Books

Nazi governor Otto Wächter in 1944 with his wife, daughter and son Horst, who assisted the author — Permission of Horst Wächter

Everyday evil

A forensic investigation of the life — and afterlife — of a high-ranking Nazi reveals multiple layers of duplicity and complicity, writes *Rebecca Abrams*

When Alfredo Reinhardt died from a sudden infection in the Santo Spirito Hospital in Rome in July 1949, his death attracted little attention — and deliberately so. As his carers knew full well, his real name was Otto Wächter and he had spent four years on the run. Former governor of Nazi-occupied Krakow from 1941 and governor of Galicia from 1942, his zealous implementation of the "final solution" earned him the sobriquet the Butcher of Lemberg. In May 1945, accused of mass murder, he vanished, successfully evading justice for the remainder of his life.

As well as disappearing physically, Wächter's name was largely "airbrushed out of the historical narrative" — a double injustice that lawyer and author Philippe Sands sets out to correct in *The Ratline*. The forensic stamina and precision that garnered such praise for Sands' 2016 work *East West Street* are equally in evidence here.

Besides tracking down incontrovertible evidence of his subject's war crimes, Sands, many of whose family perished

The Ratline: Love, Lies and Justice on the Trail of a Nazi Fugitive
by Philippe Sands
Weidenfeld & Nicolson £30
411 pages

in Lemburg (now the Ukrainian city of Lviv) on Wächter's watch, uncovers exactly where and with whose help he survived three years hiding out in the Italian mountains. Sands thoroughly investigates, and ultimately refutes, claims that Wächter died by poisoning.

It is a trail that leads deep into the maze of postwar Nazi sympathisers and supporters, and their tangled connections with US and Soviet espionage at the start of the cold war. Some of these findings confirm what we already know; some are new. The most jaw-dropping discovery concerns the children of former Nazi-turned-spy Karl Hass and his CIA handler, Thomas Lucid. To reveal any more would spoil the story.

What makes *The Ratline* both so riveting and unsettling, however, is not just what it exposes, but how. Sands proceeds from one person to the next, with a keen yet compassionate eye for the complex messiness of people's lives and relationships. Not least of these is the bizarre collaboration between the author and Wächter's youngest son, Horst Arthur Wächter, who enthusiastically supports and assists Sands with his quest.

Now in his early eighties, a "tall and attractive man [with] a warm, hesitant, gentle voice", he was named after the Nazi stormtrooper Horst Wessel, and his godfather Arthur Seyss-Inquart, notorious governor of occupied Holland. Seyss-Inquart's photograph still sits beside Horst's bed in his dilapidated *schloss* in the village of Hagenberg.

Horst is no apologist for Nazi atrocities, yet also does not accept his father's guilt. "I know the system was criminal, that he was a part of it," he says, "but I don't think of him as a criminal."

Convinced that Sands' research will yield evidence of his father's essential "humanity", Horst grants access to a vast archive — diaries, photographs and letters — that once belonged to his mother Charlotte. Some letters contain coded messages agreeing times and places where the couple can meet while Otto is on the run. The diaries provide an intimate chronicle of the Wächters' marriage and Charlotte's life as the wife of a high-ranking Nazi.

Despite Otto's long absences and incontinent womanising, Charlotte (who died in 1985) remained devoted to her husband, always insisting on his goodness and humanity. Nor do her diaries and letters reveal any qualms about his professional activities. The annexation of Austria in 1938 elicited "heartfelt joy". As the Jews of Poland and Galicia were being transported to death camps, Charlotte's diaries record a whirl of parties, theatre, ballet and opera. A tour of the Warsaw ghetto on a freezing day in 1941 is followed by shopping for shoes and a concert.

Sands also discovers that valuable artworks, which Charlotte gave to her children as wedding presents, had been stolen on her orders from the national museum in Krakow. Horst has since returned as many of these as possible.

