

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is an honour and a great pleasure to speak so warmly to you of a truly commendable man, a radiant example of intellectual richness and talent, and of the character within which all this finds expression: Martin Pollack.

It does not take long to summarise the positions in which he has worked: as a journalist, among others for *Der Spiegel*, as a Polish translator – including the regal translation of *König der Könige*, a veritably first-class, darkly phantasmagorical book by Ryszard Kapuściński on the last days of Haile Selassie – and as the author of numerous essays and books that, although listed in the special-interest genre, actually represent an in-between category blending historical studies and commentaries with the literary.

It takes an itchy nose to get to the facts, the treasure hunter's energetic sense of scent; it takes dedication. The topics that Pollack devotes himself to require precise understanding of foreign languages: you need staying power to endure sufficiently long periods in archives and you need to get under the skin of unknown people to tease out their information. But important gifts are also necessary, irrespective of the ability to hunt down astonishing facts and the thirst for precision that characterise Martin Pollack: he can tell a story, bond richly detailed material within a narrative framework that prevents the fabric disintegrating into a thousand particles.

Martin Pollack has the zealot's precision without the pedant's obsession. Put in slightly archaic terms: his heart is in the right place. A heart that I believe, without being closely acquainted with the man, beats more in a meek, compassionate melancholic than in a thunderously irate dogmatist, demanding satisfaction. Whenever faced with the cruelties that humans perpetrate on humans, with what happens that should never have been allowed to happen, the tenacious ways of the meek are at times more effective than the fists of the perennially disgusted, beating on the table.

Before we reach into the heart of darkness, let us spare a word for his narrative style. He keeps the language clear, understandable to anyone who reads easily. Even faced with a mountain range of stacked facts, the narrative flow never falters, nestling instead naturally into the facts it trails in its own wake, flowing around them, enhancing their effects with atmospheric asides or striking signal words that drift past the reader like floating islands, signal words that the current had torn free from the banks of history a hundred, a hundred and twenty or sixty, seventy years before.

On the subject of atmosphere: let us set forth without ado into inhospitable terrain. Quite early on in the book about his own family, Pollack is standing with his wife at the entrance to the bunker in which his father's dead body was discovered: *we skirted around tall nestles, dark islands in the light-green foliage, and with every step we roused clouds of minute midges from the thicket.*

In 1947, on the run, the man had been shot dead by a robber who was meant to escort him over the Brenner Pass. A concrete ring of the bunker protrudes from the earth, *on it a hump with trellised observation slits through which the musty stench wafts densely towards us.* And the story remains musty. But it

is not the earthy, fruity forest must that escapes from the book's pages, but the mustiness of corpses, penned in by the gloomy foliage.

Yes, the man can write beautifully. Let us accompany little Martin on a taste of his grandparent's house in Amstetten:

*I remember the cool semidarkness of the stairwell and the stylised, castiron lion's head with its jaws wide-open that crowned the slip newel on the stairs.*

Let us listen to the grown-up Mr. Pollack, quoting words from an ideologically armed-to-the-teeth age: *regimental songs, brandishing bludgeons to musical accompaniment, the law against spiteful denigration of Nazi authority. Religious.* Initially, *religious* sounds nondescript, but at the time it was a signal word meaning that, as a National Socialist, you had left the church. There are other beautiful and harmless words, of course, that simply come with a whiff of rural past – the *trough in a stream*, for instance, or a pocketknife wrapped in a sheath of *soft, grey, full-grain leather*.

The heart of darkness. I hesitate for an instant at this point to bring up our man's origins, quite simply because if you emphasise too overtly a person's origins, you cannot help but downplay what they achieved and hazarded on their own initiative, what ultimately perhaps made their adult life – and we award prizes solely for the results of this – an extraordinary one.

Nonetheless, there is no choice. I take the liberty to wallow in Martin Pollack's family story from his book *Der Tote im Bunker*.

Pollack is not his natural father's name; it belongs to his stepfather. His natural father was a lawyer – Dr. Gerhard Bast. Born in Gottschee, which fell to Yugoslavia in 1918, raised in Amstetten, Bast later-on became SS-Sturmbannführer and head of the Gestapo in Linz, leader of special commandos in the Caucasus, in Poland and in Slovakia. He was no small-fry Nazi: he was lord over life and death, wanted as a war-criminal in 1945, shot to death in 1947.

