

# Ringvereine

## *Organised Crime in Weimar Berlin*

Every reader of the Alaric von Trelow Mysteries knows the walls, the windows, and the rooftops. They know the hour before dawn when a slate is eased loose without a sound, and the small figure who crosses the ridge-tiles as though gravity were a suggestion, not a rule. Matchstick works alone. That's her legend, but it is also her vanity. No one working as a criminal in Berlin in the early twenties could work entirely alone. Behind the solitary artist on the roof or clinging to the wall stood a machine. It was patient, it was respectable, so far as bureaucracy was concerned, and it was armed. This is the case notes on that machine.

They called themselves the Ringvereine. The ring clubs. The name was literal. A man who belonged, and it was only men, wore a signet ring, identical to the ring of every other brother, and the ring signified everything that mattered without a word being spoken. It said he had done his time and kept his mouth shut. It said he could be vouched for. It said that if you crossed him, you were not crossing one man but a fraternity with a long memory and longer reach. To the police it said nothing useful, because a ring alone isn't evidence, and evidence was the one commodity these clubs made certain never to leave lying about.

## The respectable disguise

The disguise was the genius of the thing. The first of the clubs grew up in the 1890s as fraternal support associations for released convicts, and on paper that is what they remained for the next forty years. A man came out of prison with no work, no lodging and no friends. These societies were supposed to help such a man, to stop him reverting to crime. It found released men a place to stay, a legal job, but it also put him into contact with criminal contacts. If things went wrong, it paid a little money to the families of brothers who were inside, and it kept a fund for funerals, so that no member went into the ground without a decent stone and a decent crowd. It even held excursions to the lakes on a Sunday (see the header picture) and ran an annual ball.

At that ball, men in evening suits in a grand hall, with a band and sashes and banners with the club's motto worked in gold thread. And among the guests, quite openly, policemen, magistrates, the odd journalist, a few politicians, all of them perfectly aware of whose champagne they were drinking. The clubs registered themselves as sporting and social societies, the same legal form as a choir or a rowing club, and they wore that respectability the way a professional burglar wears a good suit. It gets you past the doorman.

Their names had the same double character, grand and sentimental and faintly absurd. *Immertreu*, Always Loyal. *Norden*, the North. *Berliner*. *Hand in Hand*. *Dragonfly*. They read like the mottoes stitched on a Biedermeier sampler, and that was precisely the point. A club called Always Loyal did not sound like a protection racket. It sounded like a society your grandfather might have joined. The members

gave themselves the same cover. A man who broke fingers for a living went by Cavalier Fritze, a fence was Jeweller Paul, titles half of the music hall and half of the racetrack. The most powerful of them all, the chairman of the notoriously violent Immertreu, was a slab of a man named Adolf Leib, and all Berlin knew him by a plainer name: Muscle Adolf.

## Who they were

Strip away the sashes and the odd names and the business underneath was classic organised crime. They sold protection in the districts they held, the waiter, the barman, the porter, the cloakroom girl, the boy who shined shoes on the corner and the woman who kept the lavatory clean all paid, in coin or in silence, to a brother of the ring. A great newspaper wrote at the start of 1929 that the whole entertainment and amusement trade of the city, at least the part built for tourists and visitors, was organised by these clubs, and it was not exaggerating. Berlin in those years was the third city of the world, after New York and London, and the acknowledged capital of sin, even more so than Chicago or Shanghai, and that quantity of sin is an industry, and an industry needs management.

Prostitution was the largest single source of income. The women on certain streets were, in the clubs' own foul euphemism, protected, and the protection was not optional, and the gratitude was collected weekly. Where there was gambling, the clubs ran it or taxed it. The same with the drugs rackets and pornography. Where there was smuggling, they carried it. And here we arrive at the part of the trade that touches Matchstick directly, because a burglar is only as good as their fence. A stolen diamond is worth nothing until someone turns it into paper money and asks no questions. That someone, more often than not, belonged to a ring, or paid one for the privilege of trading unmolested. The solitary artist on the roof was, whether she cared to think about it or not, standing at the top of a chain that ran down through the receiver and the money-changer and the club treasurer and out at last into the ordinary economy of the city. When she stepped onto the tiles, she stepped, just as surely, on somebody's territory.