There is something tragic and pathetic about Charlotte's life, squandered on a morally bankrupt husband, a depraved regime and a lethal ideology. But her loyalty to Wächter perhaps provides the key to Horst's own perverse allegiance to a father who he barely knew and did not love. Insisting on the father's innocence is a defence by proxy, a way of protecting the mother he undoubtedly adored.

> A tour of the Warsaw ghetto on a freezing day was followed by shopping for shoes and a concert

As the evidence stacks up against Wächter senior, Horst's faith remains unshakeable. When Sands presents him with an extradition order from the Polish government for mass murder, with supporting documents, Horst dismisses it on the grounds that Poland was by then under Soviet rule. Sands is respectful of Horst — and even seems genuinely fond of him — but he is ruthless in pursuit of the facts.

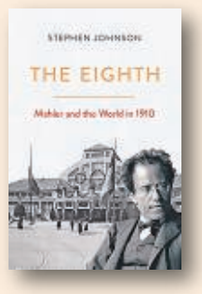
The book's title refers to the escape routes that enabled many Nazis to evade justice and flee Europe at the end of the war. It also alludes to the emotional and psychological stratagems that Horst and other characters in the book (and by extension all of us) use to evade deeply inconvenient truths.

The Ratline is in this sense not only about events in the past, but their dangerous legacy in the world today. A formidable piece of historical sleuthing written with all the pace and suspense of a thriller, it is a timely reminder that crimes against humanity don't occur only at the level of states and governments. They take place also in the more secret and less fathomable depths of people's hearts and minds.

Rebecca Abrams is the author of 'The Jewish Journey: 4,000 years in 22 Objects' (Ashmolean)

Master class

Ian Bostridge on Mahler's complex, joyful — and almost megalomaniac — Eighth Symphony



The Eighth: Mahler and the World in 1910
by Stephen Johnson
Faber £14.99
314 pages

Mahler's Eighth Symphony is an extraordinary creature, vast in its ambitions and almost megalomaniacal in its demands. Eight top-rank vocal soloists; two large mixed choirs and a boys' choir; 22 woodwinds; 17 brass; an offstage brass band of seven; nine percussion; celeste; piano; harmonium and organ; two harps; mandolin; and full strings to match.

Mahler even suggested that some of the parts might be doubled. No wonder it has become known as the Symphony of a Thousand, a title invented by the impresario Emil Gutmann, whom Mahler had engaged to make the 1910 premiere of his visionary work a saleable proposition.

Sold it had to be, in order to finance its excesses and to fill Munich's spanking new Musik-Festhalle. But Mahler was also worried and embarrassed — worried this was turning into a circus, "a catastrophic Barnum and Bailey show", and embarrassed to see the streets of Munich littered with images of himself as great composer/conductor. A new biography was in the bookshops, and copies of the score were casually left on café tables to lure punters. Our own sense of the tension between PR and lofty spirituality was alive and kicking a century ago. "There have been better symphonies that had less advertising," wrote one critic; another declared Mahler to be "our contemporary Christ".

It was as a conductor, rather than a composer, that Mahler was best known in 1910. His career path, from provincial Bohemia to the Hofoper (the court opera in Vienna) and the New York Philharmonic, was dazzling. Along the way, he invented many of the customs and practices of today's classical music and operatic world, not least the tremendous figure of the conductor as magus. Yet as a composer, he was less feted, somewhat in the shadow of his friend Richard Strauss. In 1906, Mahler attended the legendary Austrian premiere in Graz of Strauss's supremely provocative opera *Salome* and, on the train home, wondered if popular success could be at one with artistic integrity. The Eighth, which he started sketching in that same year, was perhaps the answer.

To become music director of the Hofoper, Mahler, who as a child had excelled in Mosaic religious studies and attended synagogue, had to be baptised a Christian. His Eighth Symphony is a synthesis of Christian spirituality and voguish pantheism. Falling into two parts, it sets the famous ninth-century hymn of ecstasy "Veni creator spiritus" as a vast and ravishing vocal composition, introduced by a huge ecclesiastical summons on the organ; and part two of Goethe's *Faust*, a more typically Mahlerian display of passionate yearning and instrumental colour.

