

## Jeder stirbt für sich allein

*H.Fallada*

September 5 - 14, 2016

The book was written just after the end of the war, which Fallada had spent mostly in seclusion, sometimes of the involuntary kind. He had done a rather failed stint as a mayor of a minor town, immediately after the conclusion of the same, a position for which he must have been singularly unsuited, before he returned to his true forte. He wrote the book in about four weeks, in spite of its finished bulk. He did not have time to proof read it before he died of heart failure not yet 54, brought about by his unhealthy living as a part-time drunkard and morphine addict. As a result a slightly bowdlerized version was published, and only some sixty odd years later was it rediscovered and republished in its more original form.

It is a page turner. The story is told in a sequence of scenes, very much in a style of a movie script, jumping from one thread of the story to another intertwining one, thus artlessly evading tediousness. The language is simple and there is a minimum of word-painting and digressions. The author has a story to tell and dispenses with mere decorations, thus not compromising on speed and efficiency. In short it is written in the idiom of a thriller keeping up the suspense. One is reminded of the drawings of a Grosz, striking pen strokes of black onto white.

The setting is Nazi Germany during the war. Fallada was a chronicler of the Weimar era, does he have the same eye for the Nazi one? I doubt it. During the time he was alternately ignored and lauded, but always tolerated, if at times grudgingly so. Goebbels praised some of his books, especially 'Wolf unter Wölfen' as an indictment against Weimar Germany, could he not write a subsequent book lauding the Nazi period? After all the problems of the former epoch had been solved triumphantly. Fallada dragged his feet. The picture he draws of the times is one of suspicion and fear, not so much one of prevailing hatred and enthusiasm. There are Jews appearing in the narrative, but only in the form of an elderly couple, whose presence is but shadowy. The husband in permanent custody by the authorities, the wife in temporary hiding at a neighbor until she cannot take it anymore and kills herself. Then there are dark hints at people stymied in their careers by not being fully kosher aryans, and hence prevented from serving their Führer in full glory. The protagonists consist instead of a husband and a wife by name of Quangel, whose son has just fallen in battle during the triumphant victory over the French. 'Du und dein Führer', the distraught mother accuses her husband of passive complicity. He takes it to his heart and resolves to do something. Both resign from their involvement in the party, the way the wife effects it by playing overzealous is rather comic and somewhat out of character. Then they take to writing critical commentaries on the 'Nazi Führung' on postcards and surreptitiously leaving them around. The idea is that those postcards will be taken up by people in general, make them think, and ideally share and write their own, not unlike how Facebook may work nowadays under oppressive regimes. This activity fills their life with meaning, they are at least doing something to resist a criminal regime, and their common

secret strengthens their marital bond, which previously had been seriously strained by the taciturnity of the husband grating on the nerves of a more voluble spouse. They carry it on for years, a few times being close to capture, but at the last moment evading the clutches of the authorities. Is it such a big thing after all? What can an elderly couple do against Hitler and his vast power machine? But there is such a thing as zero tolerance when it comes to crimes, something which has had renewed appreciation in recent times as testified by the New York Police Department. Nothing is new under the sun. Thus the activity has to be taken seriously and clamped down on, and the Gestapo knows of course what to do. The police officer in charge, by name of Escherich, comes across, if not necessarily intentionally depicted as, rather sympathetically, maybe because he is compared to the hysteric party officials and the undergrowth of petty crime that characterizes the grass root of the Nazi movement as envisioned in the novel. The officer is at least a professional motivated basically by reason. He figures that with patience the perpetrator will be caught, sooner or later he will make a mistake and walk into the net, because one only has control over so much. While one waits more and more postcards will be discovered, and every place of discovery is noted on a big wall map of Berlin with a small red flag. As they will accumulate a pattern will emerge which will eventually point to the 'Täter'. And after all, the matter is not so important, there are bigger fish to net. But the 'von oben' attitude of the officer does not suit his immediate superior, a party man. After that a wrong man has been picked up and then released, Escherich is after all convinced that he is innocent, he nevertheless makes him sign a protocol admitting complicity, just to have something to show to his impatient superiors, who instead are becoming more and more suspicious of his handling of the case, and have him fired, humiliated and imprisoned. This indeed teaches him a lesson, for the first time he has experienced real fear and become aware of the precariousness of his position. So after he has become rehabilitated after his successor, a man fond of theories and with no hands-on experience of real down-to-earth police work, has bungled things, he is a transformed man, deprived of his former self-confidence and reduced to a toad, now taking the assignment with unprecedented seriousness. Shortly thereafter he is able to catch the perpetrator after the latter has made a major but unpredictable mistake, resulting in his postcards being found at his workplace. At first he is not only terrified but maybe even more curious as to the reaction those cards may provoke, but is discouraged by the fact that they seem to provoke nothing but fear and panic. Although he is above all suspicion at this work, no one would connect him with such a crime, the patient work of many years finally bears fruit, as the possible locations of the residence of the perpetrator have been pinpointed, a simple comparison with that list and that of the workers' addresses points unequivocally to the culprit. A routine house search turns out more or less conclusive evidence, topped by the perpetrators involuntary admission as he sees all those red flags on the wall maps. All that work has been in vain, of close to three hundred postcards, only a handful have escaped the notice of the Gestapo, and those might as well have simply been destroyed causing no further action. The disappointment is so profound that he cannot hide it. The matter is clinched. Escherich as a true professional has done his job, what comes after is no concern of his. But this time it is different. Herr Quangel may have failed in his mission, but at least he made a stand, he can think of himself as a decent man, who did not submit passively to

