

Paul “Sling” Schlesinger’s Crime Reportage Written During His 1920s Heyday

Editor’s Note: The following four columns, “The Naked Man on the Meadow,” “The Beast,” “The Writers,” and “The Crumbs of Humanity” are examples of Paul “Sling” Schlesinger’s crime reportage, written during his 1920s heyday. **Translator’s Note:** I could not find the precise issue and page number for two of the four articles. The collections that have been published do not provide this information, and looking for specific articles in seven years’ worth of dailies (in an online archive) is a monumental task. For the two that I did not track down, I listed the publication information for a collection I found at the University of Illinois library.

The Naked Man on the Meadow

November 25, 1923, p. 5, *Vossische Zeitung*.

On the gigantic stairwell of the criminal courthouse, I met him, searching, confused, with a flowing, undulating, magnificently curling head of hair. Of course, here he wasn’t naked—he had a very proper sport coat and trousers, leather spats, Schiller collar. He was strenuously searching for Portal V. “But my dear fellow, you’re already there—you now only need room 567.” Then he found that too. And after a bit of waiting he appeared before the appeals court.

The lay assessor’s court had sentenced him, due to disruption of the public order, to one month’s imprisonment, because he had the habit of walking around and working, in a piece of meadow he leased, completely naked. Now he had applied for an appeal, accidentally only against the sentence, the punishable offense he had admitted to. Yet he had not been forbidden from explaining his point of view.

Actually a handsome man, his low but not un noble brow under soft hair, parted down the middle, his unusual, dreamy, large brown eyes, the small, thin, rather downward sloping mustache—almost the head of a young

cavalry officer from Wallenstein's army. But when he opened his mouth, a colorfast, coarse Berlinisch poured forth, softened from the inside through some kind of world view.

Which is very simple. First of all, it is better to work in the heat of the day when one isn't wearing anything. Second, he didn't do anything immoral. He works exactly in the costume in which he was born. Also, there is no public path nearby, and he didn't understand the offense, the scandal.

The presiding judge regrets, for reasons of procedure, he isn't able to respond, since only the sentence is contested. And by the way, he wasn't convicted of indecent behavior but of a disturbance of the public order.

The curly-haired man smiles and says: "When I walk down the street with my long hair and people call after me, aren't I also provoking or disturbing the public order?" The judges smile. One of the assessors asks: "Couldn't you at least wear a bathing suit?"

And the curly-haired man smiles again, so mildly. "But swimming suits are harmful, and genitalia should be healthy!"

The state's attorney coolly motions to reject the appeal.

The court, however, alters the prison sentence to the highest fine allowed: ten billion.

And the man from the meadow goes happily along his way.

The Beast

May 27, 1924, p. 13, *Vossische Zeitung*

Like a seal trying to hobble to land, the small man stands behind the dock of the arraignment room, with a wool scarf around his fat, collarless neck, both flippers left and right propped up, between them his ball-round, cleanly shaven head. Further similarities to a seal cannot be drawn without offending this noble and lovable animal race; for it was not the seal's idea that men live off the sad profession of women. This occupation, too, was thought up by intelligent mankind.

The judge, the state's attorney, the police detective as an expert witness, yes, the accused, and witnesses negotiate the trial with a noticeable routine. It is so typical; the girl had, in an attack of desperation, reported the man to the police. Now, just as in the first trial, so in the appellate court, she doesn't want to know anything about it anymore. In the meantime, she has been worked

over by her associates. If she stands by the truth, she is threatened with violence; internally, she is coolly determined to perjure herself. Maybe she knows the judge won't take her under oath after all—even if he threatens to. She is anyway cool and resigned, with her hatless, shaggy, straw-yellow hair framing a gaunt wax-pale face. Resigned but not dumb and dull. Silently, her gray eyes look over to the judge.

The trial runs like clockwork. The detective says, “as is generally known,” the state’s attorney says “according to experience,” and the judge says “it’s just always the case.” A witness, a fifty-eight-year-old, still-practicing veteran of the trade, brings a certain light gruesomeness to the ensemble. Her uncalled-for cynicism bore a few punch lines of horrible edginess. One time she appealed to the expert knowledge of the judge: “How is a man supposed to live from that girl? Just look at her—does she look like a big earner?” Another opinion was heard, of course—a contradictory statement—in the preliminary hearing. One time, in a surge of morality, she wanted to prevent the accused from stealing. So she said, “Why do you go and steal when you have a nice girl out walking?”

Naturally, the profession of the accused is denied, and the girl is not placed under oath. But shortly before the court retires, an unusual happening occurs in this otherwise ordinary and businesslike trial. The judge lowers his voice and says very softly and with great emphasis:

Accused, you know that the witness is about to, on your behalf, swear an oath that will land her in prison. The girl was once close to you, and it can't be your wish to cause her imprisonment. I know, accused, who you are and what you are and I still believe in the bit of honor in you. I appeal to your honor as a man, since the girl is lying because of you. Tell the truth.

