

IN THE GARDEN OF BEASTS

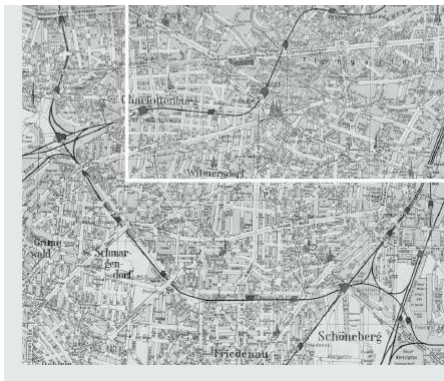


Love, Terror, and an American Family in Hitler's Berlin



ERIK
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Bestselling author of THE DEVIL IN THE WHITE CITY





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Thunderstruck

The Devil in the White City

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IN THE GARDEN OF BEASTS





*LOVE, TERROR,
AND AN AMERICAN FAMILY IN
HITLER'S BERLIN*

ERIK LARSON



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To the girls, and the

next twenty-five

(and in memory of Molly, a good dog)

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*In the middle of the journey of our life I came to myself in a
dark wood where the straight way was lost.*

—DANTE ALIGHIERI,
The Divine Comedy: Canto I
(Carlyle-Wicksteed
Translation, 1932)

Das Vorspiel

*prelude; overture; prologue; preliminary match; foreplay;
performance; practical (exam); audition; das ist erst das ~ that is
just for starters*

—Collins German Unabridged
Dictionary
(seventh edition, 2007)

Once, at the dawn of a very dark time, an American father and daughter found themselves suddenly transported from their snug home in Chicago to the heart of Hitler's Berlin. They remained there for four and a half years, but it is their first year that is the subject of the story to follow, for it coincided with Hitler's ascent from chancellor to absolute tyrant, when everything hung in the balance and nothing was certain. That first year formed a kind of prologue in which all the themes of the greater epic of war and murder soon to come were laid down.

I have always wondered what it would have been like for an outsider to have witnessed firsthand the gathering dark of Hitler's rule. How did the city look, what did one hear, see, and smell, and how did diplomats and other visitors interpret the events occurring around them? Hindsight tells us that during that fragile time the course of history could so easily have been changed. Why, then, did no one change it? Why did it take so long to recognize the real danger posed by Hitler and his regime?

Like most people, I acquired my initial sense of the era from books and photographs that left me with the impression that the world of then had no color, only gradients of gray and black. My two main protagonists, however, encountered the flesh-and-blood reality, while also managing the routine obligations of daily life. Every morning they moved through a city hung with immense banners of red, white, and black; they sat at the same outdoor cafés as did the lean, black-suited members of Hitler's SS, and now and then they caught sight of Hitler himself, a smallish man in a large, open Mercedes. But they also walked each day past homes with balconies lush with red geraniums; they shopped in the city's vast department stores, held tea parties, and breathed deep the spring fragrances of the Tiergarten, Berlin's main park. They knew Goebbels and Göring as social acquaintances with whom they dined, danced, and joked

—until, as their first year reached its end, an event occurred that proved to be one of the most significant in revealing the true character of Hitler and that laid the keystone for the decade to come. For both father and daughter it changed everything.

This is a work of nonfiction. As always, any material between quotation marks comes from a letter, diary, memoir, or other historical document. I made no effort in these pages to write another grand history of the age. My objective was more intimate: to reveal that past world through the experience and perceptions of my two primary subjects, father and daughter, who upon arrival in Berlin embarked on a journey of discovery, transformation, and, ultimately, deepest heartbreak.

There are no heroes here, at least not of the *Schindler's List* variety, but there are glimmers of heroism and people who behave with unexpected grace. Always there is nuance, albeit sometimes of a disturbing nature. That's the trouble with nonfiction. One has to put aside what we all know—*now*—to be true, and try instead to accompany my two innocents through the world as they experienced it.

These were complicated people moving through a complicated time, before the monsters declared their true nature.

—Erik Larson
Seattle

1933

The Man Behind the Curtain

It was common for American expatriates to visit the U.S.

consulate in Berlin, but not in the condition exhibited by the man who arrived there on Thursday, June 29, 1933. He was Joseph Schachno, thirty-one years old, a physician from New York who until recently had been practicing medicine in a suburb of Berlin. Now he stood naked in one of the curtained examination rooms on the first floor of the consulate where on more routine days a public-health surgeon would examine visa applicants seeking to immigrate to the United States. The skin had been flayed from much of his body.

Two consular officials arrived and entered the examination room. One was George S. Messersmith, America's consul general for Germany since 1930 (no relation to Wilhelm "Willy" Messerschmitt, the German aircraft engineer). As the senior Foreign Service man in Berlin, Messersmith oversaw the ten American consulates located in cities throughout Germany. Beside him stood his vice consul, Raymond Geist. As a rule Geist was cool and unflappable, an ideal subaltern, but Messersmith registered the fact that Geist looked pale and deeply shaken.

Both men were appalled by Schachno's condition. "From the neck down to his heels he was a mass of raw flesh," Messersmith saw. "He had been beaten with whips and in every possible way until his flesh was literally raw and bleeding. I took one look and got as quickly as I could to one of the basins where the [public health surgeon] washed his hands."

The beating, Messersmith learned, had occurred nine days earlier, yet the wounds were still vivid. "From the shoulder blades to his knees, after nine days there were still stripes showing that he had been beaten from both sides. His buttocks were practically raw and large areas thereof still without any skin over them. The flesh had at places been practically reduced to a pulp."

If this was nine days later, Messersmith wondered, what had the wounds been like immediately after the

beating had been delivered?

The story emerged:

On the night of June 21, Schachno had been visited at his home by a squad of uniformed men responding to an anonymous denunciation of him as a potential enemy of the state. The men searched the place, and although they found nothing, they took him to their headquarters. Schachno was ordered to undress and immediately subjected to a severe and prolonged beating by two men with a whip. Afterward, he was released. He somehow made his way to his home, and then he and his wife fled to central Berlin, to the residence of his wife's mother. He lay in bed for a week. As soon as he felt able, he went to the consulate.

