

Who Belongs to Which World?

Walking Through Berlin in the Mid-1920s

If you wanted to understand Weimar Berlin properly, you would begin not with party programmes or election tables but with the street. You would stand still for ten minutes on Friedrichstrasse, or outside one of the stations, or on the Ku'damm, or near one of the better hotels, and you would watch people go by. Not vaguely. Not sentimentally. Properly. You would look at cut, cloth, hat brim, gloves, shoes, companions, cigarette case, newspaper, walking pace, whether they glanced into shop windows or through them, whether they hailed a taxi or counted coins for the tram. And very quickly you would realise that Berlin, for all its noise and modernity, was still a city that wore class and caste on the body.

Not perfectly. Never perfectly. That is what makes it interesting. A clever city always teaches people how to imitate status, rent it for an evening, or hide the loss of it. But the codes were there all the same, and they rewarded attention.

I want to teach you to read them.

Not the politics. Not the economics. The people. The clothes, the hats, the cigarettes, the newspapers, the hands, the posture, the hesitation at a doorway. Because Berlin in the mid-1920s was not one city. It was several cities stacked on top of one another, all using the same pavement and very little else, and every one of them had its own uniform, its own gestures, its own tells.

A detective would notice these things. So would a good thief. Let us pay attention.

The Aristocrat

Start with the aristocrat, because in some ways he was the easiest to read and in others the most deceptive. The title no longer carried the official force it once had. The Kaiser was in Doorn, pruning roses and blaming everyone. The Empire was rubble. But a man doesn't shed a caste system like a raincoat. The old noble world still carried itself differently.

Even when the money was thinner than it had been before 1914, there remained a habit of command, a way of standing as though the room would eventually organise itself around him if given sufficient time. The tailoring might be old rather than new, but it was good old cloth, cut properly, and cut in an older German style that sat a little behind London, a little behind Paris. Not unfashionable, exactly. Simply unconcerned with fashion. If he had served in cavalry or Guards regiments, you could see it in the back and shoulders before he opened his mouth: cavalry straight, shoulders back, chin slightly elevated, as though his body had been taught decades ago not simply how to stand but how to be obeyed.

Look at the details. His collar is stiff, white, and detachable, the old-fashioned kind that most of Europe was beginning to abandon. In Berlin the stiff collar was a statement. It said: I was formed before the war, and I do not intend to be reformed after it. His ties were plain or regimental, his cufflinks subtle, never a tie pin. As a hat,

the older gentleman might still wear a top hat, but that was becoming the exception unless it were to the opera or the races. Most wore the Homburg as a mark of status, and wore it as though it had always been right, not because it was current.

Look at his left cheek. If there is a scar running from below the cheekbone towards the jaw, old, white, and clean-edged, that is a Schmiss, a Mensur scar from the academic fencing practised in the German university duelling fraternities. The face was deliberately left unguarded. The cheeks took the cuts. The scar told the world that this man had attended a good university, had belonged to a Corps, had stood and taken a blade across his face without flinching, and therefore belonged to the educated, propertied, officer-class world that had run Germany before 1918 and had not entirely stopped running it since.

His newspaper would be the *Kreuzzeitung*, the old conservative paper of the nobility and the military, folded precisely and read without hurry. He smoked respectable old blends, and if he could still afford them, imported English cigarettes: Dunhill or Benson & Hedges, taken from a case that was probably older than the Republic and certainly more loved.

Many still spoke in the accents of provinces and estates that had shaped them long before the Republic had the impertinence to ask them to become citizens instead of subjects. They roomed in Mitte, close to the old centres of power, because geography is a habit, too.

They might be in Berlin because the world had narrowed. Because politics or business had dragged them there. Because family lands no longer yielded what they once had. Because a reduced Germany offered fewer places for old men of rank to go and be amongst their own. But they still carried the old weather with them. Berlin amused some of them. One suspects it disgusted rather more.

His wife, if she accompanied him, was elegantly restrained in a way that was meant not to attract admiration but to signal breeding to other women. Her gloves were good, her coat properly made, her jewellery real but not excessive. She dressed to be correct, not current. She would not have the Bubikopf, the fashionable bob that had conquered younger Berlin. Her hat was structured, her hemline conservative, her perfume discreet. She moved through the city as a woman whose world had contracted but whose standards had not, and she regarded the new Berlin with an expression that could be mistaken for serenity but was usually closer to contempt.

