

Every Man Dies Alone

by Hans Fallada
(Melville House, 2009)

Review by Hans Sherrer

Every Man Dies Alone by Hans Fallada is a **semi-historical novel** based on the real-life event of a husband and wife distributing several hundred handwritten postcards throughout Berlin from 1940 to 1942. Those postcards encouraged people to passively resist the German government by engaging in work slowdowns and to not contribute to the “winter relief fund” that was used to support the war.

Fallada (the pen name of Rudolf Ditzen) relied on his personal experience of living in Germany during the entirety of the Nazi era (1933-45) to create a portrait of wartime Germany that is so realistically grim that you can not just understand, but almost feel the emotional turmoil that caused two middle-aged working class Germans who had been loyal to the government and tried to mind their own business, to embark on their own non-violent campaign opposing Hitler and the Nazis. Fallada makes painfully clear it was a campaign that was nothing less than a suicide mission.

Otto and Anna Quangel were jolted out of their lethargy of simply accepting the Nazi regime as a given by the death of their son during the 1940 invasion of France.

Wanting to do something to undermine the Nazis hold on power and hasten the day when parents wouldn't have to endure their anguish, Otto came up with the idea of writing anti-Nazi messages on postcards that they would distribute by placing in public places around Berlin. The postcards would let people know they weren't alone in opposing the government's policies. Otto and Anna embarked on their postcard campaign by setting aside Sunday to work on them after which Otto would distribute them.

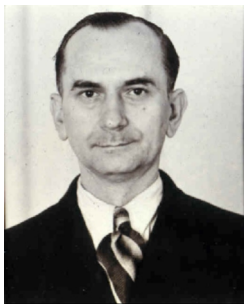
One can imagine the reaction of the Berlin police and the Gestapo when they learned postcards critical of the Nazi regime were being found all over Berlin: top priority was given to finding the traitors.

The magnitude of what the Quangels embarked upon is put in perspective by Fallada's evocative description of the

subconscious fear Germans lived in of saying or doing something that could be considered unpatriotic, and which could be reported to the Gestapo by a neighbor, co-worker, or stranger they passed on the street. Informers were everywhere.

It is driven home in *Every Man Dies Alone* that under Nazi rule all of Germany was a prison and no one — not even police officers — were safe from instantly being treated as an inmate on the slightest suspicion of disloyalty. Being picked-up by the Gestapo for questioning was a traumatic experience, and a person held in Berlin's Gestapo headquarters could turn to jelly when threatened with being sent to the “basement” where there were no rules limiting an interrogation.

However, the German government — even under its control by the Nazis — followed the general form of established protocols in criminal prosecutions, and when arrested the Quangels were charged with the capital crime of treason. Although the outcome of their trial was a foregone conclusion because it was presided over by Roland Freisler, the most fanatical pro-Nazi judge in Germany, it was surreal with moments of levity and high drama. Anna's lawyer valiantly tried to introduce evidence to mitigate her sentence

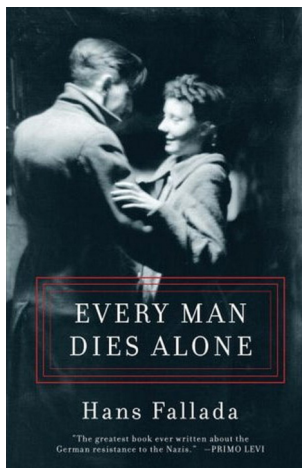


Otto Hermann Hampel (June 21, 1897 - April 08, 1943). Gestapo photo taken after Otto's arrest.

since she and her husband had pled guilty to treason for writing and distributing the postcards. Freisler would have nothing to do with considering the mitigating evidence, and for trying her lawyer felt the icy wind of Freisler's wrath. Anna's lawyer is the only person in *Every Man Dies Alone* involved in the machinery of the

German government who acts in a way that can be described as heroic. Even though his efforts were futile to change her sentence, he took risks in trying to inject reason and sanity into the proceedings. Otto's lawyer on the other hand didn't pretend to have anything but disgust for Otto or make any effort to represent him.

A significant portion of the book is comprised of how Otto and Anna dealt with being imprisoned while awaiting execution



of their sentences. Up to the end they didn't waiver in their loyalty to each other or doubt that writing and distributing the postcards was the right thing to do.

