

Taxi Driver no. 474,481

“Moreover, I still today consider as just that I assume the responsibility and thus the guilt for everything that was perpetrated. Not the individual mistakes, grave as they may be, are burdening my conscience, but my having acted in the leadership. Therefore I, for my person, have confessed to the collective responsibility, and I am also maintaining this today still.”

“I was thirty when he laid a world at my feet. My dreams were always concerned with buildings; it was not power I wanted.”

- Albert Speer.

Nuremberg, 1946.

The last defendant stepped onto the small platform of the courtroom. He was handed a pair of earphones, which he hurried to put on, before turning to face the judge.

The night before, whispers had spread quickly through the basement cells - one of the prisoners had committed suicide. A phial of cyanide was found rolling on the floor beside his body. Bet he was on the list, the others said. He wouldn't let them take him. Remorse was impossible.

On the day of sentencing, each defendant was summoned one by one into the courtroom. None had any idea of the previous man's fate. Imprisonment or the death penalty, they had each been moved immediately to the according tier. Eleven had been instructed to remain in the lower basement. Eight were moving their belongings to the upper cells. Three had been acquitted.

Two prisoners passed each other on the way to and from the courtroom, handcuffed, guided by a soldier wearing a white helmet.

“What did you get?”

“I have no idea. Probably the death penalty. I didn't listen.”

The judge called the last defendant to attention. He smoothed down the surface of his plain civilian suit, devoid of a tie, the number 474,481 stitched in the place of a front pocket.

Those who had come before him had appeared bored, pretended to be asleep, fidgeted with their hands, gazed inattentively into the distance. He sat very still. His dark intelligent eyes, framed by strangely shaped and unkempt eyebrows, rested intently on the spectators surrounding him. He was young, barely past forty, though appeared troubled by a weakness of nerves which overcame his body in brief, irregular shakes.

It is my unquestionable duty to assume my share of responsibility for the disaster.

The judge announced his sentence. The defendant bowed unconsciously, removed the earphones with unsteady hands, and was led from the platform back to his cell.

Technical University, Berlin, 1923.

The classroom was packed and silent, the breathing of the students barely audible. Some scribbled furiously, others laboriously, foreheads almost touching the paper as they reached the halfway mark of the examination. In the back row, a boy raised his head, placed his pencil down in a conclusive manner, and glanced around the room. Everyone was still working. Verifying the time remaining, the boy asked for another set of papers, picked up his pencil, and turned back to the beginning of the algebra section.

“You have excelled in figures and statistics. I see you even took the pleasure of doing the test twice.”

The boy stood before the professor’s desk patiently. He was physically slight for a fifteen-year-old, and his shy manner was accompanied by a somewhat nervous disposition, though his dark eyes were calm and composed.

“However.” The professor cleared his throat authoritatively. “You cannot draw. I do not see how you could be an architect while lacking this requirement. My selection standards are strict, Berthold, and your your application has been unsuccessful. I cannot take you in my class.”

After the initial unpleasant, crushing sensation, panic quickly followed, as the boy’s thoughts rushed to how his father would take this news.

“But I want to study mathematics, Papa.”

“With what purpose?” His son flinched. “Do you think you shall become a great mathematician? The best you could hope for would be the status of a university professor. You will never attain any expectations or social requirements. Mathematics...No, we must find you another teacher. Tessenow, Heinrich Tessenow - I’ve heard he will come to Berlin soon. He will take more students than Pölzig. You are more suited to his teachings.”

Tessenow took 50 students that semester. Berthold passed the exam, and quickly began the next stage of his education.

The Hasenheide, Berlin, January 1931.

Professors and assistants sat on a raised platform near the front. Tessenow’s recently assigned assistant found himself directly under the lectern, and sat down uncomfortably, sending darting, uneasy glances around the inconspicuous beer hall.

The dirty walls, ill-lit interior and cramped space had not stopped the huge crowd from gathering, mostly students, who were chattering and roaring excitedly. The caricatured figure of a brown-shirted, waving fanatic sprang to the young assistant’s mind, just like the one he saw in the papers, accompanied by an enthusiastic, street-fighter band of youths he now suddenly felt surrounded by.

