



Ostland



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David THOMAS

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400 pages

Extrait

Author's Note

The story that follows is inspired by actual events that occurred in Germany and Russia between February 1941 and July 1944 and by their resolution in the late 1950s and 60s.

Its subject, Georg Heuser, really existed. He was an officer of the *Kriminalpolizei*, or Criminal Police, and also of the SS. Although I have allowed myself creative licence in describing the minutiae of his day-to-day life and personal relationships, the basic facts of Heuser's personal history, his detective work and his activities in the occupied Russian city of Minsk are all presented as accurately as possible. Similarly, all descriptions of acts of violence, their perpetrators and their victims are based on factual evidence, including contemporary reports, police photographs and sketches, court records, witness testimonies and subsequent historical research. Court proceedings and verdicts are also quoted verbatim. For reasons of drama and coherence, however, I have marginally altered the timing and/or sequence of some minor events.

Many characters in this book – including all named criminal offenders and their victims, police witnesses, senior police and Nazi officials, and SS officers in Minsk – are either historical figures or, in a very few cases, fictionalized versions of real people. Others, such as those investigating Heuser's past, including Max Kraus and Paula Siebert, are fictional, but their actions – including the trip to gather evidence in Moscow – are based on real events. Likewise, the women with whom Heuser is romantically involved are all imaginary, but again inspired by specific individuals. Heuser really did have an old girlfriend who travelled from Hamburg to meet him in Berlin in February 1942, and three Jewish siblings lived in the basement of the Lenin House in Minsk and left the city in the manner described in the book. The words and opinions attributed to Heuser himself are also based wherever possible on what he is known to have written and said, or what others said about him. My depiction of Heuser's innermost thoughts and feelings is, of course, entirely imaginary.

In order to make police and SS ranks easier to read and understand I have anglicized almost all of them, to one degree or another. But for those who are interested in these things, Heuser's wartime police ranks rose from *Hilfskommissar* to *Kriminalkommissar* and eventually *Kriminalrat* (of all Nazi titles the one that surely sounds the most appropriate to a British ear). His corresponding SS ranks were *Untersturmführer*, *Obersturmführer* and *Hauptsturmführer*.

In German, the name Heuser is pronounced 'Hoyzer', so that the first syllable rhymes with 'noise'. Meanwhile Georg is pronounced with two hard 'g's and separate sounds for the 'e' and 'o', thus: 'Gay-org', to rhyme with 'morgue'.

David Thomas, West Sussex, 2013

Chapter 1

Ludwigsburg, West Germany: 23 July 1959

The police chief was naked when they came to arrest him.

'Well, we got him,' said Max Kraus, appearing at the office door, his massive figure filling the entire frame. The three investigators waiting for the news responded with a mixture of genuine enthusiasm and semi-sarcastic applause. It was a hot summer's day, so all the windows were open, but Kraus had no trouble making himself heard over the sounds coming in from the street outside: the chatter of the passers-by, the

clacking of heels on the pavement and the rumbling of all the new Mercedes, Opels and Volkswagens produced by a miraculously reborn economy. Somewhere in the distance a radio was playing Elvis Presley singing 'A Fool Such As I'. Presley himself was just a couple of hundred kilometres away in Friedberg, serving as an armoured recon scout in the US army. Fifteen years earlier Uncle Sam had sent his finest young men to invade Germany. Now he sent them to defend it.

'Took their time,' muttered one of the investigators, a paunchy, middle-aged man called Andreas Becker. He stubbed his cigarette out with a lazy stab that suggested, accurately, that he was hardly a man to rush things himself. Eight days had gone by since the arrest warrant was issued, but it had taken a full week for the authorities in Rhineland-Pfalz to accept that they had to seize their own chief of detectives. Most of the people making the decision knew him personally, and there had never been anything in his behaviour, whether personal or professional, to suggest the slightest impropriety. But the weight of evidence was undeniable and so with heavy hearts they'd given their approval.

'Better late than never,' Kraus said, as if it were all the same to him, though all his staff knew that he had been the driving force in the investigation, forcing it through the barriers of official indifference, scepticism and outright opposition with a mental rigour that could be as overpowering as his physical impact.

'So where did they find the Beagle, anyway?' Becker asked. The police chief had been given his canine nickname by his own detectives as a tribute to his uncanny nose for crime. Kraus and his team had picked it up as a way of referring to their target without alerting anyone that he was under suspicion. Even when the need for a codename had passed, they often still called him Beagle out of sheer force of habit.

