

Jan Petersen



# UR STREET

EVEN SEAS BOOKS



# OUR STREET

A Chronicle  
of only yesterday

by  
JAN PETERSEN

SEVEN SEAS PUBLISHERS BERLIN

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*Briefly,*

## ABOUT THE BOOK

*Our Street* is a true story – a chronicle of the events that took place within the lifetime of many who will read this book. It is the story of the men and women who lived in a particular street in a working class district of Berlin during the early days of Hitler's coming to power... Their physical and spiritual courage and selflessness in the face of absolute terror, their dedication to their purpose shines in a time of foul darkness with the pale beauty of the morning star. Yet all that this book relates actually happened, and was written down as it happened... Names were changed. Some of the incidents were transposed so that points of time or their sequence were altered – for to have chronicled events with undisguised facts would have meant death for all who participated in this story.... It is the heroic German people who make *Our Street* a truly honest human document – one as pulsating and dramatic as the most absorbing fiction...

BY THE AUTHOR

*Novels  
and  
Stories*

OUR STREET  
GESTAPO TRIAL  
GERMANY BENEATH THE SURFACE  
WAY THROUGH THE NIGHT  
THE CASE OF DR. WAGNER  
YVONNE  
HE WROTE IT IN THE EARTH

*Screen-  
plays*

THE SEAS ARE CALLING  
THE CASE OF DR. WAGNER

## THE CHARLOTTENBURG DEATH LIST

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BEFORE JANUARY 30th, 1933

*Oskar Owege, 20 years*  
*Erich Frischmann, 26 years*

Shot by the Schupos

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*Hans Klaffert, 19 years*  
*Erich Ziemke, 22 years*  
*Otto Grüneberg, 20 years*  
*Max Schirmer, 32 years*  
*Erich Lange, 24 years*

Murdered by S.A. Storm 33

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AFTER JANUARY 30th, 1933

*Paul Schulz, 20 years*  
*Hans Schall, 21 years*  
*Walter Harnecker, 25 years*  
*Fritz Kolosche, 24 years*  
*Martin Michallak, 25 years*  
*Paul Voss, 29 years*  
*Karl Malz, 28 years*  
*Hans Mueller, 46 years*  
*Walter Drescher, 30 years*  
*Georg Stolt, 43 years*

Murdered by S.A. Storm 33

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*Richard Hüttig, 26 years*

Beheaded in Berlin  
Plötzensee on 14. 6. 34

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# SEVEN SEAS BOOKS

A Collection of Works in the English Language

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JAN PETERSEN · OUR STREET

## INTRODUCTION

to the Seven Seas Books Edition of "Our Street"

*Now it can be told* – the story behind the story which I wrote in what seems a long-ago day but which is really only yesterday as history goes.

This book is the chronicle of an anti-fascist struggle that took place in Wallstrasse, Berlin-Charlottenburg, in the fateful months concurrent with Hitler's coming to power. I wrote down the events as they happened. I typed my manuscript partially in my small room in Knesebeckstrasse, just a few minutes' walk from Wallstrasse, and partially on the Kleiner Werbellin Lake near Oranienburg.

The story covers a period of about a year and a half, ending the middle of 1934. Its publishing history includes its English translation, brought out in 1938 in London. Its publication in the German original had to wait until the end of the Second World War, the defeat of the Nazis, and the beginning of a new life for the German people.

It is heart-warming to me to know that the present Seven Seas Books edition, will again enable the good people who once lived in our street to become known to the many readers in the many lands where English is used; and so will live again, if only briefly, as the reader follows their story in this book.

Work on their story was often interrupted: when comrades with whom I was immediately in contact in the underground resistance movement were arrested, as was often the case. Or when the Gestapo put my name down on their black list, which happened twice. Those were times that bound one to a "wait-and-see" policy.

What would tomorrow bring? Would there be a tomorrow?

Once a week, I would come to Berlin by motor bike, the most recently written pages of the manuscript in my knapsack. The Oranienburg Concentration Camp lay en route and I would have to ride past the guards. In Berlin, a writer-comrade would read the new pages and we would discuss them. Later, he was murdered by the Nazis; as were so many of our people.

I had lived in Wallstrasse for nine years, and worked there in the anti-fascist movement. In those days whenever the S.A. Storm-troop 33 marched through our street under police escort, the Brown Shirts would look up at our windows and draw their hands across their throats, as if pulling the noose. After they came to power, the 33's would burst into our lodgings, revolver in hand, and search the whole house. I was lucky – I had moved shortly before. The police station at the corner could have furnished them with my new address. But nobody enquired. When I look back on this time much of what occurred seems unaccountable. To be sure, luck was with me – and held when the manuscript was smuggled abroad.

