

Camp 14, Hitler, and Playing the Odds

Written by Alex Baer

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It depends how you view it: ***How lucky, or unlucky, can any one person get?*** Here are two books arguing wildly separate cases, two more books identified as must-reads. It is uncertain who among us will turn-a-dumbed-down-and-blinded, societal eye to either: Who will bother to low-crawl beneath the barbed-wire past of one of them -- whose head is not already filled with too many fears regarding America's future to sift through the other? Odds seem heavy against both.

Taken together, this pair speaks of real-life nightmares, cold, bracing bookends embracing all that is harshly dismal and bleak -- salted with flecks of astonishing insight, peppered with humanity. If you are worthy of the trek, and can bear up under issues of such formidable size, and can render hefty sighs, these are for you. The books are compelling and will propel you to pinpoints in time and space where no one will hear you screaming -- or, even if someone should, they themselves might be screaming, too.

Book One is "Escape from Camp 14," by Blaine Harden, with the rest of the title telling much of the story: "One Man's Remarkable Odyssey from North Korea to Freedom in the West." This book accounts the tale of Shin Dong-hyuk, the only prisoner born and raised in one of North Korea's prison camps who is known to have escaped.

It is a harrowing and horrific tale of human rights abuses, and is a personal tale demonstrating the thin-to-nonexistent veneer of civilization on, or absent, any human animal in the midst of a full, brutal struggle for survival. Later, once reasonably safe after escape, a secondary journey begins, in which there is a struggle for reconciliation of self and some meager measure of redemption. Very strong and thought-wrenching stuff, so, heads-up.

Book Two is entitled simply, "Hitler," by A.N. Wilson, who describes his subject as the "Demon King of History," but adds the man was an ordinary one, even quite boring. This is an intriguing and startling unspoken proposition, that any person, in the confines of a certain aspect of time, could morph into such a mad monster -- that, in effect, given the right conditions, any of us could have been *der Fuhrer*.

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Wilson notes Hitler was indeed a monster, but had ideas that would have been commonly shared with many people in his time -- ideas taken to great extreme by others, and, with Hitler's blessings. (Many people today do not know Hitler was elected to office; it is still debated if Hitler considered himself a Christian, even as he was raised as a Catholic in childhood.)

In an NPR interview, Wilson said, "We like to distance ourselves from anything to do with him because he was an essentially evil character. But actually, many of the ideas he had and expressed were very ordinary ideas, and they were ideas that more or less everybody had at that time."

Wilson says for eight years, 1933 to 1938, Germans were lulled by satisfaction, with their country's renewed economic strength, progress, and prowess: "I think one of the very frightening things about the regime of the National Socialists is that it made people happy." This would make the horror complete, at the end of the war no one had expected to come along, right in the midst of a new chapter of the country's success.

Somewhere in here, of course, in both books, are alarm clocks of warning -- clocks we should ensure are always wound up tight, or routinely fed fresh batteries -- kept as potent reminders and wake-up calls to help fight any rising prison-camp walls, to help battle any frankly overt, fascistic, *corporatist* turns of our own.

One book examines a tale of one human beating terrific, terrifying odds and a struggle to find a win of any kind at all, at the end; the other book dissects the times and human nature itself, wondering how it was a mundane-human-monster like Hitler played equally diverse odds and won for any time at all.

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Descending from terror to a lower circle of Dante's Inferno, into mere greed, raging like gangbusters, we bring a tale of the world's largest jackpot, should you feel up to flexing your own chances with playing the odds. The Mega Millions pot is now clawing its way to the better part of a billion dollars, with the drawing set for tonight, 11 p.m. Eastern, in Atlanta. *Keep in mind, you are more likely to be killed by a vending machine than win this crazy thing.*

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And, yes, a small slice of that, a few million, would certainly help keep the lights on and burning brightly around here -- at least, until day after tomorrow: Earth Hour is coming up this Saturday night, an environmentally sensitive act, symbolically switching off all the lights on the planet for one hour. Even the International Space Station's participating this year.

Speaking of winning the lottery, and of lights, it appears Dick Cheney's lights are still on -- enough to make some people reconsider being life-givers, being donors of their organs upon death. But then, maybe Dick's just waiting for Earth Hour to give back, to do the right thing.

Turning off the lights, that is -- if only for one whole hour.

<http://www.npr.org/2012/03/29/149061951/escape-from-camp-14-inside-north-koreas-gulag>

<http://www.npr.org/2012/03/28/149480195/hitler-the-lasting-effects-of-an-infamous-figure>

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adolf_Hitler's_religious_views

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2012/mar/30/earth-hour-from-space>

<http://www.businessweek.com/articles/2012-03-30/mega-millions-the-odds-of-hitting-the-jackpot>