'On holiday in Bad Orb,' Kraus replied.

'Very *gemütlich!*' said another of the investigators, Florian Wessel. He was even older than Becker and this backwater posting was his last before retirement.

'Oh really, is it nice?' asked Paula Siebert. The only woman on the team, and much its youngest member, she'd passed the same law exams as Becker and Wessel; her business cards clearly gave her status as Dr Siebert; and she was just as competent, just as ambitious and much harder-working than either of her colleagues. But no matter how many of those cards she handed out, the concept of a female lawyer was still so hard for most people to grasp that she regularly found herself being called 'my dear' or even 'darling' as she was asked to fetch the coffee and biscuits. And when she put questions to witnesses she was often greeted with absolute incredulity, as if the only possible reason for her presence at an interview was to take shorthand notes.

'Did you know that German women have been allowed to practise law since 1922? That's almost forty years ago!' she'd said to Kraus after one particularly infuriating encounter.

'Yes, but men have been lawyers since Roman times. You can't expect people to change overnight.'

'It's just so frustrating sometimes. Even my mother keeps telling me I should give up and find a nice husband. "Your looks won't last for ever, Paula. And no man wants a woman who cares more about her stupid little job than making him happy." Ach!'

Kraus laughed. 'Well, I can't help you find a husband. Or deal with your mother . . . But I do know how good you are at your job, and I'm your boss. So forget what anyone else says, that's what matters.'

Paula hoped he was right, but now she was cursing herself. Here they were discussing the arrest of a major suspect and the first thing she asked about was his choice of holiday resort. Little things like that only

confirmed people's worst prejudices about empty-headed females.

'Bad Orb?' said Wessel, who seemed only too happy that Paula had for once reacted as he would expect a woman to do. 'Yes, very nice. It's in Hesse, right in the middle of the Spessart Nature Park. Lots of scenic views and endless cobbled streets, lined with old, half-timbered houses. You know the sort of thing: steep roofs, wooden beams all painted in different colours, very jolly. So what was our boy up to when they got him?'

'Taking a bath,' said Kraus. 'The local police burst in and there he was, bobbing about in the water, surrounded by other respectable folk, as hot and pink as a freshly boiled ham.'

Even Becker could not help but join in the laughter at the image of the Beagle being caught in such embarrassing circumstances. Paula thought of the smooth, confident, astonishingly youthful face that looked out in three-quarter profile from his police identity card. Some women might well find it attractive, though she couldn't begin to think of him in those terms herself. Paula was well aware that there was no link between a man's behaviour and his external appearance. Even so it outraged her that the Beagle's skin should have remained so unlined, as though he'd been entirely impervious to everything that he'd seen and done. His eyes were very slightly narrowed, his mouth set with the sort of self-conscious firmness with which an actor or a politician might convey manly strength and determination. He had a fine head of neatly combed and pomaded hair without a trace of grey. Only a slight thickness at the neck and jaw betrayed the softening of middle age.

'I'll say one thing for the sick bastard,' continued Kraus, 'he has a certain style about him. Apparently he got out of the bath, stark naked and dripping wet, and asked the arresting officer whether he might be allowed to dry himself and put on some clothes before they led him away. So they all had to accompany him back to his hotel room. He got into a smart suit, kissed his wife goodbye and marched off to the police car with his head held high.'

'Do you think he expects to get away with it?' Paula asked.

'Why not?' Kraus replied. 'He's always got away with it before.'

That was certainly true enough. Once the investigators had been put on to the Beagle's trail they soon realized that there had been plenty of opportunities to catch him in the past. Strauch, for example, had mentioned him in his evidence. But the court stenographer had misspelt the Beagle's name, and so no one had made the connection. Now Strauch was dead and his information had died with him. Rübe had named him too, with the correct spelling, but the lead had never been followed up. Two court psychiatrists had examined Rübe at his trial. One said he had a schizoid personality. The other claimed he was a pathological sexual sadist. Either way, Rübe was crazy.

Whatever evidence he gave, no one was likely to accord it the slightest significance.

