

Economies of Death

Sammel adjusted his spectacles and leaned back, as the soft chair gave way to a subtle sigh. Its aching spring strained to sustain the man's weight. The cranking was swiftly accompanied by the tapping of a tightly sharpened pencil on the side of the chair.

He was deep in thought. Numbers racing through his mind as he looked up at the dank ceiling. There were the usual pair of cracks near the doorway, of course. He toyed with the thought that the dust settled up and into the cracks instead of chalking down every time the door was shut.

"There's nothing wrong with the numbers," he mumbled to himself. "It's the same exact figures I looked at the previous week and the week before that."

Sammel took his time, recalculating it all in his mind. Then, he took a deep breath, subconsciously shaking his head, and leaned into the desk once more.

For the next hour and a half, he hardly moved. Fixated on the sheets of paper in front of him, the plump, young man slowly ran his pencil across a thin wooden ruler, line by line. There was nothing special or outstanding about what he did. It was all quite dull to the unsuspecting eye, but he found it strangely liberating and even fulfilling.

No one truly understood this. Even Gertrude used to say – “playing with numbers, that’s all you do Sammi.” She dismissed it with a flick of her apron whenever he tried to tell her about his day, quickly going about her business in the kitchen.

Not so long ago, Sammel believed he could use his special skills, his fascination with numbers, to have true impact. He thought that once he completed his studies, he could leverage his father’s connections and find a job at the Government Statistics Office, the Ministry of War, or better still – the Ministry of Finance. But those aspirations quickly dissolved once the Nazi government decreed that all active socialists are enemies of the Reich.

He hadn’t seen his father since he was taken away in May of the previous year, though he trusted they would get bored by his ramblings and let him go within a year or two. He even thought that it was probably a good thing that his father had been shuffled away together with his long-time World War veteran pals. He could finally chat it up with people who cared about his politics. Sammel even saw him smile the day he got on that truck. “Take care of Mother until I return,” he blurted with a swift wave, as if he was going on a vacation.

Mother died the following month. Her heart condition acted up. Sammel visited her once at the hospital, but when he came up again for a visit they told her she was sleeping. He didn’t want to disturb her, so he just left the bundle of flowers he had picked up at the train station by her bedside. She was gone the next day. Sammel didn’t quite know what it was but assumed the doctors at the hospital did their best.

Strangely, there was not a body for him to pick up. He was informed by a short telegram and the death certificate followed by mail. But, as his wife said, it was probably for the best – “You don’t want to deal with the logistics of a funeral, Sammi. Believe me,” she said.

Gertrude buried her parents the year before, and there was a lot of paperwork and red tape she had to go through. Not only that, but within three months, the milk delivery service her father ran had dried up in his absence. Once again, she had to tend to that as she sold as many company assets as she could.

That didn’t amount to a large sum of money, but it did help the young couple move into a better neighborhood. Gertrude now had a nicer apartment to upkeep and even found a group of chatty women in their building she could commiserate with about Sammel and his unkemptly habits.

He looked at his watch. It was almost half past five. Soon the streets would be dark, as evening shadows would draw over the cobbled streets. Sammel adjusted his spectacles once more. He felt great relief now that he’d gone through the entire month’s figures. It all came together and quieted his mind.

He quickly collected the papers piled up on his desk and buried them deep in the metallic file cabinet on his right. The chair creaked once again as he shifted about.

He dropped his pencil in the desk drawer, picked up his leather bag, coat and hat, and off he went, deep in thoughts.

Sammel never understood why certain people find politics so captivating. Even when he was in university, many of his classmates were so passionate and debated endlessly. Heated discussions turned to fists at times, friendship bonds were broken, and not much was accomplished.

He stayed away from it all. Not because he was timid or afraid to jump in the fray, but because he didn't have much to say. Sammel didn't really have much of an opinion or any strongly held convictions. He did not care much if the military conscript laws should be updated or whether the Italian hard-headed Duce was a friend or foe or whether the latest international agreement would hold through winter.

Those high-browed conversations didn't really matter to him. He always thought eventually it works out in the end. Certain things simply found a way to get resolved, one way or another.

The next day he bid Gertrude goodbye as she turned her nose at him. "You snored last night," she grumbled. "Again."

He sighed with a faint smile and left for the office.

Leaving the tram station, Sammel walked down the hill overlooking the main office. Big white letters reflected in the early morning sun across the stone bricks – “IG Farben”.

He chuckled to himself, as the swarms of suits and white coats streaming into the building seemed like an endless stream of piss draining into a toilet bowl.

“We’re all being pissed downstream,” he thought to himself, as he shuffled his feet and joined the crowd.

He squirmed into the elevator and found his way to Room 23, barely nodding every time he passed his co-workers. Across from his office there was a group of young statisticians, each huddled over a desk, reviewing manufacturing and shipping reports.

It was the beginning of the month, and Sammel knew the director would soon be asking for the quarterly reports.

