

Crossing Hitler: The Man Who Put the Nazis on the Witness Stand

Benjamin Carter Hett

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It sounds like the plot for a thriller by someone like Robert Ludlum. In 1931 Germany, Nazi thugs shoot and wound several men at a dance hall. The incident triggers three months of violence. When the suspects are brought to trial, a brilliant young Jewish lawyer decides to focus the spotlight on their leader. Ordering Adolf Hitler himself into the courtroom, he subjects the rising demagogue to a withering examination. The lawyer will eventually pay with his life.

It sounds like a fictional plot, but it's actually the engrossing real-life story of a fascinating man named Hans Litten, as compiled in a biography/history by Benjamin Carter Hett, himself a former lawyer and the author of an earlier study of German criminal justice during the reign of the last Kaiser.

Litten was no ordinary hero. He was strongly principled and often didactic, if not strident. He went against the grain almost to a fault; Litten demanded severe commitment from everyone else and even more from himself. His brilliance was intimidating, mesmerizing. This was a man who regarded the law, in the author's words, as "a lever of revolution."

The son of a Prussian aristocrat with whom he had a painful parting of the ways, Litten was only in his late twenties when the Eden Dance Palace trial of four Nazi storm-troopers unfolded. Calling Hitler to testify was a daring ploy. The passages of the book which deal with Hitler's two-day appearance are riveting. Here was the one enemy Litten could not afford to have.

Devious yet temperamental, Hitler wanted to make it appear that any brutality by storm-troopers occurred without official Nazi approval. Litten used Hitler's own writings, plus Nazi newspapers, to show otherwise, briefly exposing Hitler to the threat of prosecution for perjury.

The Reichstag fire of February 27, 1933, was the turning point that enabled Hitler to become a dictator. Litten was arrested that very night. The first half of *Crossing Hitler* details Litten's early life, the trial and the immediate aftermath; the second his arrest, imprisonment, and unusual death.

Litten's staunchly loyal mother memorialized her son in a 1940 book. Lawyers in today's Germany remember and honor Litten with a jurisprudence award. For the rest of the world, Hett's well-researched history is an excellent introduction, and a creepy reminder of the insidious power of evil.

DICK CADY (October 13, 2008)

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