That is the truth the fiction leans on. The Berlin underworld was not chaos. It was a one of the many circles of authority in the city, of which the government was one, the police another. It had its own borders, revenues and a quasi-civil service of its own, and it guarded its frontiers with more diligence than the Republic ever managed to guard hers.

## The law beneath the law

What held it all together was a code, and the code was real, whatever we make of the men who kept it. Like 'Omerta' in the Sicilian mafia, silence before the police was the first commandment. A brother did not inform. A brother provided the alibi when the alibi was needed, and swore to it, and was believed because a dozen others swore the same. Witnesses in these matters had a way of remembering nothing.

Various Rings had varied other rules. Some eschewed violence, some would not use violence against civilians, some didn't touch drugs, others would have nothing to do with political crime and would banish a brother who did.

The members of the Ringvereine even spoke a language of their own, or half of one. Rotwelsch, the old thieves' cant of the German roads, thick with words borrowed from Yiddish and from Romani and from Hebrew, a tongue built precisely so that the wrong listener would catch the shape of a sentence and none of its meaning. In the drinking dens of the Scheunenviertel, the warren of poor streets and poorer courtyards behind the Alexanderplatz, you could sit an arm's length from a plan being laid and understand nothing about it.

Someone walking into a Ring beer hall who wasn't known there was either a civilian, and therefore largely ignored, or declared themselves. Like in a business meeting this was done with the equivalent of a business card, a marker. Like the ring it alone meant nothing to those who didn't understand, and everything to those who did. A hitman might place a bullet on the table, a conman a playing card or a coin, a burglar, like Matchstick, brought a cigar box taken on a job. The finer the object, the more they were claiming. A common .25 bullet might mark a thug as a back-alley killer, but a man placing a custom high-power rifle round on a bar is making a very specific claim. Matchstick does the same, as time goes on her cigar boxes become finer and more refined as she ascends the ladder of Berlin's criminal hierarchy.

The dens this all occurred in had a name too. Kaschemmen. Low, smoky, watchful rooms where the beer was often cheap and the civilian clientele was tolerated as useful cover, but everyone knew who ran the room.

## **The night the clubs walked into the daylight**

For years the ordinary Berliner knew the Ringvereine the way one knows a rumour or urban legend. Then came the night of the twenty-eighth of December 1928, and after it nobody could pretend the rumour was not true.

It began, as things often do, over something that seemed like nothing. A gang of carpenters had come up from Hamburg to work on the new U-bahn underground line, and the Hamburg men had failed, in the reckoning of Immertreu, to show the proper respect on Immertreu's ground near the Silesian Station. Hard words were exchanged in a bar. The words became a brawl. The Hamburg men were sent off by the police to another tavern to cool down, which seemed prudent but turned out to be a trap, because now they were all in one building and Muscle Adolf was calling in the brothers. Men came from Immertreu and from allied clubs, scores of them, into the freezing dark of Friedrichshain. What followed the newspapers christened the Battle of the Silesian Station.

They fought with knives and with cudgels, with iron bars and hammers, and before it was finished, with pistols. When the police came back at daylight to make sense of the street, they gathered up something in the order of a hundred spent cartridge

cases from the cobbles. Men were dead. More were carried to hospital with wounds that would mark them for life. And the whole of respectable Berlin, opening its newspaper over breakfast, discovered that the harmless little sporting society whose annual ball the deputy commissioner had attended last spring was in fact a criminal army, and had just fought a pitched engagement in the streets of the capital.

The trial that followed was, if anything, more instructive than the battle. The clubs sent their best lawyer, a celebrated defence advocate, and the case against the men simply came apart in his hands. Nobody had seen anything. Nobody could place Muscle Adolf doing more than standing by and watching, and watching is not a crime, and so the most feared underworld boss in Germany walked out with a suspended sentence of a few months and his reputation gilded rather than tarnished. The clubs even found a writer willing to act as their voice in the press, explaining with a straight face that the brothers met only for sport and good fellowship and the improvement of the mind.

There is a story from that trial that I have never quite been able to prove, and to be honest have never really wanted to disprove, because it is too perfect. The defence advocate's own fur coat was stolen while the case was being heard. Some weeks after the verdict a parcel arrived for him. Inside was the coat, and a note: *Honestly lost, honestly recovered*. The signature was a thief's nickname. Anyone could make a mistake, but one good turn deserved another. Whether the story is true, it was circulated widely and tells you how these people saw themselves and wished to be seen. Not as criminals. As a guild, with manners, and debts of honour, and a sense of humour about both.