None of the other guilty men had said a word. A conspiracy of powerful, strong-willed individuals is almost impossible to break as long as they remain united and, above all, silent. But as Kraus liked to say, 'If the water keeps rising, eventually the dam will burst.' So his tactics were always to keep collecting evidence, increasing pressure, going back again and again until – the first crack in the great concrete wall – one of the group lost their nerve and started to talk. That was what had happened. A few months earlier they'd arrested Ehrlinger and presented him with evidence he couldn't deny. He'd blabbed and that had led them to the Beagle.

Kraus looked round at the pitifully small, inexperienced, under-resourced forces at his command. There were only a very few idealists like him who were prepared to sacrifice their careers to work in an organization that

was held in as much disregard as this one. The staff had therefore been recruited from those who had nowhere else to go. Paula was twice as good as both her male colleagues put together and yet they still regarded her as their inferior. Kraus wondered how long it would take her to realize that she had no real chance of establishing the kind of career her talent and energy deserved: not before this case had finally been dealt with, he hoped.

He let his people bask in their moment of glory for a few seconds, then his voice took on a tougher, more forceful urgency: ‘Listen up, ladies and gentlemen, this isn’t the end of the case. This is the beginning. We still need evidence that will stand up in court, and that means witnesses, documents, unequivocal facts that no smart-arsed defendant can deny. And as you’re all only too well aware, absolutely no one will be keen to help you. The Beagle is a brilliant detective. He’s admired and respected by every cop, every public prosecutor, every judge, every politician you’re ever likely to speak to. Even the journalists like him. So the moment you leave this office, you enter enemy territory.’

The door slammed behind him, leaving behind a much more subdued group of investigators.

‘He’s right, you know,’ Wessel said. ‘Some of my old chums at the prosecutor’s office look at me with pity, as if I’ve caught some tragic, disfiguring disease. The others don’t even bother to hide their contempt.’

‘The cops are worse,’ said Becker. ‘The moment I tell them I’m working for the ZSL, I can see actual hatred in their eyes. They think we’re traitors. They’d happily shoot the lot of us and dump our bodies in the Neckar if they thought that would get the Beagle off the hook.’

Suddenly the office swung open and crashed against the office wall. The three lawyers turned round to see Kraus standing there again.

‘One more thing,’ he said. ‘I’ve had enough of this Beagle nonsense. The man is the suspect in the biggest criminal case since the creation of the Federal Republic. So let’s not pretend he’s a jolly little puppy dog. From now on we call him by his real name: Georg Albert Wilhelm Heuser.’

Chapter 2

Berlin, Germany: 11.35 p.m. 6 February – 8.15 a.m. 7 February 1941

Not all the propaganda lied. In those early months of 1941, we truly were the master race. We ruled a European empire that stretched from the Atlantic coast of Brittany in the west, to the Russian border in the east: from the northernmost tip of Norway to the sands of the Sahara Desert. And at the heart of it all was my home town, the capital of the Reich: Berlin.

Marlene Dietrich used to sing that Berlin was the centre of the world, the pearl on the River Spree. But that was when she was still a true Berliner, not a Hollywood movie star who called herself an American. That was when the whole town lit up when the sun went down and you could go to the Haus Vaterland on the Potsdamer Platz, eat dishes from Turkey, Japan, Italy or Spain and dance to eight different bands in a single evening. In those early months of ’41, however, Berlin had become a black pearl at the centre of a world war and the most familiar night music was the wail of the air raid sirens. The lights had all gone out. And in the absolute, impenetrable darkness of the blackout the beasts and demons that lurked in the city’s underbelly emerged to stalk their prey.

At twenty-five minutes to midnight on the night of Tuesday, 6 February, the worst of them all was strolling

down the centre aisle of an S-Bahn train – one of the old Type 477s that can still be seen on the network to this day. The smattering of late-night passengers sat on wooden benches topped by metal handrails. There was wood panelling on the walls, with a luggage rack just beneath the ceiling. Each carriage possessed eight sets of sliding doors, four on either side. To us Berliners, a carriage such as this was as familiar as our own front rooms, an environment we hardly even noticed, any more than anyone looked twice at the man now making his way between the seats.

He was not an impressive specimen. He had oyster eyes and a fleshy nose – Jewish-looking, as some back then might have said. A meagre little moustache sat above his sullen mouth, and his lower lip was set in a permanent pout of resentful disapproval. He was the illegitimate son of a farmhouse servant called Marie Saga: father unknown. His education was limited, to put it politely. He was twenty-eight years old, in his physical prime, but a broken wrist acquired in a minor accident while serving among the occupying forces in France had rendered him unfit for combat. That was why he'd come back home, after just a few months' military service.

