

A country on the brink of war.
A woman who will uncover its secrets.

The Berlin Girl



MANDY ROBOTHAM

THE INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLER

THE BERLIN GIRL

Mandy Robotham

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Dedication

*To Hayley – a good friend.
Thanks for many words spilled over coffee.*

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Author's note

Hindsight is a wonderful thing, so the saying goes. Never more so than with World War Two, when no prophet could have foretold the atrocities that were witnessed and subsequently woven into the tainted fabric of history.

It was that time *before* that I wanted to capture in *The Berlin Girl* – a time when humanity had plumbed certain depths throughout the centuries, but never to quite the same degree as with the Holocaust. So that time has become divided into before and after Auschwitz and Dachau – and Sachsenhausen; before and after we knew what Man's potential could sink to.

The degree of inhumanity might not have been predicted, but there were those who both saw and warned of Hitler's hunger for domination, those who were there in the eye of the early storm; in my research, from diaries and biographies, it was the journalists centred around Berlin who warned repeatedly of the conflict to come – among them, the highly respected William L. Shirer from CBS, in his *Berlin Diary*. Sadly, it was a world not prepared to listen closely enough – politicians especially.

Among the press pack in the 1930s – and throughout the war – were a good many women, beautifully depicted in Nancy Caldwell Sorel's *Women Who Wrote the War*: Sigrid Schultz, a shrewd Jewish reporter for a US newspaper, who managed to be both friend and foe to the Nazi elite, and Clare Hollingworth, who scooped everyone with her exposé on the Nazis' final move into Poland. Martha Gellhorn – the reluctant 'Mrs Hemingway' – was not in Berlin circles, but remains a hero of mine, and her excellent biography by Caroline Moorehead was both an avenue into the mind of a correspondent, and yet almost a fairy tale of adventure too. Having been a journalist in my days before midwifery and writing (though a very unexciting local hack), I can only imagine the courage of such women in times when they were constrained by their sex, and often by ridiculous etiquette. They broke through many barriers for women as a whole, not least in print.

In a time before social media, readers hung onto those opinions from newsprint and radio – it was their window to the world before the luxuries of mainstream television, Twitter and Facebook.

Like the fictional Georgie, I also wanted to explore the personal side of impending war – what it meant for families like the Amsels to live life on a knife edge, for months and years, never knowing if your world would be tipped upside down in a split second, by a slighted neighbour, or a careless word to the Gestapo – feelings recalled by Irene Matthews's memoir, *Out of Nazi Germany and Trying to Find My Way*. As I edited this book in unprecedented times of the

UK Coronavirus lockdown, loss took on a new meaning; it was weeks and months for us, separated temporarily for the most part, but for a lifetime? Forever? Not based on a quirk of science or nature, but on the whim of just one man. It still beggars belief for me.

I can't pretend that including the Amsels wasn't something of a personal journey too – my family history is fairly disjointed, but I did discover late in life that my paternal grandfather was Jewish; likely in North London before the war. My own father knew very little of him and was not raised as a practising Jew, but I can't help wondering what circumstances brought my grandfather to England – whether he and his family were pushed from a European homeland in the brutal sweep of fascism.

The research journey was, again, a fascinating one; not only the recollections of apt and quick minds in the foreign press, but trawling through the hundreds of pages of old newspapers. The *News Chronicle* was upbeat and a darned good read – fierce and brave in the articles it produced – and the adverts for 'Bile Beans' were in there too, I promise.

And of course, any reader that's familiar with my work knows that I am hopelessly enticed by any hint of a newsroom; the feverish rush on press day, furious tap-tapping, even in post-typewriter times. I remember so fondly the camaraderie of local newspaper offices as we pushed towards a deadline, and the vast, open space buzz of the *Evening Standard* offices, where I worked for a short time. It's tomorrow's chip paper, as they say, but something we still can't seem to do without – thankfully. Long live print journalism.

Prologue

Plans

Berlin, 23rd July 1938

Leaving the clang of cell doors behind him and the ebbing sounds of agony within, Major Hugo Schenk holstered his pistol and climbed the stairs from the gloom of the basement with renewed energy.

As the light of the upper floors lifted his mood further, he spied the tiny crimson droplet out of the corner of his eye, unable to ignore it soiling the cuff of his otherwise spotless and pressed uniform. Despite its minuscule size, it moved like a virtual beacon in his line of vision. He scratched at it, irritation rising when it remained embedded in the fine, grey weave. These days, he rarely got his hands dirty, but today's quarry for vital information had proved intensely frustrating – the target foolishly stubborn – and he'd acted in haste. Hence the spatter. He was relieved, though, to have left the majority of the red slick several floors down, a congealing pool across the filthy tiles of the cells. Doubtless, it was being mopped as he attended to his business above ground, its donor limp within the bowels of the building, unburdened of bodily fluid and what information he and his colleagues had managed to extract before his patience ran out. Even so, the tiny fleck sprayed upon him during the event was unfortunate, particularly as he had an appointment with Himmler later in the afternoon. Despite the day's intense heat, the Gestapo chief would expect him in full uniform, collar and shirt tightly fastened.

Back at his desk, he looked with satisfaction at the neat stack of files to his side, meticulously categorised and all ready for Himmler's approval. They were in size order; the fat folder labelled 'Jew' on the bottom, topped with 'Romani', 'Sinti' and 'Jehovah's Witness'. Uppermost sat a slimmer folder marked 'Undesirables'. With a self-satisfied nod, he scanned the full-scale plans for expansion spread across his desk – yes, much more capacity. More *creativity*. They were on target. Himmler would be pleased.

He scratched again at the blood spot as the phone trilled beside him.

'Yes?'

'Major Schenk, sorry to disturb you. But we've just had word on your attaché. I'm afraid to report he was killed this morning in a motoring accident. Both he and the woman in the car.'

The first emotion to rise was annoyance, sparked initially by that blood spot, but also by the inconvenience. Dammit, it was unfortunate to lose a good attaché, someone proficient at smoothing his sometimes rough edges, a worthy

diplomat. He'd been efficient and obedient. A good Nazi. Schenk was aware, though, of the need to conjure up some semblance of sympathy. It wouldn't do to appear callous.

'Ah, that's unfortunate. He had children, I believe. Do we know if they will be cared for by others in the family?'

The voice on the other end coughed with embarrassment. 'Erm, the woman in the car wasn't his wife, sir.'

'Oh, I see. Well, send his wife condolences and flowers. And make sure we pay for the funeral.'

'Yes, sir.'

'Have we got a replacement lined up?'

'Yes, Major, I have someone in mind. Young, but very keen. I'll sort the necessary paperwork; make sure you are able to meet him for approval.'

'Good work. Heil Hitler.'

He replaced the receiver, and the red speck flashed across his vision, a spark to his temper within. Fucking Jews. Why did they have to bleed so copiously?