"All my previous symphonies," Mahler wrote, "are merely the preludes to this one. In the other works everything still was subjective tragedy, but this one is a source of great joy." It was a huge success, crowds surging towards the platform after it had finished.

In *The Eighth*, Stephen Johnson leads us through all the complexities of the work with skill and sensitivity. It's clearly a piece that he reveres. In its embrace of joy and spiritual uplift, it has been the most controversial of Mahler's symphonies in our own day, lacking that juxtaposition of sublimity and the banal that makes the composer such a postmodern pin-up.

Johnson's defence involves not only a journey through the piece itself, underlining the subtlety and complexity that defy the overkill; but also a look at the world from which it sprang and the extraordinary and tangled personal story which somehow, despite all that objective joy, it still embodies. As a celebration of Goethe's *Ewig-Weibliche* — eternal feminine — it was a sonic pedestal for Alma, Mahler's wife, who was both drawn to his genius and suffocated by his demands.

As a singer, I come at Mahler from the intimate, supremely human and often painful subjectivity of his extraordinary body of songs. In the midst of all the Eighth's high-mindedness and vast horizons, it's somehow a relief to return to the little details of Alma's contemporaneous affair with the young architect Walter Gropius — her escape from the Mahler machine — or to picture her high romantic disappointment with Mahler as he arrived at their wedding wearing galoshes.

Ian Bostridge is a tenor and author of 'Schubert's Winter Journey: Anatomy of an Obsession'

Adrift in the Aegean

A tale of ouzo and intrigue on the island where Leonard Cohen once lived is as good as a holiday, says Suzi Feay

A Theatre for Dreamers
by Polly Samson
Bloomsbury Circus
£14.99, 368 pages

How we edit and retain memories is by no means a straightforward neurological process, but in novels recall is frequently perfect. Or at least the mismatch between remembrance and what "really happened" is not an issue for the text. Thus Erica, learning of the death of Leonard Cohen, is transported back to 1960, when she was 17, mingling in the bohemian circle of writers Charmian Clift and George Johnston on the Greek island of Hydra, where Cohen once lived. The years fall away, and the present tense plunges the reader into the sounds, sights and smells of the lost paradise.

Armed with an introduction to Charmian, her dead mother's close friend, wide-eyed Erica is in awe of the successful authors and free spirits she finds herself among. Polly Samson's last novel, *The Kindness*, featured complex timeshifts and sudden revelations; *A Theatre for Dreamers*, by contrast, is slower and steeped in nostalgia. On Hydra, not only can the motley gang of artists, potters, novelists and poets live far more cheaply than they could in Montreal or Notting Hill, they are a world away from the conventional views of their parents, while being generally oblivious to any values the native Hydriots might have. Though drink, sickness and infidelity will eventually ravage Erica's elders, they can't tarnish her idyll, merely render the good times all the more poignant and precious.

An ingénue or outsider allowed into a gilded milieu, only to discover too late the rot within, is admittedly a fairly common literary theme. *A Theatre for Dreamers* overlays it with the question of what it is to be a muse with creative impulses of one's own. The Sixties are not yet Swinging but just beginning to oscillate. Feminism too is simmering, and soon to boil over. Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* is being passed around the expatriates, but also Henry Miller. The menfolk's demands for sex and food are equally imperious; Erica's gold standard of service is the image of a lunchtime sandwich, adorned with a gardenia, left for the genius at his desk.

It's not a level of selflessness she can personally reach when it comes to her boyfriend Jimmy, whose one poem published in *Ambit* magazine adopts in her eyes the status of a dazzling prize. The endless influx of beautiful, lightly clad girls is also a constant worry, as is the example of the Norwegian writer Axel Jensen, flagrantly unfaithful to his doting wife Marianne. When a charming 25-year-old Canadian poet with a guitar turns up, transitory amorous pairings have the potential to become cultural turning points. After all, one of his most famous songs was "So Long, Marianne".

