

304, Adolph Hitler Strasse
by Lavie Tidhar

When they came for Hershele Ostropol it was not at night but in the middle of the afternoon, and they came quiet and with no warning, with just a polite knock on the door. He had taken it to be the postman, carrying a late delivery of one of his special magazines; but the two who stood in the doorway wore no uniforms, and only their eyes betrayed who, and what, they were.

They called him by his real name, which was Hanzi, but they knew who he really was and he knew then that it was over; the knowledge washed him in lethargy, and a sense of futility made him open his hands as if in a shrug, his fat fingers opening limply, sweat dampening his palms.

They had interrupted him writing, it was another one of his stories. The computer was left switched on in his small study (Granddad's old room), and his special books and magazines lay in plain view on the desk.

He knew then that it was over; and he went with them without a fight and let them steer him into the dark Mercedes that waited for him, as he knew it would, outside.

How it began, how Hanzi Himmler first came to assume the identity of Hershele Ostropol, he could hardly articulate. But it can be pinpointed to two events that both happened close together: he was given the new computer, and he caught his grandfather with a prostitute.

The computer was a Bulgarian Pravetz. Along with the modem the computer came with a small communications program and a list of telephone numbers for several Bulletin Board Systems in and around Berlin. The first time Hanzi connected to a BBS was late on the night of his birthday, when his parents were sleeping and he had the telephone line to himself. He dialed the first number on the list, and found himself confronted with a colorful welcome screen.

On the BBS, Hanzi discovered that night, he could download small programs, and text files and even code, and he could post messages on the BBS which other people could then read. He chose his first identity that night, his first login name. He wanted Nighthawk, but ended up being Nighthawk1 as the first name was already taken.

Hanzi didn't care. He read the public posts, and he downloaded a text file that contained a hundred and eleven dirty jokes and, more importantly, he also downloaded a file containing the telephone numbers of many other BBSs.

For him, it was a discovery. He felt like Ernst Schafer must have felt on his expedition to Tibet to prove the origin of the Aryan race, as if he too were an explorer in a new and mysterious land. He had found a door to a new world, and everything was suddenly possible.

Everything... Granddad, Hauptabschnittsleiter Himmler, lived with his son and daughter-in-law in the solitary room on the ground floor by the garden. He was once a distinguished Head Section Leader, but had retired many years back and now spent most of his time in his room, unseen by his family. He was not a well man, and Hanzi knew Herr and Frau Himmler worried about him.

Hanzi returned home early one day from school, with a sore throat and a headache that buzzed little flies on the inside of his skull. His parents were away, and Granddad should have been asleep in his room. But he wasn't.