For fans of fantasy, the Ringvereine are more the archetype for the fantasy thieves' guild than any other historical organisation, as I hope is obvious.

## **The Buddha at Alexanderplatz**

Set against these gangs was arguably the finest criminal police force in Europe, and the two lived in a state of wary, mutually useful truce that no one liked to admit to.

The most notable figure of that force was Ernst Gennat, the head of the Berlin murder squad, a man of such bulk and such stillness that the department called him the Buddha of the Alexanderplatz. He worked out of the vast red-brick fortress on the square that the whole city knew as the Red Castle, and he was, by every account, the best homicide detective of the era, methodical where his quarry was reckless, patient where they were vain. Men like Gennat understood something that never sat comfortably in an official report. A city with organised crime is, in a grim way, easier to police than a city with disorganised crime. The clubs kept their own order. They settled their own disputes, mostly, and kept the freelance savagery down, and now and then, when a killing offended even them, a quiet word would reach the Red Castle and a name would be passed, a door would be left conveniently unlocked, a fugitive would find himself in the wrong place at the wrong time. It was said of Gennat that he tolerated the ring clubs because they were, in their fashion, a kind of auxiliary. Whether he ever put it so plainly I doubt. But the arrangement was there,

unwritten, understood by both sides, the way the best and worst arrangements in the Weimar Republic always were.

The city's artists saw it too, and saw it more clearly than its politicians. When Fritz Lang came to film the story of a child-murderer, *M*, a few years later, the scene everyone remembers is not the police at work but the underworld convening its own tribunal, the thieves and the pimps sitting in judgement because the killer is bad for business and the law is too slow. That was not invention. Lang had simply watched Berlin and written down what he saw. The novelist Alfred Döblin, mapping the same streets around Alexanderplatz, gave his doomed hero of his fabulous novel *Berlin Alexanderplatz* to a gang that is a ring club in all but name, and let the machine chew him up. The fiction of the day understood the ring clubs perfectly, because the writers of the day saw them every day.

## The ring broken

Like so much, the Rings ended in 1933, and ended badly.

The new Nazi regime could not abide a rival. A brotherhood bound by absolute loyalty, holding whole districts, answering to its own chairmen and not to the Party, was intolerable to men who demanded every loyalty in Germany outright. So, the clubs were broken. The associations were dissolved, the halls closed, the brothers scattered, and many of them shipped off to the camps that were then being built for exactly such antisocial people. The Nazi regime of course told a lie about it afterwards, as it did about everything. It said the underworld had been a nest of Jews and Bolsheviks strangling the nation, and that the strong new state had cleansed it away. This was a fable, and a useful one at the time, but the historians who have gone back to the evidence have found the truth murkier and more human. The clubs may have gone, but many of their members simply slipped away. They were, after all, criminals, opportunists, loyal only to themselves, and some of them slipped through the net and simply carried on their trade under the swastika as they had under the flag of the republic. Crime, like the cockroach, is more durable than any government. It had outlasted the Kaiser. It would outlast the Nazis too, though a great many men wearing the ring did not live to see it.

But the world of the ring clubs proper, the world of the sashes and the annual ball and the funeral with a hundred mourners, the world in which a stolen fur coat came home with a note of apology, that was over. It belonged, by 1933, to the same vanished country as the literary cafés and the cabarets and the wild bright years, and it went into the dark with them.

## A last note for the reader

Which is where the file closes, and where the story you already know picks up the thread. When Matchstick crosses a roof in these books she is not moving through empty air. She is moving over a city that is claimed, floor by floor and street by street, by men who wear a ring and call each other brother and would like very much to know who has been working their district without asking. The danger on the tiles was never only the fall. It was the men below, in the warm rooms with the cheap

beer, who kept a ledger of every diamond that changed hands in their part of town and remembered, always, exactly who owed them what.

Matchstick works alone. She had too, as a woman she can never be part of a Ring. She likes to think that means she has no one behind her and needs no one. Berlin, patient and always loyal to itself, knows better.