hardcover Fiction and he won the British Crime Writers Association’s Ellis Peters Award for Historical Crime Fiction. Under the name P. B. Kerr, he is the author of the much-loved young adult series *Children of the Lamp*. He lives in London.

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Chapter 1.

I awoke from a long but agitated sleep to a world that was black and white but mostly black, with silver piping. I'd stolen some Luminal from General Heydrich's country house outside Prague to help me sleep. He didn't need it for the simple reason that he was dead and I certainly wouldn't have stolen it from him otherwise. But pills were even harder to get than booze which, like everything else, was in short supply and I needed them because as an officer in the SD I was a part of the horror now, much more than Heydrich. He was dead, buried the month before with full military honors with a clove of garlic in his mouth and a stake through his heart. He was well out of it, his last thoughts of revenge upon his Czech assassins still suspended inside his elongated El Greco head like so much frozen gray mud and there was no more harm he could do anyone. But in my wretched efforts to stay alive at almost any cost I could still hurt and be hurt in my turn, and as long as death's black barrel organ was playing it seemed I would have to dance to the cheerless, doom-filled tune that was turning inexorably on the drum, like some liveried monkey with a terrified rictus on its face and a tin cup in its hand. That didn't make me unusual; just German.

Berlin had a haunted look that summer, as if behind every tree and around each street corner was a screaming skull or some wide-eyed and shape-shifting *alp*. Sometimes when I woke in my bed at the flat in Fasanenstrasse, soaked with sweat, it was as if I'd had some demon sitting on my chest, crushing the breath out of me and, in my rush to draw a breath and check that I was still alive, I often heard myself cry out and reach to grab at the sour air I had exhaled during the day, which was when I slept. And usually I lit a cigarette with the alacrity of someone who needed the tobacco smoke to breathe a little more comfortably and to help overcome the omnipresent taste of mass murder and human decay that stayed in my mouth like an old and rotten tooth.

The summer sunshine brought no joy. It seemed to exercise a sinister effect, making Berliners irritable with the broiling heat because there was nothing but water to drink, and reminding them always of how much hotter it probably was on the dry steppes of Russia and Ukraine, where our boys were now fighting a battle that already looked like much more than we had bargained for. The late afternoon sun cast long shadows in the tenement streets around Alexanderplatz and played tricks on your eyes, so that the phosphenes on your retinas - the after-effects of the mercilessly bright light - seemed to become the greenish auras of so many dead men. It was in the shadows where I belonged and where I felt comfortable, like an old spider that simply wants to be left alone. Only there wasn't much chance of that. It always paid to be careful what you were good at in Germany. Once I'd been a good detective in Kripo, but that was a while ago, before the criminals wore smart gray uniforms and nearly everyone locked up was innocent. Being a Berlin cop in 1942 was a little like putting down mousetraps in a cage full of tigers.

On Heydrich's orders I'd been working nights at the police praesidium on Alexanderplatz, which suited me just fine. There was no proper police work to speak of but I had little or no appetite for the company of my Nazi colleagues or their callous conversation. The Murder Commission, what remained of it - which existed to investigate homicides - left me to my own devices, like a forgotten prisoner whose face meant death for anyone unwise enough to catch a glimpse of it. I was none too fond of it myself. Unlike Hamburg and Bremen, there were no night-time air-raids to speak of, which left the city sepulchrally quiet, so very different from the Berlin of the Weimar years when it had been the noisiest and most exciting city on earth. All that neon, all that jazz, and more especially all that freedom when nothing was hidden and nobody had to hide who or what they were - it was hard to believe things had ever been like that. But Weimar Berlin had suited me better. The Weimar Republic had been the most democratic of democracies and yet, like all great democracies, it had been a little out of control. Prior to 1933, anything was permitted since as Socrates learned to his cost, the true nature of democracy is to encourage corruption and excess in all its forms. But the corruption and excesses of Weimar were still preferable to the Biblical abominations now perpetrated in the name of the Nuremberg Laws. I don't think I ever knew what mortal sin really meant until I lived in Nazi

Germany.