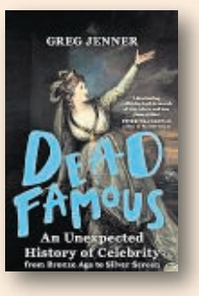
Young themselves, Jimmy and Erica are barely affected by their mentors' heavy-drinking culture, merely getting happier and browner with every month that passes. Samson is an intensely sensual writer, conjuring up blue skies, the tang of wild herbs, the vivid splash of bougainvillea — but also the donkey shit, one-eyed cats and stinking privies. Here and there are hints of a darker reality. When a German girl is gang-raped, the police chief persuades her to drop the charges; the same police chief who issues fines when women display too much flesh on the beaches.

> Erica, so ardent yet so unformed, is an appealing presence, an eavesdropper without being creepy

With a cast of characters that spend much of the time engaged in inherently undramatic occupations, there's not much plot beyond the nightly dissection of amours and intrigues over ouzo and brandy. It's tricky to insert a fictional character in a narrative filled with real people, but Erica, so ardent yet so unformed, is an appealing presence, an eavesdropper without being creepy and an imparter of information without being a gossip. *A Theatre for Dreamers* is almost as good as a Greek holiday, and may be the closest we get this year.

Stars in our eyes

Our hunger for fame is not a new one — but the media have fuelled it beyond recognition, writes Matthew Lyons



Dead Famous: An Unexpected History of Celebrity from Bronze Age to Silver Screen
by Greg Jenner
Weidenfeld & Nicolson £18.99
400 pages

On Guy Fawkes Night in 1709, Henry Sacheverell, an Anglican minister, preached an incendiary sermon in St Paul's Cathedral against religious non-conformity in the church. It was widely interpreted as a coded attack on the then Whig government, which attempted to have Sacheverell tried for sedition.

Sacheverell was a gifted self-publicist. His speech became a publishing phenomenon, selling 100,000 copies. He toured the country and was mobbed wherever he went. He posed for portraits. His image appeared on playing cards, tobacco pipes and fans. In short, he became a celebrity — Britain's first, according to Greg Jenner.

Fame was not a new concept. The foundational text of western literature, *The Iliad*, arguably pivots on the idea, when Achilles chooses early death and eternal glory — *kleos* — over a long and quiet life. But the confluence of fame with a mass media — the first daily newspaper was launched in 1702 — created the beginnings of an industry.

For everything we think indicative of a diseased modernity, Jenner, a consultant on the popular *Horrible Histories* series, offers a parallel from the past. Is the obsession with Kim Kardashian's anatomy any more peculiar than the *fin-de-siècle* craze in which newspapers vied for a sight of the ears of Parisian actress Cléo de Mérode? Our scorn for those who seek fame at any cost is not new either. In 356BC a man named Herostratus burnt down the Temple of Artemis simply because he craved *kleos*; happily for him, the concept did not distinguish between different kinds of glory.

Dead Famous is all about such distinctions. Jenner is alert to the nuances of meaning between celebrity, fame, glory, renown and so on, and the extent to which they are discrete or overlap. Modern celebrity, he argues, is a three-way compact between celebrities, the media and the public; its attainability is part of its meaning.

He explores both its mechanisms and pathologies, from image manipulation to the quasi-religious ecstasies and devotions of fandom. And, of course, the money. Part of his thesis is that what distinguishes the modern phenomenon is the freedom that capitalism provides to profit from someone else's fame.

Ultimately, *Dead Famous* asks us what we really value in those we idolise — and why. Revere them or revile them, celebrities are ubiquitous: flawed and fragile vessels for the dreams of others, things to gaze in wonder at or curse, like the stars we name them for. Celebrity-watching itself thus becomes a rapt human astrology, offering hope, inspiration — and warning — as we struggle for our own still sense of being in the noise of modern life.