

# Reflections on Daily Life in a Police State (1939)

## Abstract

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Sebastian Haffner, whose real name was Raimund Pretzel (1907–1999), was a German journalist and author. In 1938, he and his wife immigrated to London, where he wrote about the origins of the First World War and the Weimar Republic. (He used a pseudonym to protect family members back in Germany.) In 1940, Haffner recorded his experiences in National Socialist Germany in a memoir, which was published posthumously in 2000 (*Defying Hitler*). This particular entry refers to the government-mandated boycott of Jewish stores and businesses on April 1, 1933. The boycott was the first official nation-wide government action against the Jewish population of Germany. The action ultimately failed because many Germans found the measures inconvenient. Additionally, the event attracted negative international attention.

In this excerpt from *Defying Hitler*, Haffner describes his fears after a Jewish friend seemingly disappeared one day before the boycott. Concerned that his friend had been arrested and possibly detained in the nearby Oranienburg concentration camp, Haffner speculates about the boycott's potential to serve as the beginning of more widespread and more brazen violence. Haffner's text makes clear that, in the first days of the dictatorship, non-Jewish, non-Nazi Germans already registered the dangers facing Jews.

## Source

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That evening I had two more noteworthy experiences. *The first* was that for about an hour I feared for the life of my little friend Charlie. The fear turned out to be unfounded—but not unjustified.

The cause was ridiculous enough. We missed each other. We had agreed to meet outside the department store where she earned a hundred marks a month in the typing pool. She was not, after all, a Turkish pageboy, but a young girl from a hardworking lower-middle-class family, with plenty to worry about. When I arrived at 7 p.m. the store was already closed. It lay dark and silent with the roller shutters all drawn. It was a Jewish business, there was no one there. Perhaps the SA had been there today already.

I took the subway to Charlie's home and climbed the stairs of the large apartment building. I rang the doorbell, twice, three times. There was no sound from the flat. I went down to the street and phoned from a telephone box. No reply. I went and waited rather futilely at the entrance to the subway station where she would have arrived if she had come home from work. Crowds flowed in and out, undisturbed and unchecked, as they did every day. Charlie was not among them. Every now and then I tried to phone again, without success.

All this while I felt a weakness in my knees, a feeling of utter helplessness. Had she been "picked up" in her flat or "taken away" from work? Perhaps she was already in the police cells at Alexanderplatz or on her way to Oranienburg, where the first concentration camp had been opened? There was no knowing. Anything was possible. The boycott could be just a demonstration, but it could also be the excuse—"Juda verrecke!"—for deliberate, general, disciplined murder and slaughter. The uncertainty was one of the most subtle effects of the terror. To fear for the life of a Jewish girl on March 31, 1933, was not unreasonable—even if the fear turned out to be groundless.

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This time it was. After about an hour, when I again made my phone call, I unexpectedly heard Charlie's voice at the other end of the line. The employees of the store had left together and sat around trying to decide what to do, since they had obviously just lost their jobs. They had not had any ideas. No, the SA had not been in the store today. "I'm so sorry. It took so long. I was on tenterhooks the whole time . . ." Her parents? They had gone to the hospital to visit an aunt who had had a baby today of all days, impertinently disobeying the order "*Juda verrecke!*" However, it was difficult to imagine what would happen tomorrow, when the hospital and the doctor had to be boycotted. The possibility that the patients would be driven out—as indeed happened five years later—was already in the air then. We felt it darkly, but we could not quite bring it into the open. The coming events remained, for the moment, unreal.

At that instant I felt mainly relief, and also perhaps that in my anxiety I had made myself ridiculous. Five minutes later Charlie appeared, very chic, with a little feather cap cocked on one side of her head, a young city girl ready for a night out. Indeed, our current problem was where to go. It was past nine, too late for the cinema, but we wanted to go somewhere; after all, we had a date. At last I thought of something that only started at nine-thirty. We took a taxi to the Katakombe.

There was a hint of madness about it all, which you could even sense while it was happening. Now, as I view events from a distance, it is much clearer. Having just experienced real fear for someone's life, and unsure whether the next day might not be genuinely life-threatening for one of us, I nevertheless saw no reason we should not go to a cabaret.

