

Butterfly Dream

A novel by (rl) Dave Lara & Bud Gundy

Chapter 1 - Lilith's Boys

I am nearly 80 years old and I have never had sex with a woman.

I have many sons, though, borne to me by a woman named Lilith. Many, many sons. Over the course of my life, Lilith has given me enough sons to form an army.

Lilith is a Jewish demon – or demoness. She is the second Eve of the Torah, the woman created from the side of man in second account of creation called Genesis II.

My mother told me about Lilith when I was just six years old. It was 1933 and Adolph Hitler was scheduled to come to our little Bavarian city in a matter of days for a Nazi rally. I was aware of big menacing changes happening. The details not entering my consciousness until later, but I felt them. But fawning sycophants all over Germany had spent their days dreaming up ways to flatter and delight the Fuhrer, and our country was awash with conflicting rules and regulations all targeted against the Jews. Hasty implementation and disorganization created chaos – a tangle of regulations and paperwork, but the message was the important thing: Jews had no place in the new Reich. I only understood this as a feeling because of my age. Adults had taken up speaking in hushed tones around children. Everyone seemed suspicious of each other. I would get strange questions from Mother, like, “Was there only one teacher today in class?” Or questions about the number of people coming out of our neighbors home. I felt this as tension in my body because, well, the adults were all tense.

My parents must have felt besieged, although they never said as much to me.

My father owned a small furniture factory, specializing in mattresses. I was besotted by one of the welders named Freidrich who affixed the metal springs to the inside frames. I still remember his forearms hairy and muscular. His green eyes drew me in as if having power over me that I did not understand, but enjoyed. I would gaze at him in his worship, while he showed me the details of his work. Being close to him was exciting and I sought out his company whenever I was at the factory.

My mother must have noticed this, and in the midst of the growing nightmare of Jewish existence in those days she felt it important to warn me about Lilith.

“When a man spreads his seed in places other than his wife, Lilith collects it and uses it to make herself with child,” she explained. My mother had very pale skin and very dark hair that she wrapped into a cone that crowned her head.

“But mother, what kind of seeds? Where will I get my seeds when I grow up? I would ask Mother. I hadn’t the faintest idea what she was talking about, but she held up her hand to stop every question.

“The details will become clear when you are older. Just sit and listen to me now, please.” She said that with exasperation, as if she really did not want to have this conversation and this little boy was annoying with a child’s typical why why why thinking.

“Lilith uses his seed to make babies. Evil babies. Sons. When a man dies, it is necessary for his friends to protect his soul from these sons. That is why a man’s friends must guard his body by circling it and praying to drive them away.”

This struck me as grotesque although I had no way of expressing that thinking then. Instead I would always ask why. "Why should a man fear his own sons, Mother? Father doesn't fear me does he? Why should father's friends drive Paul, Pieter and me away?"

Mother had no patience for my indignant sputterings, the best that I could muster at my tender age. "Enough, Banat," she snapped and her anger shocked me into silence. "These are things of the Torah, and you must listen and remember. You'll understand when you're bigger. For now stop asking foolish questions and only listen." My mother rarely became impatient with me but it seemed lately that everyone was impatient. Of her three sons, she seemed to have the sweetest and most protective feelings for me. I always assumed it was because I was the youngest but as I grew I realized that she noticed things in me, small things like staring at the welder with unconcealed love, that others did not bother to note.

"Whenever you are tempted by a woman – or anyone – who is not your wife, you must remember Lilith," she lectured me, in a stern voice.

We were not religious Jews and although we practiced the Passover customs and sang Jewish songs on holy days, this was the first time she had ever used our religion to direct my actions.

Now that I have lived a complete life, I feel certain that my mother did not intend for me to fear the sons of Lilith more than the Nazis. Perhaps it was just easier to warn a young boy about homosexuality and masturbation than explain that the world had turned against us in such a ferocious way. But for many years I recalled this conversation with amazement and sorrow. Being gay was worse than the Nazis. This was the message my sweet mother gave to me.