He plopped down at his chair, which welcomed him once more with a loud, creaking metal salute.

A sharp knock at the door straightened him up quickly.

“Yes, come in,” he bellowed.

Maria entered the room, swerving her supple skirt around the door, and leaned on the file cabinet. She was holding a crisp new folder in her hands.

Sammel already knew what she had come in to say, but he gave her all the time in the world.

“Herr Gängigmann, the director has asked that I provide you with the latest figures,” she said with a soft voice. It sounded like a flute concerto to Sammel, syncopated every so often by her northern accent. “He said that there is something strange in the chemicals table, and that you should triple-check it before approving. He needs to submit the report by the end of the week.”

With every inflection of her voice, Sammel felt a tingle down his right leg. He had always thought that Maria was the kind of person who would love to hear about trends and figures and numbers in general. *She was surrounded by them all day, but rarely did she have the chance to truly dive in*, he thought to himself. *She is probably curious and eager to learn more.*

He knew Maria was a graduate student sent to complete her statistics dissertation but never really given a chance to get into the reports.

“Yes, I will take a look,” he replied robotically.

“Alright, then. Here it is,” Maria handed him the dossier which hung in the air a few seconds too long, enough for both to feel awkward.

“Thank you,” Sammel finally said.

Maria turned about, her overly-curved hair blanketing her shoulders, blonde waves crushing into each other. Sammel could hardly look away, his eyes trailing down her back.

“Oh, did you say he needed it this week?” he said, shaking off his not-so-subtle thoughts.

She was slightly surprised by Sammel’s abrupt comment. “Yes, that’s right. By Friday,” she said ending with an accented questioning tone.

Sammel’s leg twitched.

“I see. Well, Maria is it?”

She nodded.

“There is a lot here, I’m afraid,” Sammel said, adjusting his spectacles. “I could use some help if you are available after lunch.”

He could see her eyes glint. He tried to hold his serious and self-important composure as long as he could.

“Yes... I mean, yes. I would be glad to review the figures,” she said. “In fact, I will bring the reports from the last three quarters so we could do a comparative analysis.”

Sammel nodded, as Maria anxiously responded in kind, giddy with delight.

He could hear her rambling to herself. “Finally, I get to review the reports and oh, I need to tell Helga and Mikael. I could use Professor Schomberg’s latest statistical model and..” she trailed off as the door finally slammed behind her in a dusty cloud.

Sammel convinced himself that he needed the extra attention to detail for the quarterly report, shoving aside any fantasies that crept up as he started to review the figures.

The numbers started scrolling past him, as they often do. He called it “dancing”, but never shared that curious thought with anyone.

“January 16... 0.52 tons. January 23... 0.62 tons.” The numbers took on a wavy shape circling the rigid table. “January 30... 0.57 tons...”

Sammel quickly forgot that he had spoken to Maria earlier that morning, as the production figures overtook his thoughts. Minutes turned to hours, the chair occasionally creaking, as he rummaged through the pages one by one.

A quick double-knock at the door woke Sammel up from his number crunching.

“Yes?” he said.

“Herr Gängigmann, I’m here.” Maria’s voice filled the room as she opened the door.

“Yes, come in.” He hadn’t realized lunchtime had come and gone.

“I may need your help with these files,” she said.

Sammel got up from behind the desk, but this time it was his legs that creaked as the chair breathed a sigh of relief. He rounded the desk and saw a cart full of dossiers and over-burdened folders, hidden behind Maria’s thigh-hugging green skirt.

“This batch also includes the shipping manifests for all the chemicals production since the beginning of the year,” she rattled off. “I thought we could apply Engel’s Curve and combine it with the Production figures.”

That is not a bad idea, he thought to himself. Sammel pulled the cart into the office, lightly brushing up against Maria's legs.

The two sat across from each other, each hugging a corner of the desk separated by tall piles of paperwork. They reviewed as many dossiers as they could, tabulating the rows of data and conducting complex calculations etched onto a piece of paper that kept shuffling between the two.

"December shipping numbers for these products were 0.32 tons, November figures were right around 0.35 tons as well," Sammel spoke as his eyes shifted back and forth on the document he was working on.

"Great, that aligns well with Production," Maria said rapidly. She was putting the last touches on the plotting of her comparative graph.

Moments later, Maria dropped her pencil. "I need a break."

Much of the afternoon had passed them by, and they had only gone through about a third of the files. Sammel nodded in agreement and blurted something about having to head home as well.

They left the towers of papers as they were, and silently walked outside and went their separate ways.

The next day Maria was already sitting at his desk as Sammel stepped in. He hadn't expected her to be there as he hung his coat and hat.

They barely greeted each other and immediately dove into the figures. The "dancing numbers" continued to hop around Sammel's pages as more and more data made its way into their calculations.