Messersmith ordered him taken to a hospital and that day issued him a new U.S. passport. Soon afterward, Schachno and his wife fled to Sweden and then to America.

There had been beatings and arrests of American citizens ever since Hitler's appointment as chancellor in January, but nothing as severe as this—though thousands of native Germans had experienced equally severe treatment, and often far worse. For Messersmith it was yet another indicator of the reality of life under Hitler. He understood that all this violence represented more than a passing spasm of atrocity. Something fundamental had changed in Germany.

He understood it, but he was convinced that few others in America did. He was growing increasingly disturbed by the difficulty of persuading the world of the true magnitude of Hitler's threat. It was utterly clear to him that Hitler was in fact secretly and aggressively girding Germany for a war of conquest. "I wish it were really possible to make our people at home understand," he wrote in a June 1933 dispatch to the State Department, "for I feel that they should understand it, how definitely this martial spirit is being developed in

Germany. If this Government remains in power for another year and carries on in the same measure in this direction, it will go far towards making Germany a danger to world peace for years to come.”

He added: “With few exceptions, the men who are running this Government are of a mentality that you and I cannot understand. Some of them are psychopathic cases and would ordinarily be receiving treatment somewhere.”

But Germany still did not have a U.S. ambassador in residence. The former ambassador, Frederic M. Sackett, had left in March, upon the inauguration of Franklin D. Roosevelt as America’s new president. (Inauguration day in 1933 took place on March 4.) For nearly four months the post had been vacant, and the new appointee was not expected to arrive for another three weeks. Messersmith had no firsthand knowledge of the man, only what he had heard from his many contacts in the State Department. What he did know was that the new ambassador would be entering a cauldron of brutality, corruption, and zealotry and would need to be a man of forceful character capable of projecting American interest and power, for power was all that Hitler and his men understood.

And yet the new man was said to be an unassuming sort who had vowed to lead a modest life in Berlin as a gesture to his fellow Americans left destitute by the Depression. Incredibly, the new ambassador was even shipping his own car to Berlin—a beat-up old Chevrolet—to underscore his frugality. This in a city where Hitler’s men drove about town in giant black touring cars each nearly the size of a city bus.

PART I

Into the Wood



The Dodds arrive in Hamburg. ([photo credit p1.1](#))

CHAPTER 1

Means of Escape

The telephone call that forever changed the lives of the Dodd family of Chicago came at noon on Thursday, June 8, 1933, as William E. Dodd sat at his desk at the University of Chicago.

Now chairman of the history department, Dodd had been a professor at the university since 1909, recognized nationally for his work on the American South and for a

biography of Woodrow Wilson. He was sixty-four years old, trim, five feet eight inches tall, with blue-gray eyes and light brown hair. Though his face at rest tended to impart severity, he in fact had a sense of humor that was lively, dry, and easily ignited. He had a wife, Martha, known universally as Mattie, and two children, both in their twenties. His daughter, also named Martha, was twenty-four years old; his son, William Jr.—Bill—was twenty-eight.

By all counts they were a happy family and a close one. Not rich by any means, but well off, despite the economic depression then gripping the nation. They lived in a large house at 5757 Blackstone Avenue in Chicago's Hyde Park neighborhood, a few blocks from the university. Dodd also owned—and every summer tended—a small farm in Round Hill, Virginia, which, according to a county survey, had 386.6 acres, "more or less," and was where Dodd, a Jeffersonian democrat of the first stripe, felt most at home, moving among his twenty-one Guernsey heifers; his four geldings, Bill, Coley, Mandy, and Prince; his Farmall tractor; and his horse-drawn Syracuse plows. He made coffee in a Maxwell House can atop his old wood-burning stove. His wife was not as fond of the place and was more than happy to let him spend time there by himself while the rest of the family remained behind in Chicago. Dodd named the farm Stoneleigh, because of all the rocks strewn across its expanse, and spoke of it the way other men spoke of first loves. "The fruit is so beautiful, almost flawless, red and luscious, as we look at it, the trees still bending under the weight of their burden," he wrote one fine night during the apple harvest. "It all appeals to me."

Though generally not given to cliché, Dodd described the telephone call as a "sudden surprise out of a clear sky." This was, however, something of an exaggeration. Over the preceding several months there had been talk among his friends that one day a call like this might come.

It was the precise nature of the call that startled Dodd, and troubled him.

FOR SOME TIME NOW, Dodd had been unhappy in his position at the university. Though he loved teaching history, he loved writing it more, and for years he had been working on what he expected would be the definitive recounting of early southern history, a four-volume series that he called *The Rise and Fall of the Old South*, but time and again he had found his progress stymied by the routine demands of his job. Only the first volume was near completion, and he was of an age when he feared he would be buried alongside the unfinished remainder. He had negotiated a reduced schedule with his department, but as is so often the case with such artificial ententes, it did not work in the manner he had hoped. Staff departures and financial pressures within the university associated with the Depression had left him working just as hard as ever, dealing with university officials, preparing lectures, and confronting the engulfing needs of graduate students. In a letter to the university's Department of Buildings and Grounds dated October 31, 1932, he pleaded for heat in his office on Sundays so he could have at least one day to devote to uninterrupted writing. To a friend he described his position as "embarrassing."

Adding to his dissatisfaction was his belief that he should have been further along in his career than he was. What had kept him from advancing at a faster clip, he complained to his wife, was the fact that he had not grown up in a life of privilege and instead had been compelled to work hard for all that he achieved, unlike others in his field who had advanced more quickly. And indeed, he had reached his position in life the hard way. Born on October 21, 1869, at his parents' home in the tiny hamlet of Clayton, North Carolina, Dodd entered the

bottom stratum of white southern society, which still adhered to the class conventions of the antebellum era. His father, John D. Dodd, was a barely literate subsistence farmer; his mother, Evelyn Creech, was descended from a more exalted strain of North Carolina stock and deemed to have married down. The couple raised cotton on land given to them by Evelyn's father and barely made a living. In the years after the Civil War, as cotton production soared and prices sank, the family fell steadily into debt to the town's general store, owned by a relative of Evelyn's who was one of Clayton's three men of privilege—"hard men," Dodd called them "... traders and aristocratic masters of their dependents!"

