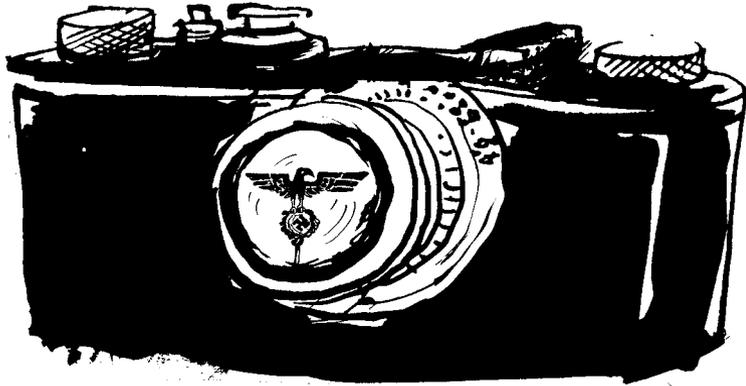


ADVENTURES IN TIME TRAVEL

Historical fiction by the winners of
the Young Walter Scott Prize 2020





THE CRIMES OF A CAMERA

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London

Highly commended in the Young Walter Scott Prize
11-15 category

Author's introduction

I wanted to set my story in Germany just after the “Golden Years” of Stresemann. I was interested in the way the cultural blossoming of 1924 to 1928 was in such radical contrast to Nazism and Nazi beliefs, and how the culture in Berlin around cabaret and the very liberal arts and forward-thinking, progressive ideas was completely eradicated by Nazism in the space of a few years. The contrast between the young, vibrant and modern generation living in cities compared with the traditional and rigid rural communities composed mainly of the older generation was something I was keen to explore. I decided to include different viewpoints, the liberal girls in the main plot and the rigid Gestapo man who captures their images at various stages. I chose the two young girls as my principal characters as I wanted to see how Nazism had influenced and changed their relationship, and to show the consequences of extreme persecution by the Nazis. By not quite defining the nature of the relationship between the two girls I could also demonstrate the contrast between the years of Weimar Berlin where same-sex relationships were starting to be accepted, compared to the persecution of homosexuality and the repressive nature of Nazism that occurred in the years after, reversing the modern ideas that had been starting to blossom in the years of Weimar Berlin.

THE CRIMES OF A CAMERA

Berlin 1933-34

Lotta watches the smoke unfurl into the air, a miniature billowing cloud of tobacco. She inhales again, dragging the cigarette smoke deeply through her lungs, relishing the searing heat in her throat. The stereotypical German worker beams at her from the poster plastered over the billboard, eyes glazed. She watches as Herr Koffman shuffles despondently to the door of his cabaret club, now shuttered tightly, fading gold lettering peeling off. She remembers Herr Koffman a few years back, eyeliner smudged under his eyes and lipstick smeared generously over his full lips. Dancing scandalously in his skimpy pink frock onstage, unreserved, wild-eyed with pure excitement, undiluted adrenaline. She remembers her own dress, even smaller than Herr Koffman's, bejewelled with sequins and studs of cheap metals that made her shine luminously onstage, reflecting the low-lit, warm light inside the club.

Lotta's chapped hands smart in the burn of the icy wind.

Without warning, she tosses the still smouldering cigarette to the ground and extinguishes the last glowing embers under the heel of her boot before striding across the street, calling to Herr Koffman. When he sees her, his round, soulful eyes crinkle mournfully and he unfolds his arms, enveloping her in the familiar scent of stale cologne and faded leather. The smell makes memories race before her eyes, nights fizzy with joy, blurry with alcohol. Pictures and scenes jostle in her mind, making her head spin, dizzying.

A young man, coat collar turned up against the biting cold, watches Lotta and Herr Koffman embrace, eyes narrowed in disapproval. They should not be here, holding on to remnants of a decadent, rotting age, where morals and young people were corrupted. The young man was never corrupted, he held on to his dignity with a stiff pride, unlike Lotta and Herr Koffman, who used to sway outrageously every night to the rhythm of scandalous music. A camera shutter clicks once, twice, three times.