His mother's marriages were unusual. Married into the Pollack family, she had two children by her first husband; she got a divorce for Gerhard Bast, married him in 1945, but son Martin was born while she was still married to her first husband; her second husband was found dead a few years later, after which she remarried her first husband. The stepfather obviously possessed an adequate sense of justice not to make his rival's child pay for the insult he had endured, confused circumstances that even in politically more peaceful times could easily have led to psychological wounds. The stepfather and the mother also came from a deeply Nazi environment, if albeit less ideologically die-hard as the natural father's family.

The child endured a vow of silence. Silence with regard to the confused paternity, silence with regard to the crimes his natural father was charged with. Although the grandparents on the Bast side remained unrepentant National Socialists and after the War saw themselves as scandalised victims, the child Martin has good memories of them. And why not? He was spoiled by his grandmother, who saw in him a delightful ragamuffin, similar to her own beloved son; his grandfather took him along on extended forest hikes, telling exciting stories of wild animals. A mild guardian to his grandson; less mild to Jews, he had been responsible for the Aryanisation of Jewish

assets during the NS period. Martin Pollack's memories of Amstetten are steeped in the enchanted world of childhood, in which adults are the guarantors that nothing evil will ever happen to the child. The scene in which we accompany the grandmother and grandchild to the cake shop and the diminutive munching machine wordlessly tucks into an ice cream with whipped cream while his frugal grandmother tenderly gazes on is magical.

In the world of little boys, evil is yet to show its true and horrific colours. The father was also once an appealing, innocent lad. In a photo dated 1913, you see *a small boy with hair down to his chin, wearing a striped tunic and an apron on top, holding a blossoming twig in the one hand and a cord in the other with which he is pulling a little wooden wagon.*

When Martin Pollack decided to enrol in Slavonic studies, to do this in Warsaw of all places, it led to a deep rift with his beloved grandmother who simply could not understand that none other than her own grandson would dedicate himself to the language of such a racially inferior people. But it was not just Poland: all the eastern territories of the shattered Habsburg Empire became the preferred focus of his studies. This is where he collected his materials and penned his books and commentaries.

In the book about his father, he traces the question as to why his grandparents fell victim so rabidly to NS ideology. It is perhaps not the perfect answer, but he does find some reasons in the Slovakian border region. A German-fixated generation grew up in this area, one that saw itself as a chivalrous strike force, fated to nurture and defend German culture. This was delivered with missionary zeal and immense bitterness. After the collapse of the Habsburg Empire, many sections of the population became entangled in such fearful and impassioned sentiments that they no longer saw simply the Slovenians as the enemy that must be wiped out, but also all Slavs, Jews, gypsies, Hungarians, Poles and Czechs.

His grandfather was also a lawyer. He and his son joined the NSDAP early on. They were both mad about guns, and the grandfather was a passionate hunter. The father became an athletic alpinist and skier; in the letters and cards that remain, the snow is great and the company is carefree and merry. It is strange how an entire generation of endeavoured ideologists across the land swore by the pure snow of the mountains, praised its clean air, far removed from the army breathing apparatus, the gas masks and the suffocating waft of Zyklon-B.

The grandmother maintained that her son had been honourable and indoctrinated her grandchild accordingly. It cannot have been easy for him to break gradually through the silence and to get to the bottom of the word *honour*.

Allow me to digress a little at this point. If we consider how crazy and damaged the descendants of families that were seriously tainted by Nazism are, we cannot be astonished enough at how wise, how free, how dedicated to justice Martin Pollack has emerged from his own. Let me mention a few examples that have stuck in my mind particularly: in the sixties, aided by Gudrun Ensslin, Bernward Vesper sent packages to Israel with a novel by his father, Will Vesper. He wanted the Jews in Israel to testify that his father, who after the war celebrated

merrily with his SS comrades year for year, was not an NS ideologist, but a respected author. Let us remember the glut of “false Sarahs” in the sixties and seventies. Countless Gudruns, Ingeborgs, Marias and Ulrikes were suddenly called Sarah, slipping into the skin of a Jewish victim’s name to escape the curse of their own families. A German author had his NSmother tossed into an anonymous grave because *she so loved the mass graves*. There is the legendary case in West Berlin of the fall of a Lacanian, a blond, eighteen-stone giant baby who descended from a deeply Nazi family, as it emerged after his death. He fabricated a Jewish family history, claiming even to be acquainted with Sigmund Freud, and paid for it dearly with leukaemia that flared up whenever his phantasmagorical jewishness reached a new level, until the cancer finally put paid to him. All of these neurotics would have taken common-orgarden Oedipus complexes easily in their stride, but not the crimes of their forefathers. There is a talk show I cannot forget, because it made my skin crawl: in it, the inexperienced host, Johannes B. Kerner, introduced the daughter of Amon Göth, the concentration camp commandant who gained notoriety through the film *Schindler’s List*. It was as if a death’s head were reciting atonally; the woman had converted to Orthodox Judaism with the billowing sails of inverse racism, so insane that even Michel Friedmann, otherwise never shy of an answer, was struck dumb out of desperation.