The judge's voice becomes quite warm. No person in the courtroom can help but be moved. And look: Out of the gray eyes of the straw-blonde girl tears fall. The corners of her mouth twitch, and over her crying is something like a triumph song: She is still a human being!

Only the beast at the dock feels nothing. “I told you, your honor, that I did not take any money. More than that I can't say.”

And stares vacantly forward. And keeps silent and waits . . . accepts his sentence . . . pulls in his flippers . . . dives under . . .

The Writers

Originally published in the *Vossische Zeitung*. Reprinted in *Richter und Gerichtete* (Munich: Rogner & Bernhard, 1969), 216–17.

The situation was already interesting in the corridor of the courthouse due to a garter, obviously a lady's, lying there, abandoned.

Accused and brought into the courtroom, a writer, whose name evokes the image of the most pleasant time of the year. The name Equinoctial Storm would be in view of this lady an inappropriate flattery, so let's call her Miss November. The charges list coercion, breach of the domestic peace, insult, and theft.

How she stood there, with tiny malicious eyes in the massive face, the strong mandible clapping up and down through uninterrupted speech, she resembled one of those grotesque fishes that vent their tropical snouts on the glass walls of the aquarium.

In the meantime, as she stood there, one could see from beneath her skirt—too short for any occasion—the other end of that abandoned garter, from which at the very least a concerned seeker could take some comfort.

Being content with a small room, Miss November had rented her two-room flat to another writer with a small child. It came to differences. Miss November broke into her renter's rooms in her absence, took belongings of the renter to secure payment, and allegedly had not surrendered them in their entirety to the investigating bailiff. She did, however, conduct an extremely ugly speech over her renter's love life, and repeated her suspicions in a typed letter. The presiding judge wants to know what kind of writer Miss November actually is.

"I am an editor."

"Where?"

"I am not saying until the appeals court." The facts of the case are also not easy to establish from the accused, since she is continually speaking about her renter's love life.

"And with married men!"

"It has been known to happen," the judge says mildly.

Now the renter scurries into the room, as the primary witness: the writer, here before the court, of course without her child. No, she is also no longer in the blossom of youth and actually hardly attractive. A hard and miserable life is chiseled into her face, but it has not eradicated the gracefulness of a floating soul.

“What do you write, then?”

“I am a poet.”

“Have your poems been published in books?”

“No—only in magazines.”

Her voice went through the room, sweet and soft. But Miss November didn't let up.

“And she had company with the lights turned out.”

“But Miss November,” warned the judge.

“When *I* have company the lights are *never* turned out!”

Which may certainly be true, but awful.

In the end, Miss November was sentenced to a 150-mark fine for coercion, unlawful entry, and insult. Immediately she wants to appeal.

“You should reconsider,” the judge gives his opinion.

“No,” says Miss November, storming out, and spring sunshine floods the room.

This curious chronicler couldn't help but inquire afterward in which field of literature the owner of the torn garter is employed.

According to reliable reports, Miss November is—a fashion writer.

The Crumbs of Humanity

Originally published in the *Vossische Zeitung*. Reprinted in *Richter und Gerichtete* (Munich: Rogner & Bernhard, 1969), 209–10.

Humanity is a big, not particularly sweet cake that crumbles. The dark, small lady slunk into the courtroom—as if played by Orska. She doesn't know what she is supposed to do, not even why she should. She shows a suggestive smile, the smile of an intelligent Russian Jewish woman, and she believes in this smile. She uses it first on the court bailiff, then on the young lawyer-in-training, acting on behalf of the state's attorney, and finally on the judge himself. One could believe she is from the Russian ballet. She is a seamstress.

The judge is not pleased with the story, for she struggles with the German language, and she continually repeats: “I don't understand why I should pay 300 marks.”

“You have been staying here without permission.”

“But where should I stay?”

“Why didn’t you stay in America?”

“They deported me.”

“You aren’t American?”

“No, Russian.”

“Why didn’t you stay in Russia?”

“My parents immigrated with me to America ten years ago.”

“Why didn’t you go back to Russia?”

“They wouldn’t allow me back in.”

The judge consults his files. It’s true. He wants to know one more thing.

“Why were you deported from America?”

“I got involved with bad company. My parents didn’t want to help me, and I then was put on a German steamer. I arrived in Hamburg, and came to Berlin. So why should I pay 300 marks?”

No doubt it’s all true. It is also proven that she had tried to get a passport to return to Russia. But the Soviet government won’t give her one because her nationality is unclear.

What is she supposed to do?

The judge acquits her, since she has done all she can do to leave Germany, and because she has no opportunity to go anywhere else.

Later, I meet her in the corridor. She smiles at me and asks:

“What is my fate?”

“You have been acquitted.”

“Thank you, much obliged.”

And she slinks up the stairs.

Crumbs of humanity. Alive without any right to exist.

Neither the great land of Russia nor the great land of America has even the smallest space left over for her. Nor Germany. Blew off the table and left the crumbs lying on the earth.

If the crumbs took the law seriously, they would have to shoot themselves.

How can one live without permission?

One does.