Sometimes, when I stared out of my office window at night I caught sight of my own reflection staring back at me – the same but different, like another ill-defined version of myself, a darker alter-ego, my evil twin or perhaps a harbinger of death. Now and then I heard this ghostly, etiolated double speak sneeringly to me: “Tell me, Gunther, just what will you have to do and whose arse will you kiss to save your miserable skin today?”

It was a good question.

From my office eyrie in the east corner tower of police headquarters I could more often hear the sound of steam trains pulling in and out of the station on Alexanderplatz. You could just see the roof – what was left of it – of the old orthodox synagogue on Kaiser-Strasse, which I think had been there since before the Franco-Prussian war and was one of the largest synagogues in Germany, with as many as eighteen-hundred worshippers. Which is to say, Jews. The Kaiser-Strasse synagogue was on a beat I’d patrolled as a young Schupo in the early twenties.

Sometimes I would chat to some of the boys who attended the Jewish Boys’ School and who used to go trainspotting at the station. Once, another uniformed copper saw me talking to those boys and asked, “what do you find to talk about with these Jews, anyway?” And I’d replied that they were just children and that we had talked about what you talk about with any other children. Of course, all that was before I found out that I had a trickle of Jew blood myself. Still, maybe it explains why I was nice to them. But I prefer to think it doesn’t explain very much at all.

It had been a while since I’d seen any Jewish boys on Kaiser-Strasse. Since the beginning of June they’d been deporting Berlin’s Jews from a transit camp at Grosse Hamburger Strasse to destinations somewhere in the east, although it was becoming better known that the destinations were more final than some nebulous compass-point. Mostly the deportations were made at night when there was no one around to see it done but one morning, at about five a.m., when I was checking out a pretty theft at Anhalter Station, I saw about fifty elderly Jews being loaded into closed cars on an impatient train. They looked like something Pieter Brueghel might have painted back in a time when Europe was a much more barbarous place than it is now – when kings and emperors committed their black crimes in the open light of day, and not at a time when no one was yet out of bed to see them. The cars didn’t seem so bad but by then I had a pretty good idea of what was going to happen to those Jews, which I expect was more than they did otherwise I can’t imagine they’d ever have boarded those trains.

I was on the point of being moved along by an old Berlin Schupo until I flashed him my beer-token and told him to go and fuck himself.

“Sorry sir,” he said, touching his leather shako smartly, “I didn’t know you was RSHA.”

“Where’s this lot headed?” I asked.

“Somewhere in Bohemia. Thereisinstadt, I think they said it’s called. You feel almost sorry for them, don’t you? But I reckon it’s better for them and for us, really. I mean, us Germans. They’ll have a better life there, living among their own in a new town, won’t they?”

“Not in Thereisinstadt they won’t,” I told him. “I’ve just got back from Bohemia.” And then I told him all I knew about the place and a bit more besides, about what was happening in Russia and Ukraine. The look of

horror on the man's florid face was almost worth the risk I took in telling him the unvarnished and unpalatable truth.

"You can't be serious," he said.

"Oh, but I am. It's fact that we're systematically murdering people by the thousands out there, in the swamps east of Poland. I know. I've seen it for myself. And by 'we' I mean us, the police. The RSHA. It's us that's doing the murdering."

The Schupo blinked hard and looked as if I'd said something incomprehensible. "It can't be true, what you just said, sir. Surely you're joking."

"I'm not joking. What I just told you is the one true thing you'll probably hear today. Just ask around, only try to do it discretely. People don't like talking about this, for obvious reasons. You could get into trouble. We both could. I'm telling you, those Jews are on a slow train to hell. And so are we."

I walked away smiling sadistically to myself; in Nazi Germany truth makes a powerful weapon. But it was one of those RSHA murderers who brought me in from the cold. An Austrian, Ernst Kaltenbrunner was rumored to be the next chief of the Reich Main Office for Security – the RSHA - but the same rumor said that his appointment could not be approved by Hitler until the man had finished drying out at a sanatorium in Chur, Switzerland. This left Kripo in the forensically capable if thoroughly murderous hands of General Arthur Nebe who, until the previous November, had commanded SS Operation Group B in Byelorussia. Group B was now commanded by someone else but if what was bruited about the Alex was correct – and I had good reason to think it probably was – Nebe's men had killed more than forty-five thousand people before he finally earned his ticket back to Berlin.