Dodd was one of seven children and spent his youth working the family's land. Although he saw the work as honorable, he did not wish to spend the rest of his life farming and recognized that the only way a man of his lowly background could avoid this fate was by gaining an education. He fought his way upward, at times focusing so closely on his studies that other students dubbed him "Monk Dodd." In February 1891 he entered Virginia Agricultural and Mechanical College (later Virginia Tech). There too he was a sober, focused presence. Other students indulged in such pranks as painting the college president's cow and staging fake duels so as to convince freshmen that they had killed their adversaries. Dodd only studied. He got his bachelor's degree in 1895 and his master's in 1897, when he was twenty-six years old.

At the encouragement of a revered faculty member, and with a loan from a kindly great-uncle, Dodd in June 1897 set off for Germany and the University of Leipzig to begin studies toward a doctorate. He brought his bicycle. He chose to focus his dissertation on Thomas Jefferson, despite the obvious difficulty of acquiring eighteenth-century American documents in Germany. Dodd did his necessary classwork and found archives of relevant materials in London and Berlin. He also did a lot of

matrices in London and Berlin. He also did a lot of traveling, often on his bicycle, and time after time was struck by the atmosphere of militarism that pervaded Germany. At one point one of his favorite professors led a discussion on the question "How helpless would the United States be if invaded by a great German army?" All this Prussian bellicosity made Dodd uneasy. He wrote, "There was too much war spirit everywhere."

Dodd returned to North Carolina in late autumn 1899 and after months of search at last got an instructor's position at Randolph-Macon College in Ashland, Virginia. He also renewed a friendship with a young woman named Martha Johns, the daughter of a well-off landowner who lived near Dodd's hometown. The friendship blossomed into romance and on Christmas Eve 1901, they married.

At Randolph-Macon, Dodd promptly got himself into hot water. In 1902 he published an article in the *Nation* in which he attacked a successful campaign by the Grand Camp of Confederate Veterans to have Virginia ban a history textbook that the veterans deemed an affront to southern honor. Dodd charged that the veterans believed the only valid histories were those that held that the South "was altogether right in seceding from the Union."

The backlash was immediate. An attorney prominent in the veterans' movement launched a drive to have Dodd fired from Randolph-Macon. The school gave Dodd its full support. A year later he attacked the veterans again, this time in a speech before the American Historical Society in which he decried their efforts to "put out of the schools any and all books which do not come up to their standard of local patriotism." He railed that "to remain silent is out of the question for a strong and honest man."

Dodd's stature as a historian grew, and so too did his family. His son was born in 1905, his daughter in 1908. Recognizing that an increase in salary would come in handy and that pressure from his southern foes was

family and that pressure from his southern roots was unlikely to abate, Dodd put his name in the running for an opening at the University of Chicago. He got the job, and in the frigid January of 1909, when he was thirty-nine years old, he and his family made their way to Chicago, where he would remain for the next quarter century. In October 1912, feeling the pull of his heritage and a need to establish his own credibility as a true Jeffersonian democrat, he bought his farm. The grueling work that had so worn on him during his boyhood now became for him both a soul-saving diversion and a romantic harking back to America's past.

Dodd also discovered in himself an abiding interest in the political life, triggered in earnest when in August 1916 he found himself in the Oval Office of the White House for a meeting with President Woodrow Wilson. The encounter, according to one biographer, "profoundly altered his life."

Dodd had grown deeply uneasy about signs that America was sliding toward intervention in the Great War then being fought in Europe. His experience in Leipzig had left him no doubt that Germany alone was responsible for starting the war, in satisfaction of the yearnings of Germany's industrialists and aristocrats, the Junkers, whom he likened to the southern aristocracy before the Civil War. Now he saw the emergence of a similar hubris on the part of America's own industrial and military elites. When an army general tried to include the University of Chicago in a national campaign to ready the nation for war, Dodd bridled and took his complaint directly to the commander in chief.

Dodd wanted only ten minutes of Wilson's time but got far more and found himself as thoroughly charmed as if he'd been the recipient of a potion in a fairy tale. He came to believe that Wilson was correct in advocating U.S. intervention in the war. For Dodd, Wilson became the modern embodiment of Jefferson. Over the next seven years, he and Wilson became friends. Dodd wrote

seven years, he and Wilson became friends, Dodd wrote Wilson's biography. Upon Wilson's death on February 3, 1924, Dodd fell into deep mourning.

At length he came to see Franklin Roosevelt as Wilson's equal and threw himself behind Roosevelt's 1932 campaign, speaking and writing on his behalf whenever an opportunity arose. If he had hopes of becoming a member of Roosevelt's inner circle, however, Dodd soon found himself disappointed, consigned to the increasingly dissatisfying duties of an academic chair.

NOW HE WAS sixty-four years old, and the way he would leave his mark on the world would be with his history of the old South, which also happened to be the one thing that every force in the universe seemed aligned to defeat, including the university's policy of not heating buildings on Sundays.

More and more he considered leaving the university for some position that would allow him time to write, "before it is too late." The idea occurred to him that an ideal job might be an undemanding post within the State Department, perhaps as an ambassador in Brussels or The Hague. He believed that he was sufficiently prominent to be considered for such a position, though he tended to see himself as far more influential in national affairs than in fact he was. He had written often to advise Roosevelt on economic and political matters, both before and immediately after Roosevelt's victory. It surely galled Dodd that soon after the election he received from the White House a form letter stating that while the president wanted every letter to his office answered promptly, he could not himself reply to all of them in a timely manner and thus had asked his secretary to do so in his stead.

Dodd did, however, have several good friends who were close to Roosevelt, including the new secretary of commerce, Daniel Roper. Dodd's son and daughter

were to Roper like nephew and niece, sufficiently close that Dodd had no compunction about dispatching his son as intermediary to ask Roper whether the new administration might see fit to appoint Dodd as minister to Belgium or the Netherlands. "These are posts where the government must have somebody, yet the work is not heavy," Dodd told his son. He confided that he was motivated mainly by his need to complete his *Old South*. "I am not desirous of any appointment from Roosevelt but I am very anxious not to be defeated in a life-long purpose."