Incidentally, it is typical of the early years of the Nazi regime that the whole facade of everyday life remained virtually unchanged. The cinemas, theaters, and cafes were full. Couples danced in the open air and in the dance halls. People strolled down the streets. The Nazis used this to great effect in their propaganda. "Come and see our normal, peaceful, quiet country. Come and see how well even the Jews are doing here." The secret vein of madness, fear, and tension of living by the day, and dancing a dance of death: those one could not see. Just as when you see the smiling face on a poster for razor blades in today's subway stations, you do not see that it belongs to a man whose head was cut off in Plötzensee prison four years ago, for "high treason," or what goes by that name today.

The fact that this was possible also speaks against us. Our reaction to the experience of fearing for one's life, and being totally at the mercy of events, was only to try and ignore the situation and not allow it to disturb our fun. I think a couple of a hundred years ago [we] would have known better how to deal with such an experience—if only by celebrating a great night of love, spiced by danger and the sense of loss. Charlie and I did not think of doing anything special, and just went to the cabaret because nobody stopped us: first, because we would have gone anyway, and second, in order to think about unpleasant things as little as possible. That may seem cold-blooded and daring, but it really only indicates a weakness of the emotions. We were not equal to the situation, even as victims. If you will allow me this generalization, it is one of the uncanny aspects of events in Germany that the deeds have no doers and the suffering has no martyrs. Everything takes place under a kind of anesthesia. Objectively dreadful deeds produce a thin, puny emotional response. Murders are committed like schoolboy pranks. Humiliation and moral decay are accepted like minor incidents. Even death under torture only produces the response "Bad luck."

That evening, however, we were recompensed for our inadequacy beyond our deserts. Chance had led us to the *Katakombe*, and this was the second remarkable experience of the evening. We arrived at the only place in Germany where a kind of public, courageous, witty, and elegant resistance was taking place. That morning I had witnessed how the Prussian *Kammergericht*, with a tradition of hundreds of years, had ignobly capitulated before the Nazis. In the evening I experienced how a small troop of artistes, with no tradition to back them up, saved our honor with grace and glory. The *Kammergericht* had fallen but the *Katakombe* stood upright.

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The man who led this small group of artistes to victory—standing firm in the face of overwhelming, murderous odds must be counted as a victory—was called Werner Fink.<sup>[1]</sup> This minor cabaret master of ceremonies has his place in the annals of the Third Reich, indeed one of the very few places of honor there. He did not look like a hero, and if he finally became something like one, it was in spite of himself. He was not a revolutionary actor, had no biting satire; he was not David with a sling. His character was at bottom harmless and amiable, his wit gentle, light, and capricious. His jokes were based on double entendre and puns, which he handled like a virtuoso. He had invented something that could be called the hidden punch line. Indeed, as time went by it became more and more necessary for him to hide his punch lines, but he did not conceal his opinions. His act remained full of harmless amiability in a country where these qualities were on the liquidation list. This harmless amiability hid a kernel of real, indomitable courage. He dared to speak openly about the reality of the Nazis, and that in the middle of Germany. His spiel contained references to concentration camps, the raids on people's homes, the general fear, and general lies. He spoke of these things with infinitely quiet mockery, melancholy, and sadness. Listening to him was extraordinarily comforting.

This March 31 was perhaps his greatest evening. The house was full of people staring at the next day as if into an abyss. Fink made them laugh as I have never heard an audience laugh. It was dramatic laughter, the laughter of a newborn defiance, throwing off numbness and desperation, feeding off the present danger. It was a miracle that the SA had not long since arrived to arrest everybody here. On this evening we would probably have gone on laughing in the police vans. We had been improbably raised above fear and danger. That morning in the *Kammergericht* I had felt weak and indecisive when put to the test. Here I felt strong, brave, and resourceful. If they came here—they, not we, would make the worse showing. The proper words had probably already been sharpened.

We felt a strange, morbid ecstasy as we left, at about midnight, still free. We were in high spirits, talked wildly, and kissed each other on the street, drunk on something more powerful than alcohol: courage. We felt absurdly invulnerable.

It was already the first of April.

## NOTES

<sup>[1]</sup> Werner Fink, comic actor and satirical cabaret performer, founded the *Katakomben* in 1929. It was closed by the Nazis in 1935. Fink survived the war and died in 1978.

Source of English translation: Sebastian Haffner, *Defying Hitler: A Memoir* [written in 1939 in reference to 1933]. First American edition. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002, pp. 152–57.

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History in Documents and Images,

<<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/nazi-germany-1933-1945/ghdi:document-5109>> [July 11, 2025].