Forty-five thousand. A number like that was hard to comprehend in the context of murder.

Berlin's Sportpalast, where the Nazis held some of their rallies, had a capacity of fourteen thousand. Three whole Sportpalasts full of people who were there to cheer a speech by Goebbels. That's what forty-five thousand looked like. Except none of those murdered had cheered, of course.

I wondered what Nebe told his wife, Elise and his daughter, Gisela about what he'd been doing out in Ivan's swamps. Gisela was a beautiful young woman of seventeen now and I knew Arthur doted on her. She was intelligent, too. Did she ever ask him about his work in the SS? Or did she see something elusive in her father's fox-like eyes and then just talk about something else, the way people used to do when the subject of the Great War had come up in conversation. I never knew anyone who was comfortable talking about that, certainly not me. If you hadn't been in the trenches there was no point in expecting anyone even to imagine what it was like. Not that Arthur Nebe had anything to feel ashamed about back then; as a young lieutenant in his pioneer battalion with the 17th Army (1st West Prussian) Corps on the eastern front, he'd been gassed twice and won a first class Iron Cross. Nebe was none too fond of the Russians as a result but it was unthinkable that he would ever have told his family that he'd spent the summer of 1941 murdering forty-five thousand Jews. But Nebe knew that I knew and somehow he could still look me in the eye; and while we didn't talk about it, what was surprising to me more than him was the fact that I could tolerate his company, just about. I figured that if I could work for Heydrich I could work for anyone. I wouldn't say we were ever friends, Nebe and me. We got along all right although I never understood how someone who had plotted against Hitler as early as 1938 could have become a mass-murderer with such apparent equanimity. Nebe had tried to explain this, when we were in Minsk. He'd told me that he needed to keep his remarkable nose clean long enough for him and his friends to get another opportunity to kill Hitler; I just didn't see how that

justified the murders of forty-five thousand Jews. I didn't understand it then and I don't understand now.

At Nebe's suggestion we met for Sunday lunch in a private room at Wirtshaus Moorlake, a little southwest of Pfauensinsel, on the Wannsee. With an attractive beer garden and an orchestra it looked more Bavarian than Prussian and was very popular with Berliners in the summer. This summer was no exception. It was a beautiful day and neither of us was wearing a uniform. Nebe was dressed in a three piece, belt-back Knickerbocker suit made of light gray hound's-tooth tweed, with button pockets and peak lapels. With his light gray stockings and polished brown brogues, he looked like he was planning to shoot something with feathers, which would certainly have made a welcome change. I was wearing my summer suit, which was the same three-piece, pin-stripe, navy suit I wore in winter except that I had neglected to wear the vest as a concession to the warmer weather; I looked as sharp as a seagull's feather and I didn't care who knew it. We ate lake trout with potatoes and strawberries with cream, and enjoyed two bottles of good Mosel. After lunch we took a longish sort of boat or shell on the water. Because of my extensive naval experience Nebe let me row of course, although it might have had as much to do with me being a captain and him a general; and while I applied myself to the oars he smoked a large Havana cigar and stared up at an unblemished Prussian blue sky as if he didn't have a care in the world. Perhaps he didn't. Conscience was a luxury that few officers in the SS and SD could afford. The Wannsee looked like an impressionist painting of some idyllic scene on the River Seine at the turn of the century, the kind that looks like the picture is suffering from a severe case of spots.

There were canoes and out-rigged shells, sailing boats, and sloops, but no boats that required petrol: petrol was even harder to get than pills and booze. There were plenty of young women around, too - which was one of the reasons Nebe liked it there - but no young men; they were all in uniform and probably fighting for their lives in some Russian shellhole. The women in the long narrow shells wore white singlets and the briefest of shorts, which were an improvement on corsets and French bustles because they showed off their breasts and behinds to anyone like me who was interested in that kind of thing; they were tanned and vigorous and sometimes flirtatious, too; they were only human after all and craved male attention almost as much as I craved the chance to give it to them. Some of them rowed alongside us for a while and made conversation until they realized just how old we were; I was in my forties and I think Nebe must have been almost fifty. But there was one girl who took my eye. I recognized her as someone who lived not so far away from me. I knew her name was Kirsten and she was a school teacher at the Fichte Gymnasium on Emser Strasse. Seeing her row I resolved to see a little more of Emser Strasse and perhaps, by some happy accident, her. After she and her lithe companions pushed off I kept an eye on their boat, just in case; you never know when a beautiful girl is going to fall in the water and need rescuing.