In short, Dodd wanted a sinecure, a job that was not too demanding yet that would provide stature and a living wage and, most important, leave him plenty of time to write—this despite his recognition that serving as a diplomat was not something to which his character was well suited. "As to high diplomacy (London, Paris, Berlin) I am not the kind," he wrote to his wife early in 1933. "I am distressed that this is so on your account. I simply am not the sly, two-faced type so necessary to 'lie abroad for the country.' If I were, I might go to Berlin and bend the knee to Hitler—and relearn German." But, he added, "why waste time writing about such a subject? Who would care to live in Berlin the next four years?"

Whether because of his son's conversation with Roper or the play of other forces, Dodd's name soon was in the wind. On March 15, 1933, during a sojourn at his Virginia farm, he went to Washington to meet with Roosevelt's new secretary of state, Cordell Hull, whom he had met on a number of previous occasions. Hull was tall and silver haired, with a cleft chin and strong jaw. Outwardly, he seemed the physical embodiment of all that a secretary of state should be, but those who knew him better understood that when angered he had a most unstatesmanlike penchant for releasing torrents of profanity and that he suffered a speech impediment that turned his *r*'s to *w*'s in the manner of the cartoon

character Elmer Fudd—a trait that Roosevelt now and then made fun of privately, as when he once spoke of Hull's "twade tweaties." Hull, as usual, had four or five red pencils in his shirt pocket, his favored tools of state. He raised the possibility of Dodd receiving an appointment to Holland or Belgium, exactly what Dodd had hoped for. But now, suddenly forced to imagine the day-to-day reality of what such a life would entail, Dodd balked. "After considerable study of the situation," he wrote in his little pocket diary, "I told Hull I could not take such a position."

But his name remained in circulation.

And now, on that Thursday in June, his telephone began to ring. As he held the receiver to his ear, he heard a voice he recognized immediately.

CHAPTER 2

That Vacancy in Berlin

No one wanted the job. What had seemed one of the least challenging tasks facing Franklin D. Roosevelt as newly elected president had, by June 1933, become one of the most intransigent. As ambassadorial posts went, Berlin should have been a plum—not London or Paris, surely, but still one of the great capitals of Europe, and at the center of a country going through revolutionary change under the leadership of its newly appointed chancellor, Adolf Hitler. Depending on one's point of view, Germany was experiencing a great revival or a savage darkening. Upon Hitler's ascent, the country had undergone a brutal spasm of state-condoned violence. Hitler's brown-shirted paramilitary army, the *Sturmabteilung*, or SA—the Storm Troopers—had gone wild, arresting, beating, and in some cases murdering communists, socialists, and Jews. Storm Troopers

established impromptu prisons and torture stations in basements, sheds, and other structures. Berlin alone had fifty of these so-called bunkers. Tens of thousands of people were arrested and placed in “protective custody”—*Schutzhaft*—a risible euphemism. An estimated five hundred to seven hundred prisoners died in custody; others endured “mock drownings and hangings,” according to a police affidavit. One prison near Tempelhof Airport became especially notorious: Columbia House, not to be confused with a sleekly modern new building at the heart of Berlin called Columbus House. The upheaval prompted one Jewish leader, Rabbi Stephen S. Wise of New York, to tell a friend, “the frontiers of civilization have been crossed.”

Roosevelt made his first attempt to fill the Berlin post on March 9, 1933, less than a week after taking office and just as the violence in Germany reached a peak of ferocity. He offered it to James M. Cox, who in 1920 had been a candidate for president with Roosevelt as his running mate.

In a letter laced with flattery, Roosevelt wrote, “It is not only because of my affection for you but also because I think you are singularly fitted to this key place, that I want much to send your name to the Senate as American Ambassador to Germany. I hope much that you will accept after talking it over with your delightful wife, who, by the way, would be perfect as the wife of the Ambassador. Do send me a telegram saying yes.”

Cox said no: the demands of his various business interests, including several newspapers, compelled him to decline. He made no mention of the violence wracking Germany.

Roosevelt set the matter aside to confront the nation’s worsening economic crisis, the Great Depression, which by that spring had put a third of the nation’s nonagricultural labor force out of work and had cut the gross national product in half; he did not return to the

problem until at least a month later, when he offered the job to Newton Baker, who had been secretary of war under Woodrow Wilson and was now a partner in a Cleveland law firm. Baker also declined. So did a third man, Owen D. Young, a prominent businessman. Next Roosevelt tried Edward J. Flynn, a key figure in the Democratic Party and a major supporter. Flynn talked it over with his wife "and we agreed that, because of the age of our small children, such an appointment would be impossible."

At one point Roosevelt joked to a member of the Warburg family, "You know, Jimmy, it would serve that fellow Hitler right if I sent a Jew to Berlin as my ambassador. How would you like the job?"

Now, with the advent of June, a deadline pressed. Roosevelt was engaged in an all-consuming fight to pass his National Industrial Recovery Act, a centerpiece of his New Deal, in the face of fervent opposition by a core group of powerful Republicans. Early in the month, with Congress just days away from its summer adjournment, the bill seemed on the verge of passage but was still under assault by Republicans and some Democrats, who launched salvos of proposed amendments and forced the Senate into marathon sessions. Roosevelt feared that the longer the battle dragged on, the more likely the bill was to fail or be severely weakened, in part because any extension of the congressional session meant risking the wrath of legislators intent on leaving Washington for summer vacation. Everyone was growing cranky. A late-spring heat wave had driven temperatures to record levels throughout the nation at a cost of over a hundred lives. Washington steamed; men stank. A three-column headline on the front page of the *New York Times* read, "ROOSEVELT TRIMS PROGRAM TO HASTEN END OF SESSION; SEES HIS POLICIES MENACED."