The underground metro rattles and rocks, lulling Lotta, whose eyelids flutter in battle with exhaustion. It spits her out near the centre of Berlin, at the same station she used to stumble drunkenly through with Thea,

shrieking with laughter, holding each other tightly as they floated through their fantasy lives. It's deserted now, plastered with posters of smiling men and women, who are blond and blue-eyed and fair-skinned. Lotta is skinny verging on skeletal, has sooty grey eyes, and is deeply tanned, even in this winter. She hurries past them, pulling her threadbare coat more tightly around her lean shoulders.

As she steps out onto the pavement of Berlin, she feels it before she sees it. The flare of heat, unnaturally searing. Smoke billows into the sky, a much magnified version of her cigarette smoke. Hot ash sticks in her throat, not entirely a different feeling to the charring burn of tobacco. The Reichstag is being devoured by towering flames; they leap from pillar to pillar, like a monkey in a forest or a dancer on a stage. The tongues lick the sky, suffocating the air, oxygen-starved. The fire emits a dull roar, writhing with power. Ash and smoke is belched out into the sky, blotting out the stars in a single swipe. Sirens scream and Lotta sees the black uniform and shining cufflinks of the SS stand out amongst the firefighters. This releases her from her spot as she runs, prey-like, heart beating a bruise against her ribcage, terror flooding through her as the eyes of the SS burn into her back, far more dangerous than the fire.

Thea refuses to go outside. They are angry, the Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei, the Nazis. They are growing too, claiming democracy is done, the Golden Years are over. Rural communities especially are disgusted by the years of Stresemann, the beautiful freedom of Berlin, cabaret, the art, the singular identity everyone had, her and Thea, Thea-and-her. Finally agreeing with the world, in all its promises of modernity, of progression, of the evolution of culture, a new age.

The Wall Street Crash brought with it a U-turn in thinking, and suddenly cabaret was scandalous, the art was ridiculed, identity became a target and Thea-and-her were degenerate.

People regard Herr Koffman with disgust and go far to prove it, until Herr Koffman is hospitalised, arms bent at odd angles, eyes stained crimson with burst blood vessels. Lotta wonders how people can beat Herr Koffman, a man whose only crime was joy, whose body is wasting away without the regular flow of cash and laughter into his cabaret club. They are hypocrites, all of them, they claim they are revolted, ashamed of the Golden Years, but Lotta recognises their over-large coats from the years of sifting through pockets in the club's cloakroom.

Thea's father's grocery shop was looted last week; the thugs smashed his windows and painted in ugly red writing *Jude, Jew*, on his front door. Thea's mother is in prison awaiting trial, accused of conspiring with the Spartakusbund, of being a communist. It is not a good time to be the daughter of a Jew and a suspected communist. He is chancellor now, the one they all say will save Germany, the small, shouty man with the excuse for a moustache. Thea nags her to take him seriously, what he's preaching is horrific, and horrific people, Thea warns her, often have a knack of getting their way. Lotta doesn't dare to imagine. Just yesterday Thea was approached by a tall man in a black overcoat, pestering her to join the newly underground communists. Thea swears he was Gestapo.

"I saw it in his eyes." She nods wisely. "Empty eyes, eyes of a monster."

Lotta snorts, unable to suppress her scepticism of the encounter.

Thea pounces on her, hollering "It's not funny!" while shrieking with laughter.

The young man frowns from his perch atop the building, looking into a window where two girls roll around laughing wildly. The faces of these two girls are slotted in a file in the building where the young man works, along with detailed descriptions of their backgrounds, residences, and suspected crimes. The camera clicks again, capturing the two girls, trapping them, in that sparsely furnished apartment, alone.

Rumours, filtered down from above, have reached the likes of Lotta and Thea. That Hindenburg, the stubborn old man who resolutely clings to his presidency, the one thing stopping the shouty chancellor, Hitler, getting to full power, is dying. Thea carries the radio around with her everywhere; Lotta hears it warbling through the thin walls of their apartment, static hissing like an angered snake. When the news plays, Thea's eyes go round and fearful; she becomes very still, apart from the tremble of her hands. Thea's brother, after protesting against the nationwide boycott of her father's shop, has disappeared.

Then early in August, the radios blare the message: Hindenburg is dead. On the evening that it is announced, and the funeral arrangements prepared, Thea's eyes are steely, brimming with fierce determination.