Another reason Nebe liked it on the Wannsee was because you could be absolutely sure that no one was eavesdropping on your conversation. Ever since September thirty-eight and the failed Oster coup, of which he'd been an important part, Nebe had suspected that he was suspected, of something; but he always spoke very freely with me, if only because he knew I was held in even greater suspicion than he was. I was the best kind of friend anyone like Nebe could ever have had; the kind of friend you could and would give up to the Gestapo without a second's thought if it meant saving your own skin.

"Thanks for lunch," I said. "It's been a while since I bent the elbow for something as decent as that Mosel."

"What's the point in being head of Kripo if you can't get an extra supply of food and drink coupons?" he said.

Coupons were needed for Germany's rationing system, which seemed increasingly draconian, especially if you were a Jew.

“Mind you, what we ate, it was all local stuff,” he said. “Lake trout, potatoes, strawberries. If you can’t get that in Berlin during the summer then we might as well surrender now. Life wouldn’t be worth living.” He sighed and puffed a cloud of cigar smoke into the sky above his silver gray head. “You know, sometimes I come here and take a boat out on my own, slip the mooring and then just drift across the lake without a thought to where I’m going.”

“There is nowhere to go. Not on this lake.”

“You make it sound like there’s something wrong with that, Bernie. But this is the nature of lakes. They’re for looking at and enjoying, not for anything as practical as what you imply.”

I shrugged, lifted the oars and looked over the side of the boat into the warm water. “Whenever I’m on a lake, like this one, it’s not long before I start to wonder what’s underneath the surface. What undiscovered crimes lie hidden in the depths? Who’s down there at the bottom wearing a pair of iron jackboots? If there’s a Jewish U-boat hiding from the Nazis, perhaps. Or some lefty who got put there by the Freikorps back in the twenties.”

Nebe laughed. “Ever the detective. And you wonder why you continue to be useful to our masters.”

“Is that why we’re here? So you can flatter me with an assurance of my utility?”

“It might be.”

“I fear my days of being useful to anyone are long past, Arthur.”

“As usual, you underestimate yourself, Bernie. You know, I always think of you as a bit like one of those people’s cars designed by Dr. Porsche. A little blunt, perhaps, but cheap to run and very effective. Built to last, as well, to the point of being almost indestructible.”

“Right now, my engine could use some air-cooling,” I said resting on the oars. “It’s hot.”

Nebe puffed his cigar and then allowed one hand to drag in the cool water. “What do you do, Bernie? When you want to get away from it all? When you want to forget about everything?”

“It takes a while to forget everything, Arthur. Especially in Berlin. Believe me, I’ve tried. I’ve got an awful feeling it’s going to take the rest of my life to forget as much as that.”

Nebe nodded. “You’re wrong, you know. It’s easy to forget if you put your mind to it.”

“How do *you* manage it?”

“By having a certain view of the world. That’s a concept that’s familiar to all Germans, surely. My father was a teacher and he used to say, ‘find out what you believe in, Arthur, what your place in it is, and then stick to that. Use that view of the world to order your life, no matter what’. And what I’ve concluded is this: life is all a matter of chance. That’s the way I look at things. If it hadn’t been me out there in Minsk, in charge of Group B, it would have been someone else. That bastard Erich Naumann, probably. He’s the swine who took over from me. But sometimes I think that I was never really there. At least not the real me. I have very little memory of it. No, I don’t.

“You know, back in 1919, I tried to get a job at Siemens selling Osram light bulbs. I even tried to become a fireman. Well, you know what it was like back then. Any kind of a job looked like it was worth having. But it wasn’t meant to be. The only place that would have me after I left the army was Kripo. That’s what I’m talking about. What is it about life that takes a man one way, selling light bulbs or putting out fires, or that takes the same man in quite another way so that he becomes a state executioner?”

“Is that what you call it?”