I finished the typescript in the autumn of 1934. I had made an original and two copies – three in all. Two of the copies, packed in water-proof coverings, were buried in the ground in two separate places. One copy was sent to Hamburg through underground channels. From there an anonymous German sailor was to take it aboard ship to England. Many weeks later, the news reached us that the manuscript had to be thrown overboard while the ship was still in harbour, to avoid last-minute detection. With considerable difficulty we made another arrangement for getting a copy abroad. Trustworthy friends took it to Dresden. From there it was to be smuggled into Czechoslovakia. But months went by with no news from Dresden. The manuscript was missing – perhaps lost. The third and final copy lay under a marked fir-tree, at the entrance to a wooded section outside of Berlin. This was our last

chance. If something happened to this copy, the story of our street and the courageous resistance of German anti-fascists would be swallowed up by time.

Now it was my turn to try and get the manuscript beyond the borders of Nazi Germany. I had been to Prague frequently to talk with German writers in exile. So I had had practice in crossing the border illegally and getting back via a different border post. At Christmas, 1934, two of us, outfitted in ski clothes, went on a skiing holiday – at least that was the impression we wanted to make. The manuscript had been baked into two cakes which I carried in my knapsack. My friend, Walter Stolle, who had been released from Brandenburg Concentration Camp only a short time before, accompanied me. The S.S., armed with carbines patrolled the border on skis. This we knew. But luck was with us, and we slipped through their lines.

In Prague, on the second day of our stay, we learned that a manuscript of an anti-fascist novel had made its way to Prague from Germany. It was the missing second copy of “Our Street”. We had had no word about it because our good friends in Dresden had put off delivery of the manuscript until Christmas time when the border traffic would be heavy and the guards busy. Their idea had been the same as ours. The messenger had taken the manuscript right past the noses of the guards – it was packed in an open basket under a stack of sandwiches. The guards lifted out some of the sandwiches and examined them, but fortunately looked at the top ones only.... We had both accomplished our missions. Two copies of the manuscript were now in safe hands.

As early as April 1935, an extract of “Our Street” was published in Paris although we in Berlin did not know about it at the time.

My foreign publishers asked if the facts in the book would in any way jeopardise the comrades who were still working in the underground in Nazi Germany. I had taken care of this possibility by changing the names of the char-

acters and by disguising their appearance, family connections, and similar personal data. While the book was authentic, and the events and fate of the persons were true, the form had been changed. In addition, some episodes in the underground work in other Berlin districts were included in the book. However, the names of the Charlottenburg Death List were authentic as well as the circumstances that led to death. These martyrs were beyond the reach of the Gestapo. I tried to present a realistic picture without giving the Gestapo any leads. For example, Heinz Preuss in the book is in reality my comrade, Walter Stolle. I met Walter again only recently. He is one of the few comrades of that time who are still alive. It was after his release from concentration camp that he told me of the brutal tortures visited upon Erich Mühsam who lay next to him on the straw sacks in Brandenburg Concentration Camp.

I am confident that the book gave no hint to the Gestapo as to the real identity of the people. Had they known the identity of the author, they might have drawn conclusions. But I had kept this secret well so as to eliminate any chance of danger to my comrades and family. We in the underground were always aware of this danger, as were our friends abroad.

Upon my return from enforced exile after the war, I had an opportunity to look through my Gestapo dossier which had survived bombings and burnings. It noted that the Gestapo's enquiries after me and my whereabouts abroad had lasted until 1941, that is, until two years after the Second World War had begun.

So far as I know, "Our Street" is the only anti-Nazi book ever to have come out of Hitler Germany and to have been currently published in foreign countries. Perhaps, because of this, it helped the world outside of Germany to understand that "another Germany" did exist.

Now, approximately twenty-three years after its first edition, it is being published again in English in the Ger-

man Democratic Republic. No changes have been made. It is just as I wrote it down during those tense days in Wallstrasse. As I look back upon its story and those in it who died so that a decent Germany might live, I am aware of the new threat to my people and the world arising in the West of Germany from a Nazi-inspired, revived militarism. If this book alerts the world to this new danger, if it encourages my own people to build a new, democratic homeland at peace with its neighbours, then it has fulfilled its purpose.

JAN PETERSEN

Berlin, 1960

*Saturday, January 21st, 1933.* I walk through the Wallstrasse in the evening with my comrades Richard Hüttig and Franz Zander. We stop at the corner of the Berliner Strasse. Glaring arc-lamps above us. An unceasing stream of cars and trams. "There comes another batch," says Richard, nudging me. Three dusty open lorries come from the left. They rumble slowly through the circle of light cast by the lamps. Brown uniforms stand packed together in the lorry. The rays of light from the lamps show up a few boyish faces for the space of a second. They glance at us with curiosity, astonishment at the big town written on their faces. Richard reads the registration number of the last lorry.

"All of them from the country, called up to the last man," he says.

Franz Zander nods. "They're all farm workers."

He leans against the lamppost.

"I once worked for farmers. It used to be the *Stahlhelm* that got the jobs; now it's the S.A. Otherwise there's no work."