It amazes me to remember the thrill I felt the first time I saw Nazis. It was their uniforms I loved, the brown shirts especially. Crisp with starch with rank insignia, strips and patches showing rank and company. I did not yet know that uniforms are only costumes and had nothing to do with the man

in them. But to me they were all so powerful and masculine. They seemed not to need a wife too, only traveling in large groups of uniformed men. A mans world if you will. One that I wanted to belong to.

Two soldiers strolled by on the street below wearing tan clothes, brown shirts, and hats shaped like pots. Red armbands encircled their biceps, beaming the hook-shaped cross that had been hung from buildings throughout Heppenheim that past week. The cross that caused unease in Mother and Father, but had a pulling devotional effect on the non-Jews of our little town. I didn't like the symbol. My feelings toward the soldiers were conflicted because they all wore them.

I craned my head over the soft velvet of what my mother laughingly called her "fainting couch" and pulled the fragile curtains aside. Effi, our maid, had ruled this couch off-limits for us boys, and she enforced this regulation with such vigilance that she even scolded me once for looking at it too long. But she was downstairs. I could see the soldiers just below our window, our home was on a slight hill above the sidewalk, so they didn't notice my observing them. They stood right below me, lighting cigarettes.

Two young women ambling down the street from the direction of our town's center, spotted my two soldiers. The girls were dressed in traditional Bavarian costume, all embroidery and lace and their hair was up in braids threaded with flowers. The two rushed up to the soldiers giggling, and I felt a tinge of jealousy when the men responded with boisterous welcomes and laughter. They were so self-assured and sturdy, and the women twisted their ankles and fiddled with their hands as they talked. The conversation ended and the group departed, now formed into couples. It was cold and the silly girls hadn't worn coats.

I didn't know then why I was forlorn as I watched them leave, but I do remember the pride I felt at witnessing such gallant German men.

A gaggle of laughing people followed, heading to the stadium for The Rally, as everyone had begun to call it. I felt an ache of longing to see what was happening. Although I was frightened too. My parents had forbidden us to

set foot outdoors until it was over and the strangers, mostly soldiers, had departed the city. Pieter became angry and argued with our parents, I was told to leave the room. Father and Mother had worried looks as the day arrived and decided to spend the evening at the factory. It felt as if they went to guard it. Even though I had a sense of fear for this gathering, my curiosity was getting the better of me.

So my parents were gone for the day and as more people rushed by, I began to wonder if I would be missed. The youngest of three boys is often overlooked, because older brothers only notice you when they want to torment you. If they don't find you right away, they will be around soon enough. And Effi would be busy making dinner and I could slip out the front door without making any sound.

"Banat!" Two sharp, insistent claps followed my name, and I scrambled to the floor. Effi glowered, wearing a house frock with pockets over her breasts. Streaks of gray raced through her brown hair, pulled back tight so that her round face always seemed to be rushing at me.

"Your mother will hear of this!" she shouted, and despite her angry tone her eyes glinted with the glee of triumph. "Stay off the couch until I call you for dinner." A red rag fluttered in her hand as she pointed in the general direction of my room.

My budding plan melted as quickly as a chocolate drop on a hot day, but not before a burst of desperation overtook me and I asked, "Can I go to Gerd's?"

I braced for the negative answer to be delivered in a rage, but she surprised me by drawing back with a look of amazement.

"No." She almost whispered it. In a voice that implied that the information was obvious, and said, "You cannot go outdoors today."

Perhaps that was the first whisper from Effi loud enough for me to hear, because even though I didn't understand her declaration, that whisper alarmed me. She knew something.

Effi demanded that I go to my room to contemplate my mother's anger. I plodded my way past her, and from the crisp smell of raw potatoes I knew tonight's menu would be cabbage and knodle again.

