

## **Black Crows: A Study of Humanity**

Hans Lemke. Matriculation with Honours. Doctorate in Fine Arts. Author of two books, of which his second, 'Contemplation and Allegory: Caspar Friedrich and the German Romantic Movement', he is particularly proud. Married, with one child. Quiet, peaceful and attentive, with an appreciation for artistic detail.

Hans stands at the railway station. He is dressed in ordinary clothes: practical leather work boots; grey woollen trousers; grey woollen shirt; warm tweed jacket and matching cap. There are mud stains on his shoes and trousers and random threads have pulled on his jacket: there is a hole near his coat pocket, as though snagged by a troublesome briar patch. A workman's outfit, complete with callused hands and sunburnt face.

Around him people wait for the train. A passenger train, not the service train on which he has just arrived. Mothers with children are sitting on the benches, standing waiting near the entrance. Old men, also, and young boys and groups of friends, the usual cross-section of everyday society. Hans stands alone, but not alone. Near him stand another fifteen men, also dressed in everyday clothing, boots, slacks, jackets. Some are laughing, some are checking their baggage. All have arrived with him; all are looking forward with a certain sense of purpose and determination. Hans has encouraged it so.

At ten fifteen he takes out his watch. It is an antique pocket watch which he has inherited from his grandfather; he checks its accuracy with the clock above the platform. There are geraniums in pots hanging from that clock, and a film of black

soot covering its face, but it, also, reads ten fifteen exactly. He nods and smiles. The fatherland has extended its ideals, even here.

He snaps his watch closed, and returns it to his pocket. Next he picks up his suitcase; he walks the six short steps to the station's exit. There is a man stationed there with uniform and rifle. Behind him is a notice, posted in three languages. The time reads half five, the date is today. It seems quite ordinary; it has been posted many days previously. Hans sees it, and is pleased: all intended have been informed.

He gestures to the troop behind him, and snaps a quick, efficient order. They follow, quickly, efficiently. Orders are to be completed by December: there are only a few months left. Hans thinks of his wife – slim, pretty, blonde-haired, blue-eyed – and hopes to be home by Christmas. It will be a traditional one: children, church and cooking. She will make him gluhwein, and pork with apples.

He steps out from the exit and into the sunlight of the morning. The town is small and quiet; the central square is filled with stalls and vendors of market day. He thinks to see the people more afraid – he knows the exact number of men who marched through only days ago – but the scene is mundanely ordinary. Under white awnings to the west are crates of brushed potatoes, turnips, cabbages, carrots. Small stalls hang various bratwurst from string, cloves of garlic, bunches of onions and shallots. People barter in their native language, laughter, anger, and the usual gossip, buzzing vigorously. Hans does not understand any of it. His second-in-command will: Kurt is proficient in all the Slavic languages.

He nods a greeting to some of the old men sitting by the platz. They are looking – staring – at him, assessing him. His nod is friendly, his accompanying smile also. It wisely conveys deference, not presumption: their information will be highly valuable. They will know where to look, if there are problems. It is their job,

undoubtedly, to sit on the same street bench every day and keep their crusty old eyes on everyone in their town.

They notice, and nod, approvingly. One man raises his walking stick and curves his gnarled hands around its handle, another flicks his cap back to get a better look. Hans gestures to his second-in-command to go and speak with them; he continues walking. A hundred feet farther along, he turns a corner to the right. It is the street that leads to the informant's home, their sympathetic contact in the town. He knows exactly which building it is, though he has never visited it before. He has studied the layout of the town, and memorised all the populous – and less populous – places in the area.

He steps up the three small steps and raps on the door. An elderly woman opens it; there are pince-nez glasses on her nose and a knitted cardigan around her shoulders. She smiles at him, and asks a question. He does not understand; he does not worry. Instead, he unfolds a sheet of paper from his pocket and presents it – there is the official police stamp and nationalist insignia. She takes it, and reads it, and smiles.

“Welcome,” she says, in his language.

She beckons him inside; he follows, his suitcase still firmly clasped in his hand. The house seems very homely, with an antique sideboard adorned with fine china and hand-embroidered doilies standing in the entrance hall. Everything is unperturbed.

“We are very pleased to see you,” she says. “Such a troublesome infestation we have - they just will not leave.”

He nods. “We plan to have all the land free. Hatred cannot fester.” His face is earnest; he believes in what he does.

She beams. He stands. He waits. She agrees.

“But of course,” she finally declares, “you must be tired. Let me offer you something first – coffee, if you would like.”

“Danke,” he responds. He does not think to refuse, though there has been an embargo on real coffee for some time. He knows from experience that people are more loquacious over drinks: coffee, then, is only a small sacrifice to make.

“Wonderful!” She smiles, and invites him into the small front room of the house. One upholstered chair stands forlornly in the middle. He sits; she goes to the kitchen to prepare the drinks. She bustles in a reassuringly familiar way, just as his grandmother did when he was a child.

