

Benjamin Hett*Associate Professor of History*

In April, Benjamin Carter Hett won a prestigious Guggenheim Fellowship, awarded to scholars “who have demonstrated exceptional capacity for productive scholarship or exceptional creative ability in the arts.” Hett, an associate professor of history at Hunter and the CUNY Graduate Center, is a former trial attorney who earned his PhD from Harvard. His research on criminal law in modern Germany, the history of popular culture, and the history of Berlin contributed to his 2008 book, *Crossing Hitler: The Man who Put the Nazis on the Witness Stand*, which won the Fraenkel Prize for an outstanding work of contemporary history. It describes the 1931 trial of four Nazi soldiers, an event known as the Eden Dance Palace Trial.

- 1** What would your students be surprised to know about you?
I was in school for a long time for various things and wasn't always diligent. In college, and even more in law school, I often cut classes, was late with assignments, and looked for shortcuts. So I tell students I know all the tricks, because I pulled them! Let me hastily add that I reformed when I went to graduate school.

- 2** When you're not at Hunter, what are you doing?
Browsing in bookstores, where that is still possible (like the Strand). I used to enjoy browsing CD shops. I miss the old Tower Records at 4th and Broadway.
- 3** What's on your iPod?
I like to have music while I am working, so I go through a lot of music. My iPod (which by the way is the greatest technology yet devised, in my opinion) runs heavily to Miles Davis (virtually complete works) and Beethoven, especially the piano sonatas (I have the last Alfred Brendel box set on there).
- 4** You used to be a trial lawyer. What inspired you to enter academia?
Quite simply, I hated my job, and I believed that life was too short to go on living like that. After four years of practicing law, and avidly reading European history in whatever free time I had, it finally hit me that history was where my passion lay.
- 5** What was your least favorite thing about being an attorney?
Unlike television, most of the day-to-day work of lawyers is very, very boring, and yet it is stressful because you are always under pressure to do excellent work very quickly. Junior associates at big firms are under great pressure to generate billable hours, so you have to be working all the time at this boring and stressful stuff. I remember when I pulled all-nighters at the firm... the place would be humming at 3 a.m. That's a bit sick.
- 6** Compare Harvard, where you earned your doctorate, to Hunter.
Harvard is a great institution, and it was a privilege to be there. But maybe because I am descended in part from working-class New Yorkers I believe very strongly in the mission of a public college. I like Hunter students very much. They have no problem challenging you in class or coming to your office to say something like, “I'm not happy with you, professor.” I get a kick out of that. I find that [Hunter students] who are particularly good at history are also more genuinely curious than students at Harvard. Students regularly ask me questions like, “How was Hitler possible?” That never happened when I taught at Harvard.
- 7** What do you wish more students would do?
I think many students don't realize how difficult and competitive the world they are moving into is going to be. So they need to get more involved in their education. No matter where you are studying, the quality of education you get is mostly up to you.
- 8** You've written much on World War II. Do you foresee a WWII?
One thing we can be certain of is that there will never be something like WWII again. Such a war now would take about half an hour.
- 9** What's your favorite thing to do in New York City?
I have been a jazz fan since I was a teenager, so to be able to live here, where the music happens more than anywhere else, is a dream come true. I get out to hear live jazz as much as I can, which is never as much as I would like. I also love to see the art museums.
- 10** What are your favorite restaurants?
I really like an Indian restaurant called Devi, on 18th street. I used to love Florent in the Meatpacking District, which closed last summer. Where I live, in Jackson Heights, there are any number of fantastic Indian and Thai places. New York must be the best place to eat in the world. It's a miracle I don't weigh 400 pounds.