The Industrialist

Not far away, sometimes in the same district, though usually entering by a different door, you would find the industrial or financial man, who belonged to another ruling class entirely. This one did not need a title. He had telephones, influence, dinner invitations, a motorcar, certainly a good tailor, and probably a secretary who knew more than his wife did.

You can always tell when money has become practical rather than ceremonial. His suit was cut a little closer at the shoulder in the English style, the drape more relaxed, unmistakably new. His shirt had the modern soft, attached collar, which the

old nobility still regarded as faintly louche. His cufflinks were gold. His cigarette case was silver or gold, and when he opened it you would see Orientzigaretten, the Turkish-blend cigarettes that dominated the better end of the German market and cost enough to make the choice a statement. He wore a Homburg, or a Fedora if he was younger, and he walked like a man who had places to be.

If the aristocrat often seemed like the residue of an older Germany, the capitalist looked like a man who had made terms with the present age and found the terms acceptable. He talked less about honour than about stability; less about the fatherland than about labour trouble, tariffs, taxation, the exchange rate, Communist unrest, French pressure, and export opportunities. His newspaper was the *Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung* or the *Vossische Zeitung*, the liberal paper of record: serious financial and political reading, not mass sensation.

One pictures him in the west of the city, in a good flat in Charlottenburg or house in the Grunewald, not always ostentatious but never careless, moving through Berlin as a man who understood which crises could be endured and which needed buying off. He dined well, holidayed properly, and used the telephone as though it were an instrument of rule rather than convenience. His watch was not flashy but serious. His umbrella told you something. The driver bringing the car without being beckoned twice told you more. He belonged to that part of Weimar Germany that feared chaos but often feared the working class and the left more than it feared authoritarian solutions.

His wife was more overtly fashionable than the aristocrat's wife, more Paris-conscious, more modern in silhouette. She might well have the bob. Her clothes were expensive in a contemporary way: good fabric, current cut, shoes chosen because they were right this season. She was easier with restaurants, with being seen, with the Ku'damm, with the business of public urban femininity that the old noble world still found faintly undignified. Her gloves were newer, her perfume less restrained, her jewellery bolder. She had learned that in the new Germany, visibility was a form of currency, and she spent it fluently.

The Middle Class

The middle class was a far sadder sight, though you had to know where to look.

This was one of the great haunted populations of Weimar Germany. Clerks, shopkeepers, small businessmen, teachers, junior professionals. People who had believed in caution, in certificates, in savings, in the notion that if one was sober, diligent, respectable, and modestly ambitious, the world would eventually do the decent thing and leave one alone. Hyperinflation had made a ghastly joke of all of it. By the mid-1920s the worst was over, but the wound remained, and you could see it if you cared to.

Look at the clothes kept going a season too long. The collars still scrubbed white though the cuffs had gone shiny. The wives who had become miraculous at mending. The insistence on decent gloves even when the purse protested. Perhaps a suit had been turned: unstitched and re sewn with the pieces of fabric reversed to show the protected inside on the outside, because the inner surface had not faded

as much. It is a trick of thrift, and if you knew what to look for you could spot it in the faint difference of texture where the cloth met the lapel. His shoes were resoled. His hat was a Melone, a bowler, the respectable middle-class hat, a slightly dated choice but a correct one, and correctness was the point, though the American Fedora was beginning to make inroads amongst younger men who wanted to look modern without looking radical.

Respectability, once cracked, is often performed more fiercely, not less. That world still took the tram. It still bought its newspaper, the *Vossische Zeitung* or the *Berliner Tageblatt*, and read it carefully because the price of a newspaper was no longer trivial. It still sat in a café with exact change and a straight back and smoked Overstolz with careful economy, rationing each cigarette as though it were a small act of self-discipline. The change for the tram was counted out in the hand before the tram arrived, because a man in this position did not fumble for coins in public.

Berlin was full of such people. Those who still believed themselves to be something, and were quietly terrified the city might stop agreeing.

His wife was often the more impressive figure, though the world did not say so. She was the one who turned the dress smart by sheer competence. She was the one who knew which shops had reduced their prices on which days, who could make a joint of meat last three meals, who kept the household looking respectable on an income that no longer supported respectability. Her clothes were neat, mended invisibly, pressed with ferocious care. Her hat was modest, her gloves clean, her shoes polished because the alternative was unthinkable. She carried a bag large enough to hold what she needed because she had no maid to carry things for her, and she moved through Berlin with a particular determined briskness that told you she had errands, and a budget, and no time to linger on the Ku'damm pretending to be someone she was not. Though she had been someone, once, and she remembered.