Herein lay a conflict: Congress was required to confirm and fund new ambassadors. The sooner

Congress adjourned, the greater the pressure on Roosevelt to choose a new man for Berlin. Thus, he now found himself compelled to consider candidates outside the bounds of the usual patronage choices, including the presidents of at least three colleges and an ardent pacifist named Harry Emerson Fosdick, the Baptist pastor of Riverside Church in Manhattan. None of these seemed ideal, however; none was offered the job.

On Wednesday, June 7, with the congressional adjournment just days away, Roosevelt met with several close advisers and mentioned his frustration at not being able to find a new ambassador. One of those in attendance was Commerce Secretary Roper, whom Roosevelt now and then referred to as "Uncle Dan."

Roper thought a moment and threw out a fresh name, that of a longtime friend: "How about William E. Dodd?"

"Not a bad idea," Roosevelt said, although whether he truly thought so at that instant was by no means clear. Ever affable, Roosevelt was prone to promise things he did not necessarily intend to deliver.

Roosevelt said, "I'll consider it."

DODD WAS ANYTHING BUT the typical candidate for a diplomatic post. He wasn't rich. He wasn't politically influential. He wasn't one of Roosevelt's friends. But he did speak German and was said to know the country well. One potential problem was his past allegiance to Woodrow Wilson, whose belief in engaging other nations on the world stage was anathema to the growing camp of Americans who insisted that the United States avoid entangling itself in the affairs of foreign nations. These "isolationists," led by William Borah of Idaho and Hiram Johnson of California, had become increasingly noisy and powerful. Polls showed that 95 percent of Americans wanted the United States to avoid involvement in any foreign war. Although Roosevelt himself favored international involvement, he kept his ideas on the

international engagement, he kept his views on the subject veiled so as not to impede the advance of his domestic agenda. Dodd, however, seemed unlikely to spark the isolationists' passions. He was a historian of sober temperament, and his firsthand understanding of Germany had obvious value.

Berlin, moreover, was not yet the supercharged outpost it would become within the year. There existed at this time a widespread perception that Hitler's government could not possibly endure. Germany's military power was limited—its army, the Reichswehr, had only one hundred thousand men, no match for the military forces of neighboring France, let alone the combined might of France, England, Poland, and the Soviet Union. And Hitler himself had begun to seem like a more temperate actor than might have been predicted given the violence that had swept Germany earlier in the year. On May 10, 1933, the Nazi Party burned unwelcome books—Einstein, Freud, the brothers Mann, and many others—in great pyres throughout Germany, but seven days later Hitler declared himself committed to peace and went so far as to pledge complete disarmament if other countries followed suit. The world swooned with relief. Against the broader backdrop of the challenges facing Roosevelt—global depression, another year of crippling drought—Germany seemed more an irritant than anything else. What Roosevelt and Secretary Hull considered the most pressing German problem was the \$1.2 billion that Germany owed to American creditors, a debt that Hitler's regime seemed increasingly unwilling to pay.

No one appeared to give much thought to the kind of personality a man might need in order to deal effectively with Hitler's government. Secretary Roper believed "that Dodd would be astute in handling diplomatic duties and, when conferences grew tense, he would turn the tide by quoting Jefferson."

ROOSEVELT DID TAKE Roper's suggestion seriously.

Time was running out, and there were far more pressing matters to be dealt with as the nation sank ever more deeply into economic despair.

The next day, June 8, Roosevelt ordered a long-distance call placed to Chicago.

He kept it brief. He told Dodd: "I want to know if you will render the government a distinct service. I want you to go to Germany as ambassador."

He added, "I want an American liberal in Germany as a standing example."

It was hot in the Oval Office, hot in Dodd's office. The temperature in Chicago was well into the nineties.

Dodd told Roosevelt he needed time to think and to talk with his wife.

Roosevelt gave him two hours.

FIRST DODD SPOKE with university officials, who urged him to accept. Next he walked home, quickly, through the intensifying heat.

He had deep misgivings. His *Old South* was his priority. Serving as ambassador to Hitler's Germany would leave him no more time to write, and probably far less, than did his obligations at the university.

His wife, Mattie, understood, but she knew his need for recognition and his sense that by this time in his life he should have achieved more than he had. Dodd in turn felt that he owed something to her. She had stood by him all these years for what he saw as little reward. "There is no place suitable to my kind of mentality," he had told her earlier that year in a letter from the farm, "and I regret it much for your sake and that of the children." The letter continued, "I know it must be distressing to such a true and devoted wife to have so inept a husband at [a] critical moment of history which he has so long foreseen,

one who can not fit himself to high position and thus reap some of the returns of a life of toilsome study. It happens to be your misfortune.”

After a brisk bout of discussion and marital soul-searching, Dodd and his wife agreed he should accept Roosevelt's offer. What made the decision a little easier was Roosevelt's concession that if the University of Chicago “insists,” Dodd could return to Chicago within a year. But right now, Roosevelt said, he needed Dodd in Berlin.

At two thirty, half an hour late, his misgivings temporarily suppressed, Dodd called the White House and informed Roosevelt's secretary that he would accept the job. Two days later Roosevelt placed Dodd's appointment before the Senate, which confirmed him that day, requiring neither Dodd's presence nor the kind of interminable hearing that one day would become commonplace for key nominations. The appointment attracted little comment in the press. The *New York Times* placed a brief report on page twelve of its Sunday, June 11, newspaper.

Secretary Hull, on his way to an important economic conference in London, never had a voice in the matter. Even had he been present when Dodd's name first came up, he likely would have had little say, for one emerging characteristic of Roosevelt's governing style was to make direct appointments within agencies without involving their superiors, a trait that annoyed Hull no end. He would claim later, however, that he had no objection to Dodd's appointment, save for what he saw as Dodd's tendency to “get out of bounds in his excess enthusiasm and impetuosity and run off on tangents every now and then like our friend William Jennings Bryan. Hence I had some reservations about sending a good friend, able and intelligent though he was, to a ticklish spot such as I knew Berlin was and would continue to be.”

Later, Edward Flynn, one of the candidates who had

turned down the job, would claim falsely that Roosevelt had phoned Dodd in error—that he had meant instead to offer the ambassadorship to a former Yale law professor named Walter F. Dodd. Rumor of such a mistake gave rise to a nickname, “Telephone Book Dodd.”



