

Mary Frank  
University of Bristol  
April 2016

Subversive Satires of the 1930s  
Wiener Library Translation Competition 2016

## **New SA Song Book**

Franz Eher Verlag  
Munich

All rights reserved  
Copyright 1934 by SA SS Brothers  
Printed by: Franz Eher AG, Munich

## **HORST WESSEL SONG**

Prices flying high, nothing to put in our gob,  
Starvation's calm, firm step will catch us whole.  
Hitler and Goebbels, their hearts for the people do throb,  
They starve in spirit with their comrade proles.

At the job centre they've sounded the alert,  
We're all on stand-by, ready to sign on.  
No bread, no work, just the stuff that the Fuehrer asserts,  
Say anything and you will soon be gone.

Down in the street, it stinks of brown battalions.  
The storm trooper has a cushy number in sight.  
Perhaps tomorrow he'll be a fat cat earning millions,  
What's that to us? It's nothing more than shite!

## **“BURNING SECRET”<sup>1</sup>**

One storm trooper whispers to another, “Have you heard the news? The Reichstag is on fire!”

The second storm trooper replies, “Shush, not ‘til tomorrow!”

\*

An adjutant comes running to Göring. “Herr Minister President,” he shouts, “the Reichstag is on fire!!”

Göring pulls out his watch. “Already?!” he replies.

\*

“Apparently Cläre Waldoff is in a concentration camp now, too”

“Why is that?”

“When she was asked who she thought set fire to the Reichstag, she launched into her favourite song: ‘Hermann is his naaaame ...’ “

\*

“Do you know who set fire to the Reichstag?”

“So who was it?”

“The SASS brothers.”<sup>2</sup>

\*

On the Island of the Immortals, a heated debate is taking place about the Reichstag fire. The illustrious spirits are crowding around the vivacious Lessing, who is exchanging quick-witted banter about the incident with the dour Grillparzer. Lessing even begins to compose some verse about it:

A Reichstag building started to burn.

---

<sup>1</sup> Translator’s note: these jokes all refer to the rumoured involvement of Hermann Göring, at this time President of the Reichstag (parliament), in its burning down in February 1933. The paramilitary Sturmabteilung (SA; storm division) and its brown-shirted storm troopers were, from 1934, disempowered in favour of the Schutzstaffel (SS; protection squadron).

<sup>2</sup> Original note: The Saß brothers are notorious burglars in Berlin. Their surname – SASS – contains the organisational abbreviations SA and SS!!

Acting quickly to fan the blaze,

Two dozen brownshirts come through the haze.

They were ready to take their turn...

-----

A Reichstag building started to burn.

The immortals applaud loudly. But Grillparzer takes a pinch of snuff and says,

“You could say that more concisely: ‘Woe to him who lies’.”

\*

“I saw Göring in Leipziger Strasse yesterday!”

“Really? Where was the fire there, then?”

\*

Hermann Göring has invited some people to a special dinner. After the meal, he has cigars served to the gentlemen.

“An excellent cigar,” remarks Herr A.

“It burns fantastically!” whispers Herr B.

“No wonder,” Herr C thinks to himself. “After all, we’re with the expert here.”

\*

In the underworld, Göring meets the Emperor Nero. He calls to him:

“Heil, colleague!”

Nero is surprised. “What do you mean, ‘colleague’?”

Göring explains with a wink, “I’m what you might call an expert in fire matters, too ...”

Nero gives him a withering stare and replies from above:

“That doesn’t make us anything like colleagues. I set fire to the whole of Rome by myself, but you needed a score of storm troopers just for the measly Reichstag.”

\*

According to another account, Göring ends up – who knows how – in heaven and meets Moses there. Göring says to him:

“Answer one question for me: how did you set fire to the thorn bush in your day?”

\*

Once the Reichstag building has been restored, its inscription will apparently be changed. While the previous inscription read, ‘To the German People’, the new one will read, ‘Burning Secret’.<sup>3</sup>

\*

The well-known folk song had to undergo the following changes in March 1933:

No blaze, no pyre  
can have as hot a glow  
as at our Reichstag a fire  
about which only Göring knows.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Original note: This is the title of a very well-known novella by Stefan Zweig.  
Translator’s additional note: This is also the title of this collection of jokes. Zweig’s works were banned by the Nazis in 1933.

<sup>4</sup> Translator’s note: the original words are:

Kein Feuer, keine Kohle  
kann brennen so heiß,  
als heimliche Liebe,  
von der niemand nichts weiß.  
[No blaze, no fire  
can burn so hot  
as secret desire  
of which nobody knows a jot]

Mary Frank  
University of Bristol  
April 2016

Commentary:  
Subversive Satires of the 1930s  
Wiener Library Translation Competition 2016

The *Horst-Wessel-Lied*, the anthem of the Nazi Party, was intended to play a leading role in conveying key messages about unity, sacrifice and the path to victory. Typically of Nazi discourse, its language is militaristic and emotive. The satire, written at a time when the Nazi Party was consolidating its hold on power (reflecting this, the *Horst-Wessel-Lied* had been integrated into the national anthem in 1933), deliberately echoes this language but reverses the thematic optimism of its source. The reality of life under Nazism is not a march to victory but hunger and oppression. That the reader is invited to believe that such counter-commentary comes from Franz Eher Verlag, the Party's official publishing house, serves only to boost the satirical impact.

There is certainly considerable importance attached to satirising something in which the Nazis invested such capital. The nature of that importance is, however, open to interpretation. Some observers may argue that satirising precisely the *Horst-Wessel-Lied* was a highly subversive and genuinely dangerous act. Others may see it as mild rebellion against the climate of the time, a means by which people could 'let off steam' (thus, in fact, serving to *reduce* the risk to the regime).

The same two angles of interpretation apply to the jokes about the Reichstag fire. Several of these pick up on manifestations of the Nazi Party taking a tighter grip. One refers, for example, to the singer Cläre Waldoff, who was temporarily banned from performing in 1933, while the title of the entire collection is directly drawn from a work by a banned author, Stefan Zweig. To this extent they highlight Nazi repression. To the extent that they presumably circulated only in private, however, they may have served more to create a sense of shared experience than to foster active opposition.

[297 words]