The Civil Servant

Civil servants lived next door to that world, and were often hard to tell apart, though they were not the same creature. The German official has a particular smell in history: paper, order, dust, ink, authority without glamour, the conviction that proper procedure is a kind of moral force.

The Weimar bureaucrat, the railway official, the post office man, the tax officer, the ministry clerk with the leather case and the exact handwriting: all these figures still carried the state on their shoulders, even while the state was busy disappointing them. Fixed incomes had been savaged by inflation. Status had outlived purchasing power. That is a bitter condition anywhere. In Germany it was worse, because a bureaucracy there was not merely a service. It was an article of faith. When the faithful begin to lose confidence, the consequences travel quietly for years before anyone notices the foundations have shifted.

You could recognise them by a neatness of a special kind: not fashionable, not dashing, but exact. The briefcase in good order. The tie correctly knotted. The coat brushed. Papers not crumpled but squared. You could spot them, too, by their soft

hands and ink-stained fingers, the creases at the backs of their knees, the shine on the seat of their trousers and at their elbows where the cloth had been rubbed to a sheen by years at a desk. An expression suggesting that queues, forms, stamps, timetables, and proper channels were not inconveniences but civilisation itself. Their clothes reflected the same bitterness as the middle class: formal enough to show status, plain enough to show limits, carefully maintained because disorder on the body would feel like surrender in the soul.

The Worker

The worker moved differently through the city, because the city could not function without him. Know him by his flat cap, the *Schiebermütze*, which he folded into his pocket on the way to the factory and which marked his class as plainly as any top hat marked another.

You could see whole districts where class was not a theory but a texture. The housing told you. The shops told you. The pubs, the tram routes, the hours at which people poured onto pavements, the union notices, the club life, the football grounds, the singing societies, the workers' sports leagues, the party newspapers folded under the arm: the *Vorwärts* if he was Social Democrat, the *Rote Fahne* if he had gone further left. He smokes Milos or Junos and is proud of their harshness. The working-class Berliner was not refined by his poverty. He was not simply a victim. He was part of a collective world, often a fiercely organised one, with loyalties and codes and arguments of its own.

The clothes were plainer, rougher, more practical. His hands gave away tool use even after washing, calloused in patterns that told you what machine he operated if you knew anything about machines. His boots were heavier than the clerk's shoes, built for standing and walking rather than sitting. Leisure was collective, not private. Sunday might mean an outing, a beer garden, a club event, a workers' choir, a sports ground, a train journey to a lake if time and money allowed. Politics was not something read about in a drawing room but something argued over in beer halls, courtyards, meetings, and on the street corner outside the factory gate.

If the middle class lived in fear of falling, the working class lived with the knowledge that life had always been contingent and therefore had to be bargained for collectively. Berlin's workers gave the Republic much of its muscle. They gave it most of its anxiety, too.

His wife, or his daughter, might work in one of the department stores on Tauentzienstrasse or as a secretary in a commercial firm. She dressed carefully, within means, but with an eye to the Ku'damm because the Ku'damm was where you went to be seen, and being seen in the right place in the right clothes was, for a young woman in Weimar Berlin, a form of investment. Her coat was almost as good as the banker's wife's coat. Almost. But the shoulder line was very slightly wrong, which meant it had been bought ready-made and altered, or copied from a fashion magazine by a competent but not exceptional seamstress. Her gloves were newer, bought for the occasion of being seen rather than drawn from a collection. Her bag was slightly too large, because she was a woman who must carry things. Her perfume, if you were close enough, was applied with enthusiasm rather than

restraint. She was performing a version of the life she wanted, and performing it well enough to pass, provided nobody looked too carefully at the stitching.

The Veteran

The ex-soldier was another creature altogether, and he haunted the city like a structural defect.

Officially the war had ended years ago. In practice it was still walking about in civilian coats. Some men came home from the front and put the thing away as best they could, folded it up, buried it under work and family and the ordinary business of carrying on. Others never managed. In Berlin you might see them in veterans' associations, in the Reichswehr, in the police, in the various Freikorps afterlives that bled so easily into politics, in clubs full of men who still sat as though at mess, still measured the world by martial standards, still regarded civilian life as faintly unserious.