NEXT DODD INVITED his two grown children, Martha and Bill, promising the experience of a lifetime. He also saw in this adventure an opportunity to have his family together one last time. His *Old South* was important to him, but family and home were his great love and need. One cold December night when Dodd was alone on his farm, Christmas near, his daughter and wife in Paris, where Martha was spending a year of study, Bill away as well, Dodd sat down to write a letter to his daughter. He was in a gloomy mood that night. That he now had two grown children seemed an impossibility; soon, he knew, they would be venturing off on their own and their future connection to him and his wife would grow inevitably more tenuous. He saw his own life as nearly expended, his *Old South* anything but complete.

He wrote: “My dear child, if you will not take offense at the term? You are to me so precious, your happiness through this troubled life so near to my heart that I never cease to think of you as a buoyant, growing child; yet I know your years and admire your thought and maturity. I no longer have a child.” He mused upon “the roads ahead of us. Yours just beginning, mine so far advanced that I begin to count the shadows that fall about me, the friends that have departed, other friends none too secure of their tenure! It’s May and almost December.” Home, he wrote, “has been the joy of my life.” But now everyone was scattered to the far corners of the world. “I can not endure the thought of our lives all going in different directions—and so few years remaining.”

With Roosevelt’s offer, an opportunity had arisen that

could bring them all together again, if only for a while.

CHAPTER 3 The Choice

Given the nation's economic crisis, Dodd's invitation was not one to be accepted frivolously. Martha and Bill were lucky to have jobs—Martha's as assistant literary editor of the *Chicago Tribune*, Bill's as a teacher of history and a scholar in training—though thus far Bill had pursued his career in a lackluster manner that dismayed and worried his father. In a series of letters to his wife in April 1933, Dodd poured out his worries about Bill. "William is a fine teacher, but he dreads hard work of all kinds." He was too distractible, Dodd wrote, especially if an automobile was anywhere near. "It would never do for us to have a car in Chicago if we wish to help him forward his studies," Dodd wrote. "The existence of a car with wheels is too great a temptation."

Martha had fared much better in her work, to Dodd's delight, but he worried about the tumult in her personal life. Though he loved both his children deeply, Martha was his great pride. (Her very first word, according to family papers, was "Daddy.") She was five feet three inches tall, blonde, with blue eyes and a large smile. She had a romantic imagination and a flirtatious manner, and these had inflamed the passions of many men, both young and not so young.

In April 1930, when she was only twenty-one years old, she became engaged to an English professor at Ohio State University named Royall Henderson Snow. By June the engagement had been canceled. She had a brief affair with a novelist, W. L. River, whose *Death of a Young Man* had been published several years earlier. He called her Motsie and pledged himself to her in letters

composed of stupendously long run-on sentences, in one case seventy-four lines of single-spaced typewriting. At the time this passed for experimental prose. "I want nothing from life except you," he wrote. "I want to be with you forever, to work and write for you, to live wherever you want to live, to love nothing, nobody but you, to love you with the passion of earth but also with the above earthly elements of more eternal, spiritual love. ..."

He did not, however, get his wish. Martha fell in love with a different man, a Chicagoan named James Burnham, who wrote of "kisses soft, light like a petal brushing." They became engaged. Martha seemed ready this time to go through with it, until one evening every assumption she had made as to her impending marriage became upended. Her parents had invited a number of guests to a gathering at the family house on Blackstone Avenue, among them George Bassett Roberts, a veteran of the Great War and now vice president of a bank in New York City. His friends called him simply Bassett. He lived in Larchmont, a suburb north of the city, with his parents. He was tall, full lipped, and handsome. An admiring newspaper columnist, writing about his promotion, observed, "His face is smooth-shaven. His voice is soft. His speech inclined to slowness.... There is nothing about him to suggest the old-fashioned hard-shell banker or the dry-as-dust statistician."

At first, as he stood among the other guests, Martha did not think him terribly compelling, but later in the evening she came across him standing apart and alone. She was "stricken," she wrote. "It was pain and sweetness like an arrow in flight, as I saw you anew and away from the rest, in the hallway of our home. This sounds perfectly ridiculous, but truly it was like that, the only time I knew love at first sight."

Bassett was similarly moved, and they launched a long-distance romance full of energy and passion. In a

letter on September 19, 1931, he wrote, "What fun it was in the swimming pool that afternoon, and how cute you were with me after I had taken my bathing suit off!" And a few lines later, "Ye gods, what a woman, what a woman!" As Martha put it, he "deflowered" her. He called her "honey-bunch" and "honeybuncha mia."

But he confounded her. He did not behave in the manner she had grown to expect from men. "Never before or since have I loved and been loved so much and not had proposals of marriage within a short time!" she wrote to him years later. "So I was deeply wounded and I think there was wormwood embittering my tree of love!" She was the first to want marriage, but he was uncertain. She maneuvered. She maintained her engagement to Burnham, which of course made Bassett jealous. "Either you love me, or you don't love me," he wrote from Larchmont, "and if you do, and are in your senses, you cannot marry another."

At length they wore each other down and did marry, in March 1932, but it was a measure of their lingering uncertainty that they resolved to keep the marriage a secret even from their friends. "I desperately loved and tried to 'get' you for a long time, but afterwards, maybe with the exhaustion of the effort, the love itself became exhausted," Martha wrote. And then, the day after their wedding, Bassett made a fatal mistake. It was bad enough that he had to leave for New York and his job at the bank, but worse was his failure that day to send her flowers—a "trivial" error, as she later assessed it, but emblematic of something deeper. Soon afterward Bassett traveled to Geneva to attend an international conference on gold, and in so doing committed another such error, failing to call her before his departure to "show some nervousness about our marriage and impending geographical separation."