Each boy had our own room. I heard my eldest brother Paul laughing behind his door. He was the oldest and already a man in my mind. Pieter, the next in line and two years older than me didn't look up from his book as I passed. He had moppy black hair that hung down across his forehead. Unless he raised his head he could not see me through that hair. My room was the smallest but I didn't mind. It sat tucked away around the corner and up two steps. I liked the solitude.

My bed creaked as I flopped down and stared at the ceiling. I could have gotten a new mattress very easily if I had asked, but I liked the way the coils squeaked. It was satisfying to imagine that I was strong enough to scrunch them into flattened rings, the way they looked when they arrived at the factory.

I felt a chill and noticed that Effi had left my window up a few inches. She was always going on about how cool air was the healthiest air and eventually she had converted my parents to this way of thinking. I didn't know if it was true, but I was cold and got up to slam the window, determined to make it loud enough to annoy Effi.

As I reached up to grab the top pane, I heard a distant rumble - voices, thousands of them all intermingled to create the babble of the crowd. I felt the yearning again to be a part of The Rally, to behold the magnificence of something grand and loud and out of the ordinary.

The view from my window consisted of the neighboring home's wall and drainpipe. An elderly couple had lived there for so long that my parents had not even been born when they moved in sometime in the last century, an eternity to a boy of six.

The sound of the crowd pitched higher, as if something exciting had happened.

I slammed the window down and was rewarded with Effi's shout of disapproval. But at that moment I remembered the times Pieter would creep through my room after we had all gone to bed. He would put his finger to his lips to keep me quiet, and steal out my second floor window and slide down the drainpipe. My bedroom window looked over a section of the first floor roof. It pitched down slightly and was maybe four feet from my window to the end of the roof. This section ran the length of the house. The drain pipe was at the end of this roof section, toward the alley. Not more than five feet away.

Pieter was five years older and so much bigger than me, but perhaps I could manage it. I put on my coat, raised the window and balanced on the sill. The pipe ran down past our dining room window to a cobbled alley that led to both the back yard and the street.

I held my breath and reached out for the metal bracket on the pipe they way Pieter did. I caught hold of it, and swung my right foot out to prepare to shimmy down. I banged the wall of our house with my foot. For an instant I worried that I would alarm my neighbors, since they were undoubtedly at home, but immediate reality soon overwhelmed me. I lost my grip and started to slide. Frantic, I tried to hug the pipe but I was moving too fast. Down I slid, grasping the pipe with my palms. The heavy metal scratched my hands, but I was able to control my fall into a straight drop and landed on my feet.

A burst of pain exploded in each ankle, but I controlled my cry. I ducked beneath our dining room window and hobbled my way to the street. My feet

worked fine, but it took me several blocks to work out the pain and walk upright.

So much had been happening in town the past few weeks, and so many people here for the construction of seating-stands and stages at the stadium. I'd watched shouting workers install sound systems with large speakers. The speakers were large horn-like affairs, much like the one on my grandmother's old phonograph but huge, with white and silver strips emanating from the inside of their deep throats. The town bristled with excitement and strangers. And menace.

I merged with the crowd, now part of the thrilling babble. All around, people moved by the hundreds. Both men and women wore their finest wool clothing, the ladies in practical hats that provided warmth and occasionally style. They greeted each other with surprised shouts, as if they did not see one another all the time.

The scaffolding that the workers had built to install the sound system still stood, just as I had hoped. It was maybe two stories high and included two wooden platforms. Perfect for sitting or standing, but after my adventure with the drainpipe I scrambled up fearlessly. It was the perfect place to watch, and small pockets of other boys had already staked out positions. We smiled at each other for being so clever as to secure the finest seats.

Below, a legion of men filled the field in smart uniforms with Sam Browne belts, the one designed by General Sir Samuel James Browne of England in the 1800's. A belt that looped from the waist belt in the back over the shoulder and crossed to the other side, again attaching to the waist belt. Quite the military accoutrement that had a very masculine line making these men even more virile, some even with holstered pistols attached. The noise from the crowd seemed to ebb and flow in spontaneous waves of excitement. Swastikas, known then as a hook-shaped cross fluttered everywhere, a mystical and potent symbol of the new Germany.