Although *Every Man Dies Alone* can be read on a number of levels: as a love story between Otto and Anna; as a story of the extremes a couple will go to in the memory of their son; it drives home with a sledge hammer that a totalitarian regime such as

the Nazis depends on the good in people being co-opted by their willingness to at least acquiesce to that regime's evil actions and do nothing to undermine it. That is why the resources of the Reich were quietly directed towards crushing the Quangels so their work towards a peaceful Germany wouldn't inspire others. Otto had the clarity after his arrest to observe the absurdity that the gang of criminals ruling Germany branded everyone who didn't support them as a criminal.

Stylistically *Every Man Dies Alone* is somewhat unusual, at least in its English translation. Fallada doesn't try to seduce the reader with flowery words and catchy phrases, or plot contrivances. The Quangels were uncomplicated people with limited educations and Fallada doesn't try to imbue them with qualities they didn't have. The postcards

Otto wrote had short and direct messages because he wasn't used to expressing his thoughts in writing. Neither were the stool pigeons Otto and Anna had to constantly keep an eye out for complex people: they primarily wanted to be paid a reward or garner the good will of a policeman to overlook some illegality of their own.

The Quangels in real life they were Otto and Elise Hampel, and it was her brother who was killed in 1940 during Germany's inva-

sion of France. Fallada was a prominent writer in Germany, and after WWII a friend provided him with the Hampel's Gestapo file, suggesting he consider writing a book based on their case. *Every Man Dies Alone* was published in Germany just weeks after Fallada's death at 53 in February 1947. However, the Hampel's story was not generally known outside of Germany until the book was translated and published in English in 2009, be-

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cause all but a few of their postcards were turned over to the police by the people who found them. In contrast, the leaflet campaign by the White Rose, a loosely knit group of mostly young people, became known during World War II when one of their leaflets critical of the Nazi regime and that encouraged passive resistance was smuggled to England.

The Hampels were convicted of treason in Judge Freisler's court on January 22, 1943 and sentenced to death by beheading. One month later, on February 22 the first three of the White Rose members who were captured -- Sophie Scholl, her brother Hans Scholl, and Christoph Probst -- were convicted of treason in Judge Freisler's court and sentenced to death. Others involved in the White Rose were later captured, and sentenced to death or prison after their conviction in Judge Freisler's courtroom.

The Hampels were not naive about the consequences if their identity was discovered. Otto's Gestapo file records that after his arrest he told his interrogators he was "happy with the idea" of protesting against Hitler and the Nazi regime.

Yet in spite of knowing their likely fate if arrested, the Hampels (and the White Rose participants) chose to speak out about Germany's path of destruction under Hitler and his Nazi cohorts rather than play it safe and

try and survive the war by silently going along to get along.

The obedience of all but a small fraction of people to the directives of an authority figure has been well documented in a number of controlled experiments beginning with those of Stanley Milgram at Yale University in the early 1960s. Psychologist Philip Zimbardo **observed in** *The Lucifer Effect: Understanding How Good People Turn Evil* (Random House, 2007) that what needs to be understood is why such a tiny percentage of people are able to muster the intestinal fortitude to not acquiesce by participating in something they think is wrong, or stand by without protest while others do so. The small number of Germans willing to do more than just privately criticize Hitler and the Nazis were no match for the overwhelming numbers of those who wouldn't do so.

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn knew first-hand about persecution by a despotic government, and he wrote **in his essay** *The Smeareders* that "the vertical seems a ridiculous posture" to people "*standing crookedly*."¹ The Hampels stood straight and clearly saw the Nazis for what they were when "standing crookedly" was the norm for people in Germany, and for that the Hampels paid with their heads.

Every Man Dies Alone is an extraordinary novel. It is like a time portal to Berlin in the early 1940s and the reader is a silent observer to every event, facial expression, voice

inflection, and emotion described by Fallada. However, *Every Man Dies Alone* is far more than just a compelling work of fiction; it is a homage to the courage of the Hampels and others who acted to undermine support for the Nazis, however feeble those actions might have seemed at the time, or even from the perspective of 70 years later. It also exposes the hypocrisy of the tens of millions of Germans who after the war tried to absolve themselves of guilt by claiming they didn't know how bad the Nazi regime was — when the Hampels knew and they were at the bottom rung of German society.

Endnote:

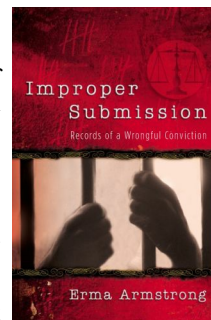
¹ Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, "From Under The Ruble," ed. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Little Brown, Boston, 1975, p. 249 (emphasis in original)



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