He had not told Tessenow he was attending the speech. He had no real heart for politics anyway, he reasoned. He had only agreed to accompany his students to the beer hall that evening at their insistent behest. Many of them had already joined the Party.

A man entered, unannounced, from the back of the room. He emerged as if from the dark, and made his way straight to the lectern. The outbreak of applause was deafening, as the speech-maker silently took his place on the raised podium, placing his hands lightly on either side of the wooden lectern surface. His face was turned towards the crowd, but he looked at no one, directing his gaze in an upright angle so the slanting rays of the beer hall lights caught his profile features sharply. Banners and flags littered the air, and all breathing seemed to hush in rapid, sticky, warm waves, as he began to speak.

He wore a plain blue shirt, not at all like the ones in the papers, and stood in a state of engaging sobriety. He spoke at first in a shy, self-conscious tone, yet commanded the absolute attention of his audience. His pitch rose gradually, persuasively. His audience, now clothed in darkness, the lights dimmed to better illuminate the speaker's position, flowed with him in a tranced state of unawareness. No one knew whether they were listening to his words, or to his voice.

He heeded and solved all warnings, separated doubts from chaos, appealed to past and present self-sacrifice, presented a thorough, logical dissection of the crowd's struggles, and seemed to hand each individual member of the unanimous mass a series of imperative, actionable tasks.

The speech concluded, and sheets were passed around the crowd by eager hands.

The young man sitting under the lectern rose, politely declined joining his peers for further drinks, and quietly left the beer hall. He paused outside, flinching unnaturally at the cold, stomped his feet, and adjusted his overcoat tighter around him.

He was tall, wore a permanent simplistic expression on his smooth face, otherwise characterised by a set of bushy eyebrows which pointed upwards slightly in the center. He had large ears, barely covered by his winter hat, and wore his hair parted dramatically on one side, thick and oiled. This only emphasised the broadness of his forehead, giving the impression that his head was too big in proportion to his long body, and that he might topple over after a single misstep.

He appeared distracted, troubled, and walked away from the the cheerful and raucous interactions echoing from the lighted beer hall. Arriving at a small, mottled green car parked in a nearby street, he got in, and drove until he reached the pine forest on the outskirts of the city. He continued his walk through the trees in darkness, in deep consideration, as if grappling with an uncomfortable, unexpected idea.

The following day, he found himself filling out a set of documents at the local post office. He signed, stamped, and delivered the papers to the address provided on one of the sheets handed out at the beer hall. One week later a response arrived, in an envelope, addressed to no. 474,481.

Wannsee, 1932.

A small, mottled green car rolled along the deserted tree-lined avenue, leading from the lake to the collection of houses of Wannsee's main residents. Berthold had left his position at the university, and stepped back into the role of apprentice-assistant at his old mentor's studio in the western boroughs.

From the beginning, the aspiring mathematician's work with Tessenow had been carried out with the utmost earnest. He had immediately felt driven to make a special effort for his new tutor - this solitary, philosopher-architect figure with a drooping right eye, who spoke in a whisper, and wore gold-rimmed spectacles which highlighted his auburn-flecked beard. "The simplest is not always the best, but the best is always simple." His awed student vowed to keep this message of simplicity at the center of all his future designs, bombasting false ornateness in favor of modern functionalism: the real, the uncomplicated, the humane. "You must always see architecture in a human context," his teacher would remind him. "A minimum of display is crucial. We do not build to achieve some sort of aesthetic utopia."

However, he now resumed his assistant position with Tessenow with reluctance and a growing sense of futility. Work as an "independent architect" had been difficult to come by. The projects were dull, underfunded, uninspiring, and the pay unreliable. This surprised no one. The economic situation was hopeless.

He drove to Tessenow's studio every morning, in his small car. Wannsee felt deserted. Days were slow. Insignificant - as if time, his time, had paused. His mind wandered, in those moments without distraction, as he drove alone, to thoughts of his future, ruminating uselessly on a life path which suddenly found itself without structure. He realised his drawings were irritatingly flawed: inconsistent, unattainable, unrealistic. The lines were of fine quality, though shapeless and lacking form.