Maria, too, was hunched over the papers like a bear culling a succulent beehive, completely indifferent to the sting of the bees. For Maria, that sting was the passing of time. She wanted to run through even more models, try new ways of interpreting what was actually being measured. She tried to visualize the manufacturing plant, the production line, the liquid tanks, the tubes and the canisters. She desperately tried to visualize the numbers taking on the shapes of cans piling up on the shipping dock. But it wasn't quite there. There was more work to be done.

The next two days followed a similar pattern, as both processed more and more dossiers well into the night. Maria and Sammel were consumed by the information they were processing. Jagged columns of meticulously documented, hand-written registries were transformed into a beautiful massive visualization of IG Farben's operations.

They had mapped the production and shipping volumes of all chemicals manufactured through most of the previous year. It was an enormous achievement that overtook the original accounting task at hand. The pair were able to track the flow of all chemicals across the subsidiary companies, from the manufacturing plant to the various customers and destinations, at the serial number level.

On the fourth day, as end of the week was upon them, Sammel noticed something persistently obtuse. There was one chemical that kept throwing off the model both in growth and delivery. He had flagged it to Maria who traced the issue to one of the subcompanies – “Degesch mbH”.

“They are growing at a much faster rate than before, and exponentially more so than other companies,” Maria commented as she glared at the page.

“I saw that too,” Sammel replied. “If we can identify what is driving this increased production, we could perhaps identify the anomaly. I fear there is a corrupt element in play.”

For the first time in the past two days, he looked up and eyed Maria’s contour. He had forgotten how the young woman’s blonde hair glistened in the dim light.

“We should look more into it. I am going to phone my wife and let her know I’ll be staying late,” he said and disappeared into the hallway.

Maria barely took notice, though a subtle smile flashed her lips. She rummaged through the short pile to her right pulled out the October figures labeled "Degesch" and placed the document front and center.

She leafed through it all moving her finger line by line, reading through inaudibly. Finally, she scribbled a quick note and shoved it to Sammel's side of the desk. It was getting late, and she needed the rest.

Meanwhile, Sammel had made his way across to the main office's telephone station. He haphazardly straightened his hair as his fingers circled the numbers dial. An operator connected him within seconds.

"The director needs this tomorrow, Gertrude," Sammel spoke dryly into the telephone receiver. "I have to get it done, dear."

He listened silently as Gertrude complained into the ether.

"Yes, yes, I know. I'll be back early tomorrow," he said. "I promise."

Minutes later he was headed back to his office, eager to get on with the work. But, more so, Sammel was looking forward to spending more time with the young assistant.

He opened the door somewhat rushed, but Maria was nowhere to be seen.

Sammel looked back across the hallway. It was completely empty as was typical at night. Not a sign of the blonde hair or the thin flowery dress that Maria wore could be seen.

He walked into the room and sat at his chair. Sammel let out a deep sigh and fixed his spectacles back in their proper position.

He eyed a small piece of paper ornamented by handwriting that he'd grown to recognize and adore.

I will be back tomorrow. Check for Zyklon-B under Degesch. --Maria

Sammel's thoughts raced back to the data, quickly letting all improper thoughts disappear into the numbers.

He picked up the latest report and started to read through the Degesch file. "February 5... 5.63 tons. February 12... 6.48 tons."

That was quite a significant increase in the volume of chemical production and all flowing through from this single company out to the field, he thought. He made note of it in his notebook.

Two hours later he traced the shipping information to the exact location that was consuming large quantities of the canisters. It was a location in Poland that he had seen occasionally in the records.

Sammel's fingers felt stiff as he continued to summarize and document his calculations for this chemical's journey through the supply stations. It was clear that there was either a welcomed increase in demand or perhaps one of the distributors in its path had found a lucrative side-business.

In any case, the numbers had lost some of their luster now that it was just him in the office rummaging through the reports. The air felt stale and the silence of the night was overbearing, even for him.

He sighed deeply, in tandem with the chair, as he leaned backwards. The long week had caught up with him as well.

Sammel looked across the wooden desk at the small piles of dossier where Maria had set up shop. He slowly got up and carried himself around the table. Tired hands grabbed the folders, binding them together and placing them back into the cart.

After all the files were neatly organized, Sammel decided it was time to head home. There was not much for him to stay in the office anymore.

He put his coat and hat on and grabbed his leather bag. He was about to leave but then sat back down in his chair; coat and hat still on.

The report he was working on rested on his desk. Sammel opened the drawer and pulled his pencil out.

He scribbled a few lines into his report. He cleverly highlighted the anomaly but at the same justified it as a spike in demand that required the manufacturing plant to increase its production capacity, and assign additional workforce onto this production line.

He then produced a red-stained stamp from the depth of his top drawer. Sammel blotted it in the thick ink cushion bolted into his desk, and unceremoniously pushed it into the flesh of the paper report – *Approved*.

Thirty minutes later, Sammel was back home. He grabbed something quick to eat and walked up the stairs. He quickly changed into his pajamas and slipped in under the covers.

As sleep started to take hold, he heard Gertrude whisper silently – “I’ll make your favorite cabbage stew tomorrow, Sammi. Get some rest.”