He looks around his surroundings. A tiled stove stands in the corner, around which cluster two wooden chairs and table. The left wall hangs a formal photograph of the woman’s family: her husband, whom he presumes he will meet later; her two grown daughters and son, each with children in their arms. All are standing formally, not smiling; all are dressed in their Sunday best. On the right wall is a reproduction of a famous painting. He recognises it: not German, he knows, but still distinctive nonetheless. A farmyard, buildings, and a railing fence in the foreground. The farmscape is covered in snow; he remembers studying it in his first year of university, how Monet had used the yellow and blue and grey to give definition to the otherwise Aryan snow. On the fence is a single black raven – or was it a crow? – small and almost insignificant when compared to its surroundings, but so distinctive it has given title to the painting.

He turns his head away from it, and smiles as the lady returns. She places a tray down on the table; it holds a cup and saucer, a plate of fresh pyrohy and a pot, presumably with the coffee in it – all are enamel, and old.

Hans picks up one of the sweet dumplings, and carefully holds it in his hand.

“Thank you. This will be fine.”

“Unfortunately,” she says, “I have no special silverware. But I hope you can procure something better for us. Maybe this afternoon?” There is a calculating gleam in her eyes.

Afternoon in the countryside. Hans is standing by a copse of trees; the sun is low in the sky but Hans knows there is at least another hour of sunlight left in the day.

Maybe two. Beside him stand two men, Kurt, his second-in-command, and an old man, the local gendarme and sympathetic informant. Hans has only just met him; it was his wife that served him coffee. Kurt met him during the afternoon, on his sweep to gather any for deportation. He is a wizened old man, with a cracked front tooth and a stubble of growth – white growth – around his face. He is talking, and Kurt is translating,

“He says ‘Black crows. Black crows invaded our country. Many years ago.’”

He points towards them, the people sitting by the trees, jabs his finger right at them.

Hans nods. “Only these?” he asks. He looks at the small group before him, the object of the pointing. “There are no more?”

“Aye,” the man answers, through Kurt’s quick, efficient translation. “I beat ‘em out as best I could.” He emphasises his sentence by reaching into his pocket and pulling out a small tin of tobacco. He opens the tin and dips his finger into the tightly-packed brown shreds. These he pinches out, placing a small roll inside his cheek above his teeth; there is intense hatred in the eyes above.

“We’ll take care of them,” Hans promises, and counts the group before him.

There are only forty-six. Quite a small number. But, he supposes, the town is quite a

small community. More than that would not have been allowed to roost. Where he is going tomorrow, where his men are going tomorrow, he expects many more.

“Please remember to detail everything to Kurt here. He will be most attentive.” From the corner of his eye he sees Kurt nod, and produce a small notepad and pen. Ever the person scrupulous with records and files. Hans perhaps wonders, not for the first time, if Kurt’s previous job had been in the civil service. He does not know, but it is the common way.

He steps away as the man begins to recite names and places. He inspects the ground around him. It has rained recently, the ground is slightly muddy. The digging will be difficult; a small grimace crosses his face. It is only momentary: his men will do the digging, or, better yet, the other group standing by the trees. Shovels lie in a heap by a small heather bush, another shovel is being used as a lean-to by one of his men. He is a young man, full of swagger and bravado. Hans wonders how long that attitude will last.

He turns away. He does not think to rebuke his man’s bravado. Rather, he thinks it will serve as a good example. He knows how hard it is to retain morale in the group: not all are zealous men, rather, many are married with children, like himself. They carry photos and memories of loved ones also.

He gestures to the other men; they jump to attention. “The usual,” he orders, and points to the ground. “Ten feet by thirty. At least six feet deep. Have the men and boys do the digging. But have them strip first. The women and children also.” His gaze does not linger on the young women or children who jump at his voice, or cringe closer into themselves. Instead, he watches as his men gesture to the group to follow orders. Images of sunken cheekbones give way to exposed ribs as the men undress.

The harvests have been lean, or, more appropriately, the group has been ostracised. As he would expect in such a town.

A few men in the group – including a man perhaps even more old and infirm than the wizened old informant – have shovels thrust in their hands and bayonets pointed in their backs, pushing them brusquely towards the area of ground Hans has indicated. His other men remain guarding the women and children, fingers cocked at the ready. Every precaution is made, though it seems rather unnecessary: each member of the small group is quiet and subdued, accepting the inevitable.

The first sod is turned and then the second. Just as Hans thought, the ground is wet and sticky. The soil has turned into heavy clay and is difficult to dig. His men have to shout continually to keep the others working; the infirm man cannot breathe and wheezes continually. An oddly melodic rhythm is created: shout, dig, wheeze, shout, dig, wheeze. Hans thinks to hear birdsong in counterpoint and is oddly disappointed when he does not.

He is not surprised. Crows do not sing, per se.

He remains standing, surveying. Tufts of grass quickly give way to mud and stones. On his side a neat right angle is dug into the trench; mud is piled high on the other side, to be filled in later. His men will do it, or other sympathetic townsfolk, those who are glad his men have come. A shovel misses the pile and sends its load towards him instead. Mud splatters on his boots; he glances down.

More mud, he thinks, annoyed.