An enormous lake dominated the edge of the town. During the warmer months, it was packed with activities, boats and swimmers; families, lake residents and visitors crowded the man-made beaches which lined the water's edge. Now, it was empty, and still. The land surrounding the lake was impressive, though mildly eerie and oppressive, clouded by fog and silence. Several exclusively located properties peered out onto its edges. It was late autumn, and thin, naked branches poked like flexible iron twine over the slate stillness of the water. Winter had not yet reached the damp, dull brown leaves which stuck to the road, having long forgotten their auburn glow.

From his vantage point in the car, passing the lake's borders each morning, Berthold could just about discern a wooden walkway platform leading into the water from the edge of one particular property. He would crane his neck over the steering wheel, moving the car slowly down the brief sloping which proceeded it. The walkway disappeared momentarily, then surfaced again on his left, filtered through the thick bush of the evergreens.

The property entrance was faced by a huge set of chained green gates and two white pillars. The gate was rusting, neglected. Green iron fencing stretched from either pillar and

surrounded the property, enormous and breathing, as if waiting impatiently. Everything was hidden from view by dense overgrowth. The walkway was perfectly poised, leading out into the water from the steps of a porch which began to form in the architect's mind. The grounds seemed to emit electric waves across the lake and through the gates, as if in warning to the relative neutrality of the countryside landscape.

An overcoated figure, tall and broad-backed, soon appeared on Berthold's regular morning route. He trudged forwards along the road path, shoulders hunched against the cold, as it enveloped the air like a thick, suffocating blanket.

One morning, he stood still on the pavement, as if waiting for something. He had small eyes, thin lips, and a receding hairline beneath a broad-brimmed hat, which had an official air; his nose broadened at the center, brows slightly furrowed in a concentrated yet not unapproachable manner. He held out his hand suddenly, as if to flag the driver down. Berthold slowed and brought the car to a stop beside him, the engine still running. The exhaust pipe puffed grey snow clouds into the cold air, the body of the car humming. Leaning down, the stranger squinted through the rolled-down window, moved his head from side to side, and raised his eyes, as if examining the car.

"Guten morgen."

"Good morning. Can I offer you a lift?"

"You might. Though, I'm not sure if I'm heading in your way."

"I'm sure we could arrange something."

"Yes, maybe." He peered into the car again, off to the side and along the bonnet, as though distracted.

Berthold leaned back and flicked open the side door, like a taxi driver beckoning his next passenger.

"I can take you some of the way, at least."

The man shifted himself stiffly into the back seat, brushing his tight, cumbersome uniform layers as he settled. Berthold's eyes shot to the viewfinder mirror, as his passenger's badge surface glinted sharply in the reflection.

The car pulled back onto the road.

"Just another few kilometers should be fine," the passenger announced. "This is a fantastic car," he added. Though his lips were thin and straight, his eyes were intelligent, energetic and amused. "It is your vehicle, am I right?"

Berthold wondered what was so interesting about his small, modest, aging vehicle.

"Yes. I brought it from the city. I see you are a Party member?"

"I am. Karle Hanke. Head of District Headquarters of the West End. *Und dir?*"

"Member number 474,481. I just joined this year. Although, I haven't yet had the chance to familiarise myself with Party activities in these parts."

A sudden element of grave secrecy seemed to overcome the passenger's thoughts at that moment, causing him to readjust his manner slightly - now more contained, in his officer

role. "It is important activity, nonetheless - central to everything, yes. A part of the center, brought here, to expand..."

"Important activity? I'd like to know." The young man reddened at his own bluntness.

"That is, to see if I could get involved, to help, in some way..."

"I'm sure!" Hanke looked around the interior of the car again. "There are exciting plans for construction. I have just leased a villa, by the lake. It will be the future headquarters for the district's organization. An old building, of course, and needs renovating, but with the right vision and skill - "

"I am an architect, officer."

Their eyes met this time in the mirror. His brows narrowed. "Oh, you are? An architect?" Berthold suddenly had an uncanny, unplaceable feeling that this conversation could not take any risks. He explained his background, his schooling, his teaching, his current occupations. He did not mention Tessenow's name.