I must ask Martin Pollack to forgive this digression. But I just can’t stop when the topic grabs me. Let us return to *Kaiser von Amerika*, our prize-winner’s latest book. This work is also wonderfully researched and excellently written. Certainly, we all know that the emigrants between 1880 and 1914 led pitiful lives.

However, *Kaiser von Amerika* brings such dizzying details to light that at times you can only shake your head disbelievingly. The refugees, many of them from bitterly poor Galician villages, suffered horrific harassment on their journey to Hamburg alone. Traffickers, ships’ agents, con artists, robbers and corrupt railway and customs officials stripped the people, who had frequently sold their only cow to pay for the journey, of their last penny.

And it gets truly sinister when you read of measures in which it is easy to see the precursors of all that became deadly reality in the death camps a few decades later. When cholera breaks out in a train jam-packed with emigrants, it is stopped half-way to its destination; the travellers are ushered out and, in the midst of this Babylonian mishmash of languages, nobody knows what is happening; parents lose their children in the crush and they are stuffed into barracks willy-nilly where disinfection measures are implemented in the roughest possible of ways. The fate awaiting those that made it to Ellis Island was barely brighter. Buttonhooks were used to pry open their eyes to examine them for diseases; quite a few were convinced that any second, their eyes would be gouged out.

The emigrants come from rural areas; most of them can neither read nor write and many have never even seen a clock. They are duped using the simplest of tricks. Ships’ agents, for instance, who frequently also sell them forged tickets, proceed as follows: the wily fellows let an alarm clock ring and claim

they had just telegraphed Hamburg or America. *First of all he asks whether there is space on the ship. He then winds up the alarm clock again and waits for the answer. Emigrants are asked to shell out four to six gulden for each of these “telegrams”.* A bogus telegram then asks and confirms that there is a piece of land available for the emigrant in America. The *Emperor of America* also grants his merciful consent and welcomes the new subject into his fold.

The fate of the women is brutal. Young girls are lured and kidnapped into prostitution. Many do not survive for long, and it is fatally reminiscent of the state of affairs when the Iron Curtain collapsed and legions of young women were enticed to the West under false pretences. They had been offered honourable positions as cooks or housekeepers, now they are enticed as nannies or models: the drugs they are force-fed are harder these days, but the circumstances are otherwise desperately similar: childhood sexual slavery of the most brutal kind: beatings, manslaughter, debilitating sexually-transmitted diseases.

If you immerse your head in this book, you will pull it out full of comparisons with the abject misery facing refugees in our day and age. The Arabs and North Africans currently landing on Lampedusa are just as unwelcome here as the Galicians were back then in Hamburg or elsewhere. Please imagine for a moment: what would we do in a time of need if nowhere in the world was there a single hand to tenderly stroke our heads and welcome us?

Time is pressing, so I will refrain from opening Martin Pollack's book on an alleged patricide in the mountains, the Tyrol Halsmann Affair of 1929. Let me mention just one thing: written as sensitively and vividly as all his books, it remains so exciting it is almost impossible to put down.

Allow me to conclude with a brief anecdote. Remember once more *König der Könige*, which Martin Pollack translated in the archaic, portentously dark guise of a fairytale. My Great Aunt Luise, a hugely shrewd woman who owned a small electronics business, managed to sell ten thousand heaters for baby bottles to Haile Selassie's entourage when he was on a state visit to Stuttgart in 1954. Just imagine, of all the things I'm sure they needed in their sweltering country, the venerable gentlemen returned home carrying ten thousand entirely useless heaters for baby bottles.

As you can see, ladies and gentlemen – Slovenians, Galicians, Arabs, Africans, Haile Selassie, Aunt Luise, you, me and Martin Pollack, we are all connected along mysterious channels. But let us all look at him, gaze with true amazement at a man who has developed so well from the Amstetten munching machine he once was!