His injury had not, however, prevented him murdering six women. Another half-dozen had somehow survived being battered, stabbed and discarded like broken dolls beside the tracks of the very line on which this train was now travelling, or being left for dead in the gardens and allotments near his suburban home. There had been perhaps thirty further assaults: he'd not kept a precise count.

This campaign against the female sex had been going on since 1938 – longer than the Führer's own war – but barely two months had passed since the authorities finally woke up to his murderous existence. Now the full weight of the Berlin police had been brought to bear. Thousands of possible suspects had been interviewed. The trains and stations of the S3 line – the killer's particular hunting ground – had been flooded with uniformed officers. The authorities had done their best to keep official coverage of the case to a bare minimum, but rumours still swirled through the city. Everyone was talking about the S-Bahn murderer.

And here he was, at twenty-five minutes before midnight, prowling amongst the passengers as anonymously as death itself while the train moved out of Karlshorst in the southeastern suburbs and headed towards the city centre. There were blackout blinds over the windows and the only light in the carriage came from a single dim blue bulb that provided just enough illumination to enable people to find their way around, but no more than that. The men and women scattered amongst the polished wooden benches were hunched and huddled, shivering in clothes whose meagre wartime fabrics gave scant protection against the winter weather. Stout boots and thick leather soles were fast becoming a thing of the past. Now the people's footwear was often as cardboard as their food, quite possibly because the same sawdust was used for both. Cold and damp seeped deep into the bones, sapping energy and attentiveness alike. The only time that anyone even marked the killer's passing was when he opened the connecting door between one carriage and another, letting in a freezing blast of snow-dusted air, provoking a few muttered obscenities before he closed the door and entered the next . . . and the next . . . until he finally found what he was looking for.

The woman wasn't particularly young or pretty. She did not conform to any specific character type: this wasn't a man who sought out only whores, schoolgirls or the elderly as his victims. There was, as we would later discover, one particular quality that this man required from his victims, but even that was secondary to the main thing that interested him about this particular female. She was sitting by herself, alone and unprotected.

He looked around, checking that he hadn't missed any other passengers. He tried to control his mounting excitement like a dog owner desperately clinging to the lead of a running hound as his pulse started to hammer, his breathing grew heavier and his cock swelled beneath his rough woollen trousers. His rage was rising along with his lust. He did not see a respectable woman in front of him, just a filthy, germ-laden

infector of men. To him she was the killer, the spreader of death, a criminal who deserved to be punished.

And punish her he would. He bent his right hand behind him, wrapping his fingers round the length of rubber-wrapped copper telephone cable as thick as his wrist that he'd hidden up the sleeve of his jacket. This was the bludgeon with which he had cracked skulls and ended lives. He was practised in its use and confident in his method. Killing, like anything else, is a skill that improves with repetition, and he'd become very good at what he did.

He took another few paces down the aisle. There were shoulder-high partitions in pairs beside each set of doors and the killer needed to be sure that no one was concealed on a bench behind one of these partitions.

The discovery that she really was alone came to him as a great relief. It hadn't been easy waiting for the perfect moment when he was free to walk the trains; when the cops were looking somewhere else for once; when there was a solitary woman offering herself up as a sacrifice. But here it was. He did not have to hold back any longer. He could satisfy the urges that had been burning in him unassuaged for more than a month since his last killing.

He stepped towards her and gave a polite cough to signal his presence no more than a couple of metres from where she sat. She looked up and saw him, a man looming over her in a deserted railway carriage in the middle of the night.

Then she smiled.

She suspected nothing. She felt completely safe. Quite calmly she pulled off one glove and then the other to make it easier to rummage in her jacket pocket. And that was when he took one long stride towards her and let the length of cable slide down the back of his arm, slipping through his fingers until he gripped it again at the far end. Now he was raising his arm and as she saw what was in his hand the look on her face changed from complacent security to the first wide-eyed tremor of alarm. He twisted his shoulders, gathering his strength. Her mouth opened to scream in terror, but the scream was silenced before it had left her throat as the bludgeon swung down, smashing through the pathetic defence of her upturned arms and crunching into her skull.