An open car drives past; six brown uniforms sit on the collapsible seats.

"S.A. patrol cars!" says Richard.

The Nazi headquarters, the Hohenzollern banqueting rooms, are only a few streets further on. More of their cars patrol the streets at regular intervals. The police never examine *them* for weapons.

"Let's go," says Franz curtly, and turns on his heel.

The Wallstrasse, with its crowded rows of houses, dimly lit by a few gas lamps, lies before us like a long grey defile. Three Schupos stand in a doorway. They have buckled their chin straps under the chin. The barrels of their rifles show up above their shoulders.

"They've been reinforced!"

People are standing in front of all the doors. They talk in whispers, as if they feared to wake someone. We nod to them. Richard raises two fingers to his cap, as if he were pacing down the lines of his Buildings Defence Groups. The street makes a sharp bend in the centre. There is a wide gap in the row of houses here. A building site, with rubbish heaps and a dingy grey fence. Our political slogans, pasted over with the tattered posters of a wandering circus. Close by, the Charlottenburg Power Works, a large modern red-brick building. Low wooden houses stretch away to the left of the works. Lights still burn in all the windows. Temporary billets, run up in the years of the greatest housing scarcity, they have now become permanent dwellings. Nearly all the tenants are unemployed.

Suddenly Richard stops. He looks up at the solitary detached gable on the left that towers above the billets. It is quiet here, ominously quiet. Only the dull hum of the machines that run day and night comes from the huge windows of the Power Works.

"Our party slogans," says Richard.

High up on the gable in large painted letters:

ANTI-FASCISTS! VOTE FOR LIST THREE!  
COMMUNIST PARTY! RED FRONT!

Richard and Ede! Ede, the best climber in our district, lowered at night by a rope from the roof on to a swaying plank to paint our election slogans. The police don't dare to get up there even during the day, although the words burn their eyes like pepper. The illuminated windows in the gable seem to hang suspended in the night.

A gas explosion some years ago demolished the front of the house near the gable. Only the hall door was left, a miserable survival. The crumbling walls of the back yard now face the street. We see a few sticks of furniture behind the windows, the lines on which the washing is drying.

Werner's beer-house, near the gable, is our meeting-place. We cross the road. Our sentries stand outside.

"Red Front!"

"Red Front!"

There are small round holes in the window panes. Revolver shots from the S.A. Storm-troop 33. Round brass plates are fixed in the upper half of the pane. The insurance company has had the window repaired several times already.

"Anything special?"

"No, Comrade Hüttig, only the police cars..." The sentry stops speaking, nodding his head towards the bend in the street. For a second, headlights blind us. Slowly the car drives past.

Glistening helmets. Rifles.

"They've been here twice already. Searching for arms... here... in our place!" says the sentry mockingly.

Richard opens the door. A clamour of voices strikes us. The fat, white-bearded landlord nods to us from the bar. His red-faced wife is washing the glasses. Clouds of smoke float towards the ceiling. A feeling of suspense; my nerves react immediately. An excited group stands round the large centre table.

"... Tomorrow is the Nazi's dress rehearsal. Will the Social Democrats...?"

"I have spoken to a good many; they will be on the streets with us tomorrow," says Franz quietly.

"Since the 20th of July a lot realise..."

"From realising to fighting..." replies the other dubiously.

"Ready-made" draws a paper from his pocket. He is an assistant at Brenninkmeyer's Ready-to-Wear Tailoring

Establishment, and has to dress like a "gentleman". He reads from the paper:

"... It is to be hoped that the Chief Commissioner of Police will even at this late hour realise the seriousness of the situation."

"As if the police would side with us."

"Even my Social-Democrat pals laughed at that. They are going to meet me tomorrow!"

I glance over his shoulder at the paper. A photo of the Karl Liebknecht House, and above it in large letters:

### S. A. PARADE TO THE BÜLOWPLATZ

As if that were no provocation!

Behind us the door flies open. We turn round. A young comrade leans his bicycle against the window and enters.

"For Comrade Franz," he says. The latter nods. "Correct."

The youth searches in his pocket and hands over a folded slip of paper. The door immediately shuts noisily behind him. Conversation is silenced. All eyes watch the white slip of paper.

Franz nods to me and Richard. He passes in front of us, swaying his broad shoulders. "Strong Jim", we had once nicknamed him.

We go into the next room. Franz hands us the slip of paper.

"Instructions for tomorrow. You know already what to do with your Buildings Defence Groups, Richard."

"Yes, I must go now." Richard shakes hands firmly.

Franz calls in the comrades, one at a time. A circle of serious faces. He looks at them all in turn, as if he wanted once again to put each one to the test. He speaks with cool emphasis.

"I don't need to say much, comrades. We can't surrender Berlin to the Fascists without a fight. I shall inform the leaders later of the meeting point for tomorrow. We shall start from various streets in scattered groups. See that they are all punctual and that no one fails. Sleep in your clothes