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Laina Farhat-Holzman
lfarhat102@aol.com

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**Erik Larson, *In the Garden of Beasts: Love, Terror, and an American Family in Hitler's Berlin*
Crown Publishers, 2011**

Reviewed by Laina Farhat-Holzman
lfarhat102@aol.com

Erik Larson has the remarkable ability to write solid history as though it were fiction. He selects issues so significant that they are page-turners, but there is nothing in his books that cannot be substantiated by the letters, memoirs or other documents of the participants of the events at the time.

For example, his *Dead Wake*, the account of the sinking of the Lusitania, reads like a thriller: a German submarine hunting a British ocean liner with a number of important American passengers on board in the tense time during World War I. It is very enlightening to see the increasing ruthlessness of the Germans in that war in which they violated every former rule of civility; we also see the ruthlessness of Winston Churchill, who will sacrifice American civilians to bring America into the war. We watch an American President, Woodrow Wilson, whose judgment is clouded by bereavement, then love, then a stroke. Leaders are human beings. And finally, we see the hubris of the day's modern scientists and engineers, who considered the Lusitania (like the Titanic) unsinkable. Larson accomplishes all this with one book.

In the Garden of Beasts may be even more important for our understanding of one of the most important mysteries of the twentieth century. How could a country as cultured, educated and sophisticated as Germany permit itself to be taken over by a group of thugs with scarcely a murmur?

It did not happen with scarcely a murmur. The takeover was far more complex than that, and this book provides us with an inside view of a seminal year, 1933-34, in which this takeover could have gone either way. The main inside view is that of a particularly able observer: William E. Dodd, Chairman of the History Department of the University of Chicago, appointed by President Roosevelt as Ambassador to Germany after Roosevelt was turned down by several other more likely (wealthy) candidates.

Dodd was certainly not one of the usual 'old boys' club' appointees. He was, however, a distinguished historian, had gone to the university in Germany and was fluent in German, had fond memories of the country, and promised to be eyes and ears for the president, reporting the weird events of the new Nazi regime roiling Germany. Dodd also promised to live on his salary, unheard of in diplomatic circles where diplomats brought their own money.

Dodd set out for Berlin with his family, including another important eye-witness, his grown daughter, Martha, a well-educated and sexually-liberated airhead who “fell in love” with a succession of beaux including the newly appointed head of the Gestapo, the French Ambassador, and a Russian who turned out to be the head of the NKVD. Although her romantic judgment was poor, her diary entries and those of her lovers are extremely interesting!

The title of the book is also significant. “The Garden of Beasts” is a translation of Tiergarten, the main park in Berlin, around which most of the embassies were located and where Ambassador Dodd walked each day. It was one place where people could walk and talk without being overheard. It was also a place where someone observed: ‘Germans love animals! Their dogs and horses are so loved, fed, talked to! Much better than they treat their children and each other.’

The Dodds arrived in Germany with mixed views of the Nazi government. Dodd was skeptical from the start, quite certain that this was a temporary anomaly. However, Martha was, as were many Americans of her class at the time (such as Charles Lindbergh), an enthusiast. She loved what she considered the vitality of the ‘new Germany.’ The blond, healthy, young Germans striding around, the cleanliness, the seeming return to work from the desperation of the prior depression—all this seemed good to her.

And like her class of Americans, she was theoretically anti-Semitic. She didn’t hate Jews; just thought that “they had too much power” in the United States. But this dislike didn’t stop the Dodds from renting an amazing mansion in the Tiergarten region for next to nothing! Lovely mansions were available in that neighborhood that belonged to Jews suddenly deciding to leave Germany. How fortunate.

Dodd left his post in 1937, just before “Kristallnacht,” after which Germany’s intentions for the Jews left no doubt. In this book, the Dodds go through a transformation, particularly Ambassador Dodd; beginning mildly anti-Semitic, by the end of his tour of duty he turns into a Paul Revere, warning that the Nazis were going to take on all of Europe and planned to murder all the Jews. He was greeted with disbelief by the American isolationists—only to be proven right by 1941.

The most surprising revelations in the book are those about the “Night of the Long Knives” in 1934, which was the night in which Hitler supposedly acted with speed to wipe out the particularly thuggish Brownshirts, the Storm Troopers, who were supposedly plotting against him. A reading of the diaries and memoirs indicates that this is not what happened at all. This was one of those moments in which events could have gone in either direction. There had been rumors all summer that the Army was going to get rid of Hitler. Democratic forces in the country were protesting the seizure of power by both Hitler and the Storm Troopers. It was starting to seem as if Germany might be coming to its senses. But then events changed.

The Brownshirt ‘plot’ was bogus. Hitler fabricated it to seize an opportunity to grab total control over Germany. Not only did he get rid of his armed enemies, he got rid of all his democratic enemies as well (including one unfortunate music critic, whose name led him to be mistaken for somebody else). This purge set up such a regime of fear that nobody ever got out from under until 1945.

How thugs can take over a regime is also contemplated by Martha’s lover, Diels, the first head of the Gestapo—a man by far not the worst of those to come later. Diels commented later that his organization seemed to draw in every psychopath in Germany, something that was frightening even to him.

One description stays with me: that of frogs in a pot of warm water. They do not realize that the water is coming to a boil until it is too late. This was Germany during that fateful year.

One last thought about a civilized country going bad. In retrospect, there were signals as that country progressively broke the rules of civilized behavior. Germany was the first to use poison gas, the first to use submarines to attack civilian ocean liners, the first to use dirigibles to drop bombs on cities. And, all this occurred in World War I. In World War II, Germany carried this uncivilized behavior to its apotheosis, perpetrating systematic genocide on a theretofore unimaginable scale.

Larson is a master writer. This is an important book.