“Why not? I didn’t wear a tall hat, it’s true, but the job was the same. The fact of the matter is that quite often these things have very little to do with the man himself. I didn’t end up in Minsk because I’m a bad man, Bernie. I sincerely believe that. It was an accident that I was ever there at all. That’s the way I look at it. I’m the same man I always was. It’s just fate that took me into the police instead of the Berlin fire department. The same fate that killed all those Jews. Life is nothing but a random series of events. There’s no logic to anything that happens, Bernie. Sometimes I think that’s your real problem. You keep looking for some sort of meaning in things, but there isn’t any. Never was. All of that was a simple category mistake. And trying to solve things doesn’t solve anything at all. After what you’ve seen surely you know that by now.”

“Thanks for the philosophy seminar. I think I’m beginning to.”

“You should thank me. I’m here to do you a favor.”

“You don’t look like a man who’s carrying a gun, Arthur.”

“No really, I am. I’ve got you a job with the War Crimes Bureau at the Bendlerblock, starting in September.”

I laughed. “Is that a joke?”

“Yes, it is rather amusing, when you think about it,” admitted Nebe. “Me, finding a job for you there of all places. But I’m perfectly serious, Bernie. This is a good deal for you. It gets you out of the Alex and into somewhere your skills will be properly appreciated. You’re still SD, there’s not much I can do about that. But according to Judge Goldsches, to whom you will report, your uniform and investigative experience will open a few investigative doors that remain closed to the people who currently work there. Von this and von that lawyers most of them, the wing-collar kind whose scars were earned in university societies rather than on the battlefield. Hell, you’ll even make more money.” He laughed. “Well, don’t you see? I’m trying to make you respectable again, my friend. Semi-respectable, anyway. Who knows, you might even make enough to afford a new suit.”

“You’re serious, aren’t you?”

“Of course. You don’t think I’d waste my time lunching you without a damn good reason. I’d have brought a nice girl here, or even a girl who isn’t so nice, not a stinger like you. You can say thank you now.”

“Thank you.”

“So, now that I’ve done you a favor. I want you to do something for me in return.”

“In return? Perhaps you’ve forgotten our dirty weekend in Prague, Arthur. It was you who asked me to investigate Heydrich’s death, wasn’t it? Less than a month ago? You didn’t like my conclusions. When we met and had a conversation at the Esplanade Hotel you told me we never had that conversation. I never did

collect on that favor.”

“That was a favor to us both, Bernie. You and me.” Nebe started to scratch the eczema on the backs of his hands; it was a sign he was beginning to get irritable. “This is different. This is something that even you can do without causing trouble.”

“Which makes me wonder if I’m the right person to do it.”

He put the cigar in his mouth and scratched some more as if there might be a better solution to his problem under the skin. The boat turned slowly in a circle so that we were pointing in the direction we had just come; I was used to that feeling. My whole life had been going in a circle since 1939.

“Is this something personal, Arthur? Or is this what we detectives laughingly call, ‘work’?”

“I’ll tell you if you’ll just shut your beer hole for a minute. I don’t know. How did someone with a mouth like yours manage to stay alive for so long?”

“I’ve asked myself the same question.”

“It’s work, all right? Something for which you’re uniquely qualified, as it happens.”

“You know me, I’m uniquely qualified for all sorts of jobs it seems most other men wouldn’t touch with a pair of oily pliers.”

“You’ll remember the International Criminal Police Commission,” he said.

“You don’t mean to say that it still exists?”

“I’m the acting president,” Nebe said bitterly. “And if you make a joke about making a gardener out of a billy-goat, I will shoot you.”

“I’m just a little surprised that’s all.”

“As you may know, it was based in Vienna until 1940, when Heydrich decided that it should be headquartered here, in Berlin.”

Nebe pointed west, across the lake to a bridge across the Havel that was just a little way south of the Swedish Pavilion.

“Over there, as a matter of fact. With him in charge of course. It was just another neon-lit showcase for the Reinhard Heydrich Show, and I had hoped that now the bastard’s dead, we might use that as an excuse to wind up the IKPK, which has outlived any usefulness it ever might have had. But Himmler is of a different opinion and wants the conference to go ahead. Yes, that’s right - there’s a conference in a week or two’s time. The invitations to all the various European police chiefs had already gone out before Heydrich was murdered. So we’re stuck with it.”