the regime. This gives him a moral strength, which cannot but impress Escerich as he is later made to participate in the humiliation perpetrated by his superior on the prisoner in custody. He is made aware of his own cowardice, and overwhelmed with shame he blows his own brains out. Maybe he is intended to be a pitiful figure, yet he comes across as the only truly morally ambiguous character in a novel of black and white. Until the capture the suspense has been kept up, combining both the perspective of those pursued by the excitement of those in pursuit. Although you know the ultimate end, you still hope for permanent evasion, which every temporary one seems to make more likely. Just like death, we all know, at least formally, that our lives will end in death and that there is no escape, still we cherish every temporary escape as heralding a potential immortality. The last part of the book relentlessly documents the misery of the interrogations by a sadistic police officer the couple Quangels is subjected to. Somewhat absurdly Herr Quangel is to suffer the presence in his cell of a former SS-officer whose murdering lust went out of bounds, and which now tries to save his skin by acting insane through the impersonation of a dog. Hairy and naked this monster licks and bites his fellow inmate until incredibly a kind of emotional bond appears between them. The man may have gone mad after all really believing that he is a dog, and animals in their basic innocence can never be as depraved as men. After the end of the period of interrogation there is a transfer to another cell in anticipation of the court proceedings. A cell which he shares with an educated man, a musician. He comes in contact with a lot of things he had had no inkling of before, such as classical music and opera, or playing chess which he soon acquires such a mastery of that he beats his mentor. But to start to read books, something he has neglected to do his entire adult life, turns out to be too much after all. Besides that he eats good food, incidentally paid by his roommate. It all appears as paradise, at least in comparison with what has gone on before. There is the court proceedings when he for the last time gets to meet his wife again. The proceedings are a joke intended to humiliate them, a farce in which the putative defense lawyer enthusiastically participates. At the end of it one of the attending individuals of the audience, a former neighbor, manage to smuggle a capsule of cyanid to him, and do the likewise for his wife somewhat later. While the capsule gives strength to the man, making him master of his own fate (to be able to choose your own time of death gives the illusion of immortality because what if you would keep on postponing); it torments his wife. Just think if she would succumb to the temptation and in a moment of despondency take it before she would meet up with her husband before execution. That would have been betrayal. She does not achieve peace of her mind, until she destroys it. Her husband though, out of curiosity cannot resist postponement until it is too late. When the axe is descending he accidentally voids his capsule from his mouth. His wife though, meets her extinction not at the guillotine, but during a bomb raid when the members of the staff are hovering in the basement exposing their charges to the ravages of war. Maybe an effort of effecting a happy ending?

Once again how realistic is the novel? The Quangels have a real life precedent by the couple Hampel, who after many years of distributing postcards against the regime were caught and executed, thus this part of the plot makes historical sense. A petty proletariat of criminals make up a large part of the action of the novel, but such people have existed in all epochs, including in particular the Weimar epoch, and what is new is

to show the continuity with the rank and file of the party. Party members had privileges making them immune, up to a point of course, to persecution, something that must have caused resentment especially to the author. Still one suspects that the picture it paints of everyday life is a bit stereotyped, based less on personal experience, than received knowledge and above all an awareness of the politically correct way of treating the subject matter. On the other hand it focuses on the more mundane aspects of Nazi terror, only obliquely referring to the plights of Jews, and thus not written with the nowadays dominant Holocaust perspective. Horrible as the Nazi machine may appear in its treatment of the Quangles and people in similar predicaments, it is god to keep in mind nevertheless that it probably is not worse than what is going on daily at unfortunate parts of the world until today, and most likely will so until the end of mankind's tenure on earth.

September 17, 2016 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden* ulfp@chalmers.se