As the bone crumpled beneath the impact of his weapon the killer entered a new, blissful state in which all his senses were heightened. Time slowed down for him so that he was perfectly aware of the effect of every single blow as he brought the telephone cable down again and again. His eyes seemed to cut through the gloom of the half-lit carriage, perceiving every drop of blood spattering from the gaping wound, each strand of hair upon the battered head. He pounded his arm up and down in a vile, destructive parody of masturbation, smashing her long after she'd lost consciousness, even when life itself had left her, until, with a hoarse, ecstatic cry, he achieved his orgasm and the battering finally ceased.

The killer would have loved to linger a while to savour the pleasure of what he'd done, but there was no time for that. He knew very well how long it took the train to travel between each and every station on the line and he'd spent too long finding his victim to allow himself even the briefest indulgence now. Instead he had to focus on the disposal of her body.

He placed his weapon on the seat close to where the woman was lolling, head down, battered skull exposed, devoid of any sign of life. Her gloves had fallen on to the carriage floor, so he picked them up and stuffed them into one of his trouser pockets. Then he pulled the woman from her seat on to the floor and reached down to grab the back of the jacket. His intention was to drag her along the floor to the nearest set of doors. But the jacket was made from a heavy, pre-war woollen fabric, lined with satin and belted at the waist, and all he succeeded in doing was pulling it away from her body so that it bunched under her armpits, forced her

arms over her head and ended up in a cumbersome tangle, half-on and half-off. Meanwhile her body had barely moved five centimetres.

The killer cursed under his breath, beginning to worry now as the next station drew ever closer. His arrogant composure was fraying badly, giving way to a much more familiar mood of simmering resentment: once again the world was against him.

He wasn't beaten yet, though. He pulled the jacket right off and threw it towards the nearest doors on the left-hand side of the carriage. Now the woman was much easier to handle and it was only a matter of seconds before he'd pulled her to the doors. He dropped her beside the coat as casually as if he were back on the farm, dumping a sack of chicken feed in the barn. The thud of her head and shoulders against the linoleum and the grotesquely distorted expression on her upturned face – one eye wide open, yet sightless; the other barely distinguishable amidst the bloody pulp of her ravaged skull – did not register with him at all.

Bracing himself against the piercing gale, the killer pulled on the door handle and heaved the woman's body out into the night. The gloves and coat followed in quick succession. His task complete, he closed the door again, heaved a sigh of relief, took off his cap and passed a hand over his sweaty brow. He walked back to where the woman had been sitting and picked up the bloodstained cable, which he stuffed back up his sleeve. The next stop was Rummelsburg Depot. When the train arrived he got off and made his way down the deserted platform. No one boarded the carriage he'd just left. No one noticed him as he made his way out. In the blue half-light of the carriage no one spotted any traces of blood against the dark red floor.

The S-Bahn murderer had just struck for the seventh time. And I meanwhile was lying in bed, trying and miserably failing to get some sleep. *Revue de presse*

"An intriguing mix of detection, thriller, courtroom drama, fact and fiction." —*The Times*

"With subtlety and intelligence, Thomas joins the historical dots to produce a novel with plenty to say--eloquently--about the brutalising effects of the Holocaust." —John O'Connell, *The Guardian*

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"Very rarely do books reach into your psyche and take root. *Ostland* came along and kicked my door down. A wonderfully thought-provoking novel. Educational, entertaining and emotive throughout . . . a first class read by an author at the top of their game." —*Crimesquad* Présentation de l'éditeur
Berlin, 1941. Le jeune et ambitieux Georg Heuser entre dans la police en tant qu'inspecteur à la brigade criminelle. Il est rapidement affecté à la traque d'un tueur en série qui terrorise la ville. Sous la tutelle de son supérieur et mentor, il affirme ses dons d'enquêteur, apprend la loyauté envers ses collègues et se jure d'œuvrer toujours au service des innocents. Jusqu'au jour où, pour le féliciter, on le promeut au sein de la SS. Envoyé à Minsk, Georg va prendre en charge l'arrivée des convois de déportés juifs et l'organisation du

ghetto. Soucieux de plaire à sa hiérarchie, il obéit aux ordres et s'interdit de penser au crime odieux auquel il est en train de participer. Mais peut-on rester dans cet état d'insensibilité lorsqu'on devient soi-même le monstre qu'on s'est toujours promis de poursuivre ?

Dérangeant et poignant. Un thriller, inspiré d'une histoire vraie, qui pose une question extrêmement délicate, celle de la responsabilité.

" Enquête, thriller, drame judiciaire, réalité et fiction ; un mélange fascinant. " *The Times*

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