He seemed to listen attentively, with thoughtful, silent interest.

"You can drop me off here. Nearer to the office already! Ah, that cold..."

The car stopped and he pulled himself out. The engine chugged steadily, disturbing the icy steam which surrounded them. Hanke rubbed his hands together briskly, his eyes narrowing again, this time squinting into the distance as though in mild consideration. He turned and leaned back through the rolled down window.

He handed the driver a card.

"*Dankeschön.*" Again, his eyes flitted around the car interior, as he leaned in closer. "I hope you consider it," he motioned to the card. "You know, the Doctor has the utmost appreciation and regard for those who wish to support the cause - especially in a manner particular to themselves." He winked, smacked the window ledge lightly but firmly, and stood up straight. "My applause to your Party membership. The first step!"

One week later, Berthold had gained official admission to the NS Motor Corps, the Party's official paramilitary drivers' organisation, as Head of the area's section.

"I'm the only Party member in Wannsee with a car, apparently," he explained to Tessenow, attempting to balance any trace of pride with a tone of thoughtful, mature, and removed observation.

"A glorified roadside service," was his grumbled reply.

His student ignored him.

Soon afterwards, Hanke invited him to redecorate the villa headquarters.

"It's only a temporary structure," he explained, in an official, yet eager, manner. "We have plans for greater, larger developments in the future. The Party is establishing its respectability."

The architect chose bright, strong colors, of red and yellow, wallpaper designed by an emerging art school in Weimar, and modest furnishings, which contrasted with the ornate carvings and plaster of the original Wilhelmine structure. Despite his appreciation for the

classical tradition, from Tessenow's trainings he felt a natural pull towards architectural simplicity.

Hanke was pleased with his work, though he paused at the wallpaper, appearing troubled. After consideration, he waved his hand in a relaxed gesture, and moved on with a strained smile.

Party members began to arrive more frequently from the city. The new driver would meet them at the station, and take them to the temporary headquarters.

They regularly passed the property by the lake, with its distinct wooden walkway and rusted green gates. Once, Berthold noticed a car parked outside, and movement beyond the closed gates. A week later, the gate had opened, and several cars accumulated around the entrance. People wearing uniforms with glinting badges crunched around the grounds' ice-dirt surface, which had replaced the limp sludge of autumn. The architect felt a hint of jealousy when he saw them, traipsing about the property, looking around and gesturing to each other, with grave and concentrated faces. He felt they were discussing something very important.

Wannsee, 1933.

Work on the villa had long finished. Berthold was spending frustrating periods in the studio poring over stretching pools of pretty designs which lacked function or service, when he received a call from Hanke. He sounded troubled, anxious, and urged him to make his way immediately to a certain location between the town train station and Party headquarters.

"It's an important job, don't ask any questions, a car has broken down and you need to pick up the passenger - quickly."

Berthold left the studio, mildly curious, An old, unattractive car was pulled up by the roadside, its front engine steaming aggressively. Two individuals were arguing and gesticulating frustratedly, uselessly. A shadow, arms folded, remained inside the halted vehicle.

After preliminary introductions, the shadow was ushered quickly into the back seat of Berthold's car. He was a thin man, unimpressed with the proceedings, and swiftly pulled off his hat, revealing an arrow shaped head and bird-like features. His hairline seemed to start halfway past his forehead, and the sides of his mouth creased in a permanent downward curve. His long, thin, pointed fingers twined and untwined themselves impatiently on his lap.

"Your first time in Wannsee, officer?"

He looked up sharply.

"No, it is not."

"Ah, so you are familiar with headquarters, then."

“Yes. But I am not due to visit headquarters today. What did they tell you? Another thing they cannot get right? Take me in that direction. My destination lies on the same route. I will signal when to stop.”

“Of course, sir.”

Silence ensued. The man’s head was turned to the side, gazing out the window with a firm, unsatisfied expression.