He takes out his watch and checks the time. Still early. Time enough to return for the evening meal, pork with potatoes and sauerkraut. The sympathetic woman has promised a special honeyed beer with her invitation, so maybe he can avoid the coffee. A cool evening breeze has started, the women are coldly huddling together.

Their jackets lie in a pile to their left, one of his men is sorting it for any valuables.

These will be returned to headquarters, or distributed amongst the townsfolk: they will appreciate it.

He stretches his head from right to left, and back and forth, tired, waiting. The digging is almost finished; so is the wheezing. He looks around, checking that they remain undisturbed. They do. Hans congratulates himself on another excellent choice of location: they are some distance from a road, and the copse will absorb much of the sound. But then, Hans presumes, the villagers will not venture out this evening. They know that he and his men have arrived; they have no wish to interrupt. In fact, they may rejoice. Hans will probably read a book.

The sun is touching the horizon as the men finish digging. Kurt is finished too; the notepad and pen have returned to their usual place in his coat's breast pocket. Hans gestures to his men to retrieve the shovels from the workers; no sense in having them get out of the trench if they are only to go back in.

He looks over once more to the remaining group. They are still quiet, subdued, accepting. All are dark-haired and olive-skinned, as distinctively unwanted and inferior as that oil crow in that pristine landscape. To the side sits a woman with her child; the child is also distinctively different. Dark eyes look out under dark eyebrows, dark hair hangs limply to its shoulders. Hans thinks of the photo resting inside his jacket, near his beating heart. It is of a mother and daughter also, but the daughter's hair is blonde not black, with twinkling blue eyes and chubby cheeks rather than solemn eyes and sunken cheekbones.

Hans looks away. He will instruct his men to keep them together. Perhaps have the woman stand with her back towards his men: it will keep the child calm and will avoid unnecessarily wasting supplies. He wonders how much they will need

tomorrow, how many guns, how much ammunition. Could additional supplies be sourced from the local gendarmes?

He thinks it likely: he knows what he does is important.

Captain Hans Lemke, Commanding Officer, Einsatzgruppe C. Responsible for Northern and Central Ukraine: active in Lvov, Dvorno, Poltava, Kiev. Precise, efficient, artistic; voluntarily enlisted and extremely well-educated. Tried on 22 September 1947, Military Tribunal II-A, Palace of Justice, Nuremberg. Convicted of war crimes and crimes against humanity: consistent with the Special Task Force's systematic extermination programme. Total Jews murdered: 118,341.

One would presume, Judge Musmanno comments before delivering his judgement, that this is an intelligent man. A man with the presence to recognise the difference between right and wrong.

## Sources of Inspiration

*Black Crows: A Study of Humanity* is inspired by both Steve Reich's minimalist composition *Different Trains* and personal research into the German Einsatzgruppen of World War II.

*Different Trains* is a three-movement piece for string quartet and tape written by Steve Reich in 1988. Each movement includes recorded speech in which people, both in the United States and Europe, recount their experiences surrounding World War II. The reference to Black Crows is taken from the second movement *Europe-During the War*. In this, the Holocaust survivor Paul recounts an incident during his schooldays in which a man, visiting his school, compared him to that of an unwanted bird, subhuman and different:

*There was a tall man, his hair was completely plastered smooth.*

*Black crows.*

*Black crows. He said "Black crows".*

*He said, "Black crows invaded our country, many years ago."*

*He said, "Black crows invaded our country many years ago," and he pointed right at me. Pointed right at me.*

The Einsatzgruppen were special, paramilitary, operations units of Nazi Germany, which operated through Eastern Europe before and during World War II. Under the direction of the SS, the Einsatzgruppen initially had the responsibility of following behind the advancing German army and securing government papers and building. By 1941, the role of the Einsatzgruppen had changed; initially given (in 1939) orders to kill anyone belonging to groups that the Germans considered hostile, the

Einsatzgruppen now became directly responsible for the mass murder of Jews and Gypsies in the Baltic and Slavic countries.<sup>1</sup> Typically, the Einsatzgruppen would forcefully deport Jews out of town, gather them in rural areas and have them shot point-blank by officers such that they would fall directly into the already-prepared trenches, which often had been dug by the victims themselves.

As horrific as these operations were – their own records attest to the murder of approximately 1.5 million Jews – the men of the Einsatzgruppen were not stupid men who blindly followed orders. Rather, they were well-educated men,<sup>2</sup> many of whom had numerous university degrees. Otto Ohlendorf, commander of Einsatzgruppe D, studied Economics and Law at the University of Leipzig and the University of Göttingen; Otto Rasch, commander of Einsatzgruppe C, held two university doctorate degrees.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ronald Headland, 1992, *Messages of Murder: A Study of the Reports of the Einsatzgruppen of the Security Police and the Security Service, 1941-1943* (Associated University Presses: Cranbury, NJ)

<sup>2</sup> Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, 1996, *Hitler's Willing Executioners* (Vintage Books: New York) 394

<sup>3</sup> 'The Einsatzgruppen Trials', 2007, Holocaust Education and Archive research Team, Accessed 15<sup>th</sup> July 2009, <http://www.holocaustresearchproject.org/trials/einsatztrial.html>