The dangerous one, the man who had not come home in the sense that mattered, gave himself away by his stillness. His weight was evenly distributed on the balls of his feet. His hands were quiet. He had the alertness of a man who had once spent a long time in places where inattention was fatal, and the habit had not left him. His coat was civilian but worn like a uniform: buttoned, straight, no unnecessary decoration. A Stahlhelm badge at the lapel, perhaps, or a regimental tie, or an Iron Cross ribbon at the buttonhole. Medals appeared on certain occasions. Old ties. Old habits. Old moustaches. Old ways of speaking about November 1918 as though defeat had been theft.

The pretender was easier to spot than you might think. He had the clothes but not the bearing. He might wear a field-grey coat and military boots, but he fidgeted, or stood wrong, or wore the coat unbuttoned. The real veteran carried himself with a particular economy of movement that cannot be faked. He learned it in places where unnecessary movement attracted fire. The pretender was performing soldierliness. The real soldier simply was it, in the way a man who has been cold and frightened for a long time is never quite warm or safe again, and it shows in how he enters a room and where he sits.

And then the broken ones, whom one should not romanticise. Men with canes, with missing limbs, with shaking hands, with facial prostheses of painted tin shaped by craftsmen who once made theatrical masks. Men whose place in the world could not be recovered by posture alone. The crippled veteran selling matches on the Friedrichstrasse. Those men told the truth about the Republic in a way the cabarets never did. Not every veteran became politically dangerous. But the country was full of men whose bodies and minds had been trained for one purpose and then handed a civilian democracy they did not necessarily respect, and were not necessarily wrong to distrust.

The Émigrés

A short detour into Charlottenburg, to the side streets around the station, the small restaurants and the bookshops with Cyrillic lettering. This was 'Charlottengrad'. As

many as half a million Russians lived in Germany in the early 1920s, most in Berlin, most around here. They had their own cafés, newspapers, churches, publishers. The bus routes through this district were called the Russenschaukel, the Russian roundabout.

The White Russian émigré, the former officer or landowner, was often identifiable by what he had lost. The clothes might once have been very good. They were now worn. There was often a military bearing that had survived the loss of everything else, because deportment was trained into the body at an age when it could not be removed. He might be working as a taxi driver or a nightclub doorman, but he sat like a man who was once saluted. His cigarette, if he could afford one, might be a Russian brand with its distinctive long cardboard tube, which marked him as a foreigner as clearly as his accent.

Cross the city to the Scheunenviertel, the old quarter east of Alexanderplatz, and you found a different emigration entirely. This was where the Ostjuden settled, the Jews from Eastern Europe, from Galicia and Lithuania and the old Russian Empire, fleeing pogroms and revolution and the collapse of everything they had known. Many intended Berlin as a transit stop on the way to America. Many discovered they could go no further. Joseph Roth described the quarter as an open-air shtetl in the heart of a modern metropolis.

These two émigré worlds, Charlottengrad and the Scheunenviertel, barely overlapped. A detective who confused them would be a poor detective indeed.

The Women on the Game

Now, because this is Berlin, there are prostitutes.

The Kontrollmädchen, the registered prostitutes supervised by the Sittenpolizei, could not legally solicit in words. They could not stand conspicuously in doorways. They could not display themselves at windows. The law meant they had to develop a repertoire of signals visible to the initiated and invisible to the police. Eye contact held a fraction longer than convention allowed. A measured promenade along a known stretch of pavement that any regular observer would recognise as territorial. Positioning near a hotel entrance, near a known bar, at a tram stop she had no intention of using. Clothes calculated to suggest availability without crudity: the hemline a fraction higher, the make-up a shade more vivid, the perfume a degree more present than a respectable woman would risk. And then the call: "So, sweetheart!" If you ignored it, she kept looking, engage and you have a date, for a price.

There are many working women who do not have a licence. For instance, the Tauentzien girls, named for the street near the Memorial Church, dressed in the newest fashions, sometimes worked in mother-and-daughter pairs, and were so well turned out that the line between fashionable young woman and working girl was, by design, impossible to draw. And this was the point. In a city where shopgirls dressed up to look like wealthy women, and working girls dressed up to look like shopgirls, and wealthy women dressed in styles that would have scandalised their mothers, the entire visual grammar of female appearance was in play.