“Here,” he motioned suddenly. The car stopped, outside the green rusted gates. The wooden walkway floated calmly on the lake’s surface, as if sleeping. A group of officers were waiting at the entrance, and approached the parked car. The man exited from the back seat, and strode briskly towards them without another word, waving his hand sharply. They hurried after him, entering the property, before taking a sharp turn left and disappearing.

Alone now, Berthold edged forward slightly in the car, crunching onto the gravel driveway. He could see closer into the grounds from here, and now, the side of a white brick bungalow, flat roofed. A porch suddenly didn’t seem suitable anymore.

Hanke called him again the following day.

“Hi! I’ve been looking everywhere for you. Would you like to rebuild the Doctor’s new house? We’re in a great hurry. He wants the same architect as headquarters. You will need to pass by the property this afternoon.”

Hanke was waiting outside the elusive green gates, where the arrow-featured man had disappeared so angrily the day before. The architect now finally found himself walking through the grounds, around to the entrance of the white brick villa, surrounded by signs of construction and officers striding about with an air of professional urgency.

“How long will it take?”

“Two months.”

“Two months?” Hanke raised his eyebrows. “Well, if you say so...but, Bert. The Doctor was impressed with headquarters, yes. But his home, this property, it will also be frequented by...higher members. Please reconsider your...choice of wallpaper. And those watercolors. That style of...art - it is simply impossible. You will find yourself in trouble.” He clapped me on the back. “Two months, Bert. I’ll pass on your word.”

The architect tacitly accepted.

“Two months? He does not believe you can do it.”

The architect and the Doctor picked their way carefully through the blackened slush of the last frosts on the property, observing the building activities taking place around them.

Whether the Doctor remembered him, as the taxi driver who had fortuitously come to his aid that morning; whether he recognised the car, which had taken him to the grounds of his future home, of which his chauffeur, Party member no. 474,481, was to be the primary architect - the arrow-like features did not betray, when they were officially introduced prior to the initial blueprint presentations.

“He does not believe you can do it,” the Doctor repeated.

“I am quite confident, sir. Every aspect of construction has been synchronized to the smallest detail.”

“He is planning to visit me here once everything is completed. I should like you to join us for dinner.”

“Of course, sir.”

The Doctor turned leisurely, as if suddenly noticing something. “Ah, that is what I meant to tell you. The measurements for this window - they aren’t quite in line with the new frames. I neglected to tell you, I changed the order. Can you make sure this is not overlooked in the final blueprints? Thank you. That is all. I shall have the details of our dinner party sent to you directly.”

The three men were dining in the Doctor’s recently completed villa. Work had concluded punctually, exactly two months subsequent to its commencement.

“I would have quite liked to have been an architect, you know.” The Doctor’s guest wiped his mouth slowly with his napkin, folded it, and placed it on his lap.

Berthold found him exactly as he remembered: the placid, confident figure who had addressed the hypnotised crowd that evening at the Hasenheide beer hall. Inspecting the villa, he had drifted slowly through each room, as the architect followed in silence, watching him pause, nod, gaze around himself theatrically, and continue.

He now fixed his gaze on the architect with small, circular, piercing eyes, wiping his mouth carefully again with his napkin. Every gesture was calculated, precise, every move charged with the utmost civility and purpose. “Have you ever,” he asked, “had the good fortune, of visiting Hadrian’s Pantheon in Rome?”

“No, sir, unfortunately I have not.”

“Well. It is difficult to fully explain - but, from the time I experienced this building, I became interested in its history. Majestic! No description or photograph can do it justice.”

“I can imagine, sir. I have, however, visited the Pantheon in Paris.”

“Oh, the Pantheon in Paris. No, it did not impress me. I was quite disappointed. Now, you see, Hadrien’s Pantheon - we know it belongs to him, that it was built by him. A shining example of gothic classicalism. There is no scourge greater than the dry, degenerate form of art which is making its way like a stain into this country. It will have no place in the *Welthauptstadt*.” He stopped short. “I have something to show you. I brought with me some sketches, I have been working on them for some time. I would like your opinion.”