"I'm leaving," she says, and her words hang in the air for a second as the full, hefty weight of them sink in. She meets Lotta's eyes, and an unspoken understanding passes between them, fleeting, too dangerous,

too deadly, to be spoken aloud. Like birds flitting between the gnarled trunks of a forest, their thoughts arc and swoop to the rhythm of their relationship and when Thea whispers to Lotta, no lighter than a breath, "Will you help me?" those words shift the fundamental cores of the two girls, like tectonic plates unsettling deep in the earth, altering the inside beyond recognition while only causing a ripple above the surface.

Loitering in a dark alley, Lotta yearns for a cigarette. Those became a luxury long ago. A man strides into the alley, as if the broken, blackened cobblestone is a carpet into the finest hotel in Berlin. A flash of banknotes, a sheet of official looking documentation stowed hurriedly inside Lotta's overcoat.

The rumble of the car that trundles past them fully masks the sound of a camera, clicking away.

Thea is on the train bound for Warsaw, which is so packed that people cannot sit on the floor, only stand, like sardines compressed tightly into their tin grave, other people's faces just inches away from yours. Lotta can see her, Thea, right next to the window, staring out at Lotta with wide, frightened eyes. Suddenly Lotta's fighting through the throng on the platform, shoving her way to the carriage where Thea is pressed against the window, until their noses touch the glass. Ashy grey eyes meet Thea's deep vivacious blue and Lotta, who has not cried since she was five and broke her arm, feels tears slip down her cheeks, like raindrops racing down a window, until her face is wet with tears and her lips taste of the sea. The train gives an enormous shudder before starting to roll out of the station, and Lotta starts to panic, because what will she do here in this culture-starved, Thea-free, monster-filled city? She claws at the handles of the train and throws her weight against it, hopelessly adrift without Thea, but the train doesn't slow or even notice her weight, it just drags her along with it, the platform edge hurtling towards her. Thea is screaming now, screaming at her to let go, she'll fall, she'll be slammed against the barrier, she'll die. A man seizes Lotta from behind, a big, burly man, who lets loose a stream of reassuring, comforting words into her ears, but she doesn't hear it because all her senses are focused on one thing: Thea's face slipping round the corner, in that rattling metal cage, grief-stricken, fleeing for her freedom.

The snow crunching underfoot reminds Lotta vaguely of the rattle of sequins in a box. She was stared out of the station, people goggling at her as if she was a rare breed of bird. The sky is an unyielding, unforgiving iron grey and the snow falls thick and fast, catching in her eyelashes and hair. She tells herself the tears running down her face are melted snow. Her feet find the old cabaret club, the letters now all gone, replaced with spiky, angry graffiti slashing at the building like knife wounds. The door gives way. Immediately a rancid smell reaches her, curling up her nose, suffocating her, thick and rotting. Lotta stumbles into the main performance room and sees Herr Koffman, swinging from a noose onstage, suspended by the same hook that used to make him fly.

Lotta doesn't stop running until she reaches the apartment, stripped bare now that she and Thea have sold all their valuables. She's violently sick on the doormat, before staggering into the main room, where three men wait. Pictures, hundreds of them, are spread out across the bare wooden floor. She's winking in one, arrogantly beautiful, almost haughty. Like a map of her life, they unreel before her, reaching into the corners and encroaching up the walls, hills upon mountains of evidence stacking up against her. She looks at each of the men, grinning at her like crocodiles, Gestapo stamped on their hearts like on the hundreds on the photos. Lotta doesn't hesitate. She flies down the stairs, through the streets, into the station she left an hour ago.

Arms snatch at her, but they're not comforting now, they're rigid and too tight; she feels her rib cage bruising. She is a bird trapped in a cage, a sparrow, lashing out desperately but it makes no difference, they shrug off her feeble blows easily. The arms force her roughly to the floor as the three men hurtle into the station. As the last rays of sunlight dip behind the horizon, painting the world a bloody crimson, someone somewhere in the mess of screaming and thicket of bodies raises their gun and fires. Lotta falls as though there had been a puppeteer holding her strings, a puppeteer who lost interest in his play.