They spent the first year of their marriage apart, with periodic come-togethers in New York and Chicago, but

this physical separation amplified the pressures on their relationship. She acknowledged later that she should have gone to live with him in New York and turned the Geneva trip into a honeymoon, as Bassett had suggested. But even then Bassett had seemed uncertain. In one telephone call he wondered aloud whether their marriage might have been a mistake. "That was IT for me," Martha wrote. By then she had begun "flirting"—her word—with other men and had begun an affair with Carl Sandburg, a longtime friend of her parents whom she had known since she was fifteen years old. He sent her drafts of poems on tiny, odd-shaped slips of thin paper and two locks of his blond hair, tied with black coat-button thread. In one note he proclaimed, "I love you past telling I love you with Shenandoah shouts and dim blue rain whispers." Martha dropped just enough hints to torment Bassett. As she told him later, "I was busy healing my wounds and hurting you with Sandburg and others."

All these forces coalesced one day on the lawn of the Dodd house on Blackstone Avenue. "Do you know really why our marriage didn't turn out?" she wrote. "Because I was too immature and young, even at 23, to want to leave my family! My heart broke when my father said to me, while fussing with something on our front lawn, shortly after you married me, 'So my dear little girl wants to leave her old father.' "

And now, in the midst of all this personal turmoil, her father came to her with an invitation to join him in Berlin, and suddenly she confronted a choice: Bassett and the bank and ultimately, inevitably, a house in Larchmont, kids, a lawn—or her father and Berlin and who knew what?

Her father's invitation was irresistible. She told Bassett later, "I had to choose between him and 'adventure,' and you. I couldn't help making the choice I did."

The following week Dodd took a train to Washington, where, on Friday, June 16, he met Roosevelt for lunch, which was served on two trays at the president's desk.

Roosevelt, smiling and cheerful, launched with obvious relish into a story about a recent visit to Washington by the head of Germany's Reichsbank, Hjalmar Schacht—full name Hjalmar Horace Greeley Schacht—who held the power to determine whether Germany would repay its debts to American creditors. Roosevelt explained how he had instructed Secretary Hull to deploy gamesmanship to defuse Schacht's legendary arrogance. Schacht was to be brought to Hull's office and made to stand in front of the secretary's desk. Hull was to act as if Schacht weren't there and "to pretend to be deeply engaged in looking for certain papers, leaving Schacht standing and unobserved for three minutes," as Dodd recalled the story. At last, Hull was to find what he'd been searching for—a stern note from Roosevelt condemning any attempt by Germany to default. Only then was Hull to stand and greet Schacht, while simultaneously handing him the note. The purpose of this routine, Roosevelt told Dodd, "was to take a little of the arrogance out of the German's bearing." Roosevelt seemed to think the plan had worked extremely well.

Roosevelt now brought the conversation around to what he expected of Dodd. First he raised the matter of Germany's debt, and here he expressed ambivalence. He acknowledged that American bankers had made what he called "exorbitant profits" lending money to German businesses and cities and selling associated bonds to U.S. citizens. "But our people are entitled to repayment, and while it is altogether beyond governmental responsibility, I want you to do all you can to prevent a

moratorium"—a German suspension of payment. "It would tend to retard recovery."

The president turned next to what everyone seemed to be calling the Jewish "problem" or "question."

FOR ROOSEVELT, THIS WAS treacherous ground. Though appalled by Nazi treatment of Jews and aware of the violence that had convulsed Germany earlier in the year, he refrained from issuing any direct statement of condemnation. Some Jewish leaders, like Rabbi Wise, Judge Irving Lehman, and Lewis L. Strauss, a partner at Kuhn, Loeb & Company, wanted Roosevelt to speak out; others, like Felix Warburg and Judge Joseph Proskauer, favored the quieter approach of urging the president to ease the entry of Jews into America. Roosevelt's reluctance on both fronts was maddening. By November 1933, Wise would describe Roosevelt as "immovable, incurable and even inaccessible excepting to those of his Jewish friends whom he can safely trust not to trouble him with any Jewish problems." Wrote Felix Warburg, "So far all the vague promises have not materialized into any action." Even Roosevelt's good friend Felix Frankfurter, a Harvard law professor whom he later named to the Supreme Court, found himself unable to move the president to action, much to his frustration. But Roosevelt understood that the political costs of any public condemnation of Nazi persecution or any obvious effort to ease the entry of Jews into America were likely to be immense, because American political discourse had framed the Jewish problem as an immigration problem. Germany's persecution of Jews raised the specter of a vast influx of Jewish refugees at a time when America was reeling from the Depression. The isolationists added another dimension to the debate by insisting, as did Hitler's government, that Nazi oppression of Germany's Jews was a domestic German affair and thus none of America's business.

Even America's Jews were deeply divided on how to approach the problem. On one side stood the American Jewish Congress, which called for all manner of protest, including marches and a boycott of German goods. One of its most visible leaders was Rabbi Wise, its honorary president, who in 1933 was growing increasingly frustrated with Roosevelt's failure to speak out. During a trip to Washington when he sought in vain to meet with the president, Rabbi Wise wrote to his wife, "If he refuse [sic] to see me, I shall return and let loose an avalanche of demands for action by Jewry. I have other things up my sleeve. Perhaps it will be better, for I shall be free to speak as I have never spoken before. And, God helping me, I will fight."

On the other side stood Jewish groups aligned with the American Jewish Committee, headed by Judge Proskauer, which counseled a quieter path, fearing that noisy protests and boycotts would only make things worse for Jews still in Germany. One who shared this point of view was Leo Wormser, a Jewish attorney in Chicago. In a letter to Dodd, Wormser wrote that "we in Chicago ... have been steadfastly opposing the program of Mr. Samuel Untermyer and Dr. Stephen Wise to further an organized Jewish boycott against German goods." Such a boycott, he explained, could stimulate more intense persecution of Germany's Jews, "and we know that, as to many of them, it could be still worse than it now is." He stated also that a boycott would "hamper efforts of friends in Germany to bring about a more conciliatory attitude through an appeal to reason and to self interest," and could impair Germany's ability to pay its bond debt to American holders. He feared the repercussions of an act that would be identified solely with Jews. He told Dodd, "We feel that the boycott if directed and publicized by Jews, will befog the issue which should not be 'will Jews endure,' but 'will liberty endure.' " As Ben Charny wrote in *The Warburgs*: "A

choice. As Roth Crenshaw wrote in *The Harbors*, "A fatal division sapped 'international Jewry' even as the Nazi press claimed that it operated with a single, implacable will."