After dinner, they made their way into one of the villa’s newly built meeting rooms. The space was sparsely furnished and unlighted, though a large, heavy, oak desk stood in the center. An array of papers and materials were spread carefully on its surface. A black lantern was attached to the side of the desk, held in place with a screw contraption, wound tight. The lamp’s head drooped heavily, the springs having lost their tautness from overuse - it no longer drew back in an expansive, vivacious bound. Its glow was pulled close to the desk surface, illuminating sections of the enormous diagrams with its white, prominent clarity. The skirting territory was left in a grey, blurred hue, like a cold sun descending

unnervingly on a snow-filled battlefield landscape - unable to focus on the full questionable horrors at once, leaving the spectator in doubt and fearful intrigue. The surrounding room suddenly felt dark and impenetrable in comparison.

A rubber cord ran from the lamp to the wall plug. Berthold passed it nervously between his fingers, one hand behind his back, his head above the Party leader's shoulder, who hunched over the intricate papers. The man's eyes were fixated in a sudden state of concentrated lunacy. The architect glanced at him quickly, before drawing his eyes back to the diagrams and drawings whose contents suddenly presented themselves to him in an indecipherable blur.

The Party leader was leaning on the table surface, his knuckles slightly bent, shoulders hunched, resting his weight on the balls of his palms. His stare was fixated, and seemed to cover the whole expansive area mapped out before him in one wave. It was as if he had spent so much time absorbed in its contents and creation, that it had now become an extension of his consciousness, which commanded as much attention as a sick family member. His forehead was slanted in anxious concentration, though expressed a disconcerting confidence and fixated intent, which pushed for perfection, as if searching for an ingenious addition or crippling flaw in his work. His manner imbued the papers with an uneasy character, and they seemed to throb uneasily in response to his attentive glare, causing the table to vibrate motionlessly before them both.

It suddenly struck Berthold how short the Party leader appeared when hunched in that manner.

They were gathered at the front door, taking their leave after the evening's events. The Party leader grasped the architect's hands in his, holding them firmly. There was an excited gleam in his small eyes, which added an unattractive red glow to his plump cheeks. "We are designing the future, my friend. I have full faith in your abilities."

He handed him a wrapped package, and grasped the architect again by the arm as he turned to leave.

"Oh, and your name. You will need something...sharper. Do you have any middle names? Something passed down from your father, possibly?"

The architect paused. A shadow drew across his simple features, and he seemed in that moment to falter, as his chest tightened and he began to sweat. He now seemed suddenly short of breath, and his reply emerged in brief a stammer. "Albert, sir - my f-father - father's name is Albert. Berthold Speer, is my full name."

"Albert Speer. Yes, much better. You sound like a real architect now. I am already looking forward to our next meeting. *Mein Bildhauer.*"

The architect drove straight to his old tutor's studio. Clearing his desk, he opened the sketchbook, and laid out its contents.

He only knows who I am because of my car.

The sketchbook contained the same drawings they had consulted together that evening. Now, in his own space, removed from the overpowering influence of the Party leader's presence, the architect felt his mental cognition return, and considered the papers with a focused, concentrated eye.

A small sheet of paper, about the size of an office memo, had fallen from the sketchbook to the floor. Holding it up to the light, he traced the sketch of a huge Dome, with the words "*core of the dream for the new Capital*" scribbled across the top.

The designs were for the rebuilding of a city. A matching Dome could be located immediately, unmistakably. It protruded like a time bell, commanding space in its immediate vicinity, steadfastly observing a conglomeration which grew before and around it. Everything spread out like bark on a tree trunk surface, with barely perceptible rivets and thin, smooth grooves marking passage. It was a black and white mosaic, with veins and arteries joining to form a bloodless bodily ecosystem, leading to no heart but the solid beating of the dome - everything led back to the dome. From above, the whole city plan resembled the inner mechanisms of a machine, with all its tiny plugs, connections, and iron parts. All it needed to function was for someone to flick a switch, for it to begin to throb and vibrate. There were no broken parts.

The plan was flat. The spectator's physical vantage point provided a bird's eye view; but everything already appeared so concrete and molecular, that it was as if one were hanging from a plane which navigated vertically through the maze, and had stopped to hover at a precipice just above the city.

It was new, it was ambitious, but it was empty.