“But there’s a war on,” I objected. “Who the hell is going to come, Arthur?”

“You’d be surprised. The French Sûreté, of course. They love a good feast and any chance to air their opinions. The Swedes. The Danes. The Spanish. The Italians. The Romanians. Even the Swiss are coming.

And the Gestapo, of course. We mustn't forget them. Frankly, it's almost everyone except the British. Oh, there's no shortage of delegates, I can assure you. The trouble is that I've been given the task of organizing a program of speakers. And I'm scratching around for some names."

"Oh, no. You don't mean."

"I do mean. It's all hands on deck for this one, I'm afraid. I thought you might talk about how you caught Gormann, the strangler. Even outside Germany that's a famous case. Forty minutes if you can manage it."

"That's not scratching, Arthur. That's scraping. Gormann was almost fifteen years ago. Look, there must be someone else in your new police building on Werderscher Markt."

"Of course, there is. Commissioner Lüdtkke is already drafted in. And before you suggest them so are Kurt Daluege and Bernhard Wehner. But we're still a couple of speakers short for a conference that lasts for two whole days."

"What about Otto Steinäusl? He used to be the IKPK president, didn't he?"

"Died of TB, in Vienna, year before last."

"That other fellow in Prague. Heinz Pannwitz."

"He's a thug, Bernie. I doubt he could speak for five minutes before he used a swear word or started beating the lectern with a cosh."

"Schellenberg."

"Too secretive. And much too aloof."

"All right, what about that fellow who caught Ogorzow – the S-Bahn murderer? That was only last year. Heuser, Georg. That's the fellow you should get."

"Heuser is the head of Gestapo, in Minsk," said Nebe. "Besides, since Heuser caught Ogorzow, Lüdtkke is terribly jealous of him. That's why he's going to stay in Minsk for the time being. No, you're it, I'm afraid."

"Stopgap Lüdtkke's not exactly fond of me, either. You are aware of that."

"He'll damn well do what I tell him. Besides, there's no one who's jealous of you, Bernie. Least of all Lüdtkke. You're no threat to anyone. Not anymore. Your career is going nowhere. You could have been a general now, like me, if you'd played your cards right."

I shrugged. "Believe me, I'm a disappointment to myself most of all. But I'm not a speaker, Arthur. Sure, I've handled a few press conferences in my time, however they were nothing like what you're asking. I'll be terrible. My idea of public speaking is to shout for a beer from the back of the bar."

Nebe grinned and tried to puff his Havana back into life; it took a bit of doing but he finally managed to get the cigar going. I could tell he was thinking of me while he went about it.

"I'm counting on you being crap," he said. "In fact, I expect every one of our speakers will be bloody awful."

I'm hoping the whole IKPK conference is so fucking boring that we'll never have to do another one again. It's ridiculous talking about international crime while the Nazis are busy committing the international crime of the century."

"First time I've ever heard you call it that, Arthur."

"I said it to you, so it doesn't count."

"Suppose I say something out of turn? Something to embarrass you. I mean, just think who'll be there. The last time I met Himmler he kicked me on the shin."

"I remember that." Nebe grinned. "It was priceless." He shook his head. "No, you needn't worry about putting your foot in the German butter. When you've written your speech you'll have to submit the whole text to the Ministry for Propaganda and National Enlightenment. They'll put it into proper, politically correct German. State Secretary Gutterer has agreed to cast his eye over everyone's speeches. He's SS anyway so there shouldn't be a problem between our departments. It's in his interest if everyone sounds even duller than him."

"I feel reassured already. Jesus, what a farce. Is Chaplin speaking too?"

Nebe shook his head. "You know one day I think someone really will shoot you. And that will be goodbye Bernie Gunther."

"Nothing says goodbye quite like a bullet from a nine millimetre Walther."

In the distance, at the shimmering edge of the lake, I could just about make out the schoolteacher, Kirsten. She and her shapely friends were now disembarking at the jetty in front of the Swedish Pavilion. I collected the oars and started to row again only this time I was putting my back into it. Nebe hadn't asked and I didn't tell him but I like pretty girls. That's my world view.

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