If a woman said “Kommst du mit, Liebling?” she had already taken a risk, because the direct approach was illegal. If she said it, she had judged you as a likely client and an unlikely policeman, and she had been watching you long enough to be sure. If you heard those words, you were not on the Ku'damm. You were on a darker stretch of Friedrichstrasse, or near the Stettiner Bahnhof, or in the streets behind Nollendorfplatz, where enforcement was lighter and the clientele less choosy.

The Dispossessed

At the edges of all these worlds, though sometimes right at the centre of the city, you would find the dispossessed. The homeless man sleeping rough or drifting through stations. The poor refugee carrying everything he owned and speaking with the wrong accent. The petty criminal who had discovered that in a large city one can steal not just money but anonymity. The street seller. The lodger. The man in cheap shoes who watched hotel doors because he had reason to notice who went in and who came out. The woman whose shoes told you everything: once good, now going. The man in an overcoat donated by charity but worn with private pride. The boy too young to seem this watchful.

These figures did not all belong to the same story. Some had fallen. Some had been born at the bottom. Some were passing through. Some were cleverer than the respectable assumed. Some were more dangerous. Some were merely hungry. But they all told the truth about Berlin in ways the better districts preferred not to hear. A city is never most honest in its grand buildings. It is most honest where people wait, trade, sleep, hide, and fail.

One Last Lesson

Look at a man's hands, because hands do not lie. The pen-and-ink man has smooth hands, faintly stained at the fingertips. The factory worker's hands are thicker, calloused in patterns that tell you what machine he operates. The aristocrat's hands are often surprisingly rough from riding and shooting, but maintained, the nails clean.

Listen to the voice, if you are close enough. The Berliner speaks with a rapid, nasal patter that delivers irony as a municipal service. The Prussian officer speaks with a clipped precision that comes from generations of men who believed clarity was authority. The Russian émigré speaks German with a Slavic softness on certain consonants that no amount of practice entirely removes. Each accent places a man more precisely than a passport, and in a city where everyone was trying to pass, the voice was the thing they could not quite change.

Even holidays gave the game away. The very rich went to spas, lakes, private estates, perhaps abroad if means and passport allowed. The middle class still aspired to holiday properly, though sometimes now with visible strain. Workers had excursions, club outings, lake trips, beer gardens, collective pleasures closer to hand. The dispossessed had no holiday at all. Only weather.

That, too, is a way of reading a society.

The Art of Passing

There is another layer to all this, and it matters a great deal if one is interested in crime, in mystery, or simply in the ordinary business of human deception. In a city like Berlin, people learned not only to belong to a world but to imitate one. The clerk dressed above himself. The ruined nobleman concealed it. The prostitute borrowed glamour from the fashion plates. The criminal studied the manners of a respectable man. The refugee rehearsed confidence he did not feel. The revolutionary wore the coat of an office worker. The city taught people to pass, and passing is one of the essential arts of modern urban life. It is also, of course, the essential art of the confidence man, the spy, and the murderer.

That is why Berlin is so extraordinarily fruitful for fiction. Nothing existed in isolation. Every world rubbed against another. The hotel lobby, the nightclub, the café, the railway station, the ministry corridor, the furnished room, the police waiting area: these were the places where classes and identities collided, sometimes by accident, sometimes because someone had planned it that way.

So, if you ask how one would know, walking through Berlin in the mid-1920s, who belonged to which world, the answer is straightforward. One would know in the oldest way there is. By watching. By looking at cut, cloth, posture, company, pace, district, voice, hands, habits. By noticing whether someone looked as though they served the system, despised it, profited from it, had been broken by it, or had learned to slip between its categories unseen.

Then, by distrusting the obvious things. Because Weimar Berlin was a city in which class still announced itself, but modernity had already begun teaching people how to counterfeit identity.

And by remembering that the most interesting people in any city are usually the ones who seem to belong somewhere at first glance and nowhere at second.

That was true in Weimar Berlin. It is true still. And it is very much the world through which Alaric von Trelow moves. He reads these signs. He notices the turned suit and the Mensur scar and the woman whose coat is almost right but not quite. He reads Berlin the way a hunter reads ground: for tracks, for the small disturbances that tell you something has passed this way and does not want to be followed.

That is what these novels are about. Not simply crime. Not simply mystery. But the art of reading a world in which everyone is performing something, and the truth is usually in the details they did not think to hide.