Where both factions did agree, however, was on the certainty that any campaign that explicitly and publicly sought to boost Jewish immigration to America could only lead to disaster. In early June 1933 Rabbi Wise wrote to Felix Frankfurter, at this point a Harvard law professor, that if debate over immigration reached the floor of the House it could "lead to an explosion against us." Indeed, anti-immigration sentiment in America would remain strong into 1938, when a *Fortune* poll reported that some two-thirds of those surveyed favored keeping refugees out of the country.

Within the Roosevelt administration itself there was deep division on the subject. Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins, the first woman in American history to hold a cabinet position, was energetic in trying to get the administration to do something to make it easier for Jews to gain entry to America. Her department oversaw immigration practices and policy but had no role in deciding who actually received or was denied a visa. That fell to the State Department and its foreign consuls, and they took a decidedly different view of things. Indeed, some of the department's most senior officers harbored an outright dislike of Jews.

One of these was William Phillips, undersecretary of state, the second-highest-ranking man in the department after Secretary Hull. Phillips's wife and Eleanor Roosevelt were childhood friends; it was FDR, not Hull, who had chosen Phillips to be undersecretary. In his diary Phillips described a business acquaintance as "my little Jewish friend from Boston." Phillips loved visiting Atlantic City, but in another diary entry he wrote, "The place is infested with Jews. In fact, the whole beach scene on Saturday afternoon and Sunday was an extraordinary sight—very little sand to be seen, the

characteristic sign—very much said to be seen, the whole beach covered by slightly clothed Jews and Jewesses.”

Another key official, Wilbur J. Carr, an assistant secretary of state who had overall charge of the consular service, called Jews “kikes.” In a memorandum on Russian and Polish immigrants he wrote, “They are filthy, Un-American and often dangerous in their habits.” After a trip to Detroit, he described the city as being full of “dust, smoke, dirt, Jews.” He too complained of the Jewish presence in Atlantic City. He and his wife spent three days there one February, and for each of the days he made an entry in his diary that disparaged Jews. “In all our day’s journey along the Boardwalk we saw but few Gentiles,” he wrote on the first day. “Jews everywhere, and of the commonest kind.” He and his wife dined that night in the Claridge Hotel and found its dining room full of Jews, “and few presented a good appearance. Only two others beside myself in dinner jacket. Very careless atmosphere in dining room.” The next night the Carrs went to dinner at a different hotel, the Marlborough-Blenheim, and found it far more refined. “I like it,” Carr wrote. “How different from the Jewish atmosphere of the Claridge.”

An official of the American Jewish Committee described Carr as “an anti-Semite and a trickster, who talks beautifully and contrives to do nothing for us.”

Both Carr and Phillips favored strict adherence to a provision in the nation’s immigration laws that barred entry to all would-be immigrants considered “likely to become a public charge,” the notorious “LPC clause.” A component of the Immigration Act of 1917, it had been reinstated by the Hoover administration in 1930 to discourage immigration at a time when unemployment was soaring. Consular officials possessed great power over who got to come to America because they were the ones who decided which visa applicants could be excluded under the LPC clause. Immigration law also

required that applicants provide a police affidavit attesting to their good character, along with duplicate copies of birth certificates and other government records. "It seems quite preposterous," one Jewish memoirist wrote, "to have to go to your enemy and ask for a character reference."

Jewish activists charged that America's consulates abroad had been instructed quietly to grant only a fraction of the visas allowed for each country, a charge that proved to have merit. The Labor Department's own solicitor, Charles E. Wyzanski, discovered in 1933 that consuls had been given informal oral instructions to limit the number of immigration visas they approved to 10 percent of the total allowed by each nation's quota. Jewish leaders contended, further, that the act of acquiring police records had become not merely difficult, but dangerous—"an almost insuperable obstacle," as Judge Proskauer stated in a letter to Undersecretary Phillips.

Phillips took offense at Proskauer's depiction of consuls as obstacles. "The consul," Phillips replied, gently chiding, "is only concerned with determining in a helpful and considerate manner whether applicants for visas have met the requirements of law."

One result, according to Proskauer and other Jewish leaders, was that Jews simply did not apply for immigration to the United States. Indeed, the number of Germans who applied for visas was a tiny fraction of the twenty-six thousand allowed under the annual quota set for the country. This disparity gave officials within the State Department a powerful statistical argument for opposing reform: how could there be a problem if so few Jews applied in the first place? It was an argument that Roosevelt, as early as April 1933, appeared to accept. He also knew that any effort to liberalize immigration rules might well prompt Congress to respond with drastic reductions of existing quotas.

By the time of his lunch with Dodd, Roosevelt was acutely aware of the sensitivities at play.

"The German authorities are treating the Jews shamefully and the Jews in this country are greatly excited," Roosevelt told him. "But this is also not a governmental affair. We can do nothing except for American citizens who happen to be made victims. We must protect them, and whatever we can do to moderate the general persecution by unofficial and personal influence ought to be done."

THE CONVERSATION TURNED to practicalities. Dodd insisted he would live within his designated salary of \$17,500, a lot of money during the Depression but a skimpy sum for an ambassador who would have to entertain European diplomats and Nazi officials. It was a point of principle for Dodd: he did not think an ambassador should live extravagantly while the rest of the nation suffered. For him, however, it also happened to be a moot point, since he lacked the independent wealth that so many other ambassadors possessed and thus could not have lived extravagantly even if he had wanted to.

"You are quite right," Roosevelt told him. "Aside from two or three general dinners and entertainments, you need not indulge in any expensive social affairs. Try to give fair attention to Americans in Berlin and occasional dinners to Germans who are interested in American relations. I think you can manage to live within your income and not sacrifice any essential parts of the service."

After some additional conversation about trade tariffs and arms reductions, the lunch came to an end.

It was two o'clock. Dodd left the White House and walked to the State Department, where he planned to meet with various officials and to read dispatches filed from Berlin, namely the lengthy reports written by Consul