

GERMAN HUMOUR

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A Jew, fleeing from the Gestapo, sought sanctuary in a crowded church. When the priest saw the secret state police checking his congregation he announced fearfully "All Jews to leave the church". The Jew remained in his pew and continued his silent prayers and, once again, the priest made his cowardly announcement. Finally, as the Gestapo came ever nearer the priest and the stranger, the sweating cleric cried out "I said all Jews must leave the church at once!" Suddenly, the crucifix over the altar stirred and, descending from his cross, Christ put his arm round the Jew and said "Come, brother, we aren't wanted here."

George Burns? Bob Hope? Neither. Nazi financier Walther Funk to a fellow-inmate of Spandau Prison, Balder von Schirach, leader of the Hitler Youth.

Even Hess, the most committed of the National Socialists, when explaining why he would never have become a composer, said "[it was] because my brain didn't co-ordinate too well with my fingers, the distance from my brain to my fingers is too great." (However, he did make a contribution to personal literary shorthand; Hess invented a line of V's to represent a pause for laughter in his personal correspondence.)

The Berliners rivalled the Cockneys in stoical good humor despite the terror of the advancing Red Army. When the Russians were on the point of storming the German capital and part of the defences consisted of makeshift barricades comprising overturned omnibuses and the like, a popular gag went as follows:

"That should hold the Russians for an hour and twenty minutes."

"An hour and twenty minutes?"

"Yes. An hour laughing their heads off and twenty minutes dismantling it."

One of the great comedic characters of literature is Tyl Eulenspiegel--the prankster known in English translations as Owlglass--whose legendary actions can be best summarized by comparison with a German army official who has no direct British or American equivalent, the welfare warrant officer. He was approached by a delegation from a regiment of the Waffen SS, newly transferred from near-starvation on the Eastern front to face the new threat in Normandy. (Not to be confused with the ghoulish SS who served Himmler's Final Solution purposes, the Waffen SS were a genuine elite army corps as gallant as any who took the

field on either side.) This detachment was desperate for meat. Rather than feed them the vegetarian fare that was all the caterers had available, Sergeant-Major Owlglass borrowed a disabled tank and drove it into the middle of a herd of cows. Knowing that the American Air Force could not resist such a tempting target, he did not have to wait long before a trigger-happy Yank flyer reduced the moribund panzer to scrap metal. The ingenious warrant officer then shot a French cow and, blaming Uncle Sam, paid the farmer for the carcass.

Whilst we in the West could, despite their reputation, enjoy a German joke, the Russians had difficulties. Jodl was being debriefed by a Russian intelligence officer who was trying to pin responsibility for a criminal order to him and, getting nowhere, changed tack:

"If this order had been put to you, would you have signed it?"

"If my grandmother had wheels, would she be a bicycle?"

"Ah! Your grandmother was there!"

No. Having attacked one myth, my next Word Ways article is not on the subject of Italian war heroes or the saintliness of ex-governors of Arkansas.