These were the early years of Nazi pageantry. Later rallies featured symmetry on a massive scale, choreographed like the relentless movement

of tectonic plates – Busby Berkeley on steroids. The Nazis understood the importance of these grand spectacles, the deep need of people to feel part of something majestic and powerful and permanent. As I think about it now, it is no accident that it was the Nazi organizers of the 1936 Olympics who came up with the idea of lighting the torch on Mt. Olympus and transporting it back to the site of the games, a ceremony so romantic it was embraced world-wide, despite its origins. And though the Olympics were still two years away, you could see that Hitler was already formulating its pageantry.

Hitler had just taken power less than a year before, so even though I was awed at the splendor, this rally in Heppenheim later came to feel sloppy and un-German. The soldiers stood in even rows and perfect blocks of men, but the placement was a bit haphazard and occasionally diagonal. And the people had not yet learned their roles as The Crowd, so they followed the boisterous rules of the stadium and slouched, laughed and moved about mumbling.

Eagerness filled the air, shared by us boys scattered on the scaffolding like sailors on the mast of a Tall Ship. It only took a few moments for the great flaw in our plan to become clear. It started with an ear-splitting hiss from the massive speakers only a few feet above, and we grimaced and covered our ears. But as the first words issued out, the sound became more bearable and I was the first to dare listen with bared ears. The rest soon followed suit.

The voice, a rich baritone that suggested a hearty Aryan, introduced Dr. Josef Gobbels, Gauleiter of Berlin. The crowd stood, anxious to catch a glimpse as he entered and took a position in the center of the dais in front of a microphone. He took time to introduce a handsome officer standing next to him named Dr. Josef Mengele, obviously important in some way although I had no idea why. Then he began his speech.

"You are witnessing this evening an event of such magnitude which neither Germany nor the rest of the world has ever seen before. I believe it would be no exaggeration to say that tonight at least 20 million people in Germany and beyond its frontiers will be able to hear Chancellor Adolf Hitler speak."

Across the sea of people, arms shot up in unison in a salute that had become more and more familiar. Some of the other boys on the scaffolding even attempted the move, although holding ourselves from falling made it so most of us ignored the gesture. Some people rose, and Goebbels stood resolute, his left hand in his pocket. He started again:

"When the Jewish press complains that the National Socialist Movement gives the Chancellor of all Germany such wide radio coverage we can only reply: we are merely repaying like with like." Arms shoot up again, and a loud cheer welled up. "And if the Jewish papers think they can intimidate our Movement, and if they think they can ignore our emergency regulations, let them beware! One day our patience will come to an end! And the insolent Jews will have their lying mouths shut for them!"

The crowd roared assent, and the field of brown shirts nodded in enthusiastic agreement. I could sense a feeling of anger from the crowd. Yet they were cheering as if at a sporting event and our side had scored.

And then suddenly there was a stir. A hush overtook the crowd as people turned to one another and began to point.

Goebbels then screamed: " Making his way, on his own...smiling gravely at the crowds...here comes the Fuhrer, Adolph Hitler, leader of the new Germany."

A rapturous cacophony filled the air until, at the microphone, the baritone battered the noise into the chant, "Sieg Heil! Sieg Heil! Sieg Heil!" Over and over again they shouted, and the baritone steered it into a staccato rhythm that sent the word 'heil' soaring like a cheer.

In Hitler marched, his right arm raised in an almost half-hearted reply to the billowing rapture. But all the same, he was so intense it was thrilling and

Goebbels could scarcely be heard above the crowd: "Our Fuhrer. Chancellor Adolf Hitler!"

The word made flesh and the flesh wore a uniform. How strange it was to see him, and how oddly shaped he was, almost like a pear. His swipe of black hair crossed from right to left, hanging down to his brow and he clutched the buckle of his belt. He strode across the dais, taking the spot behind the microphone. He stood still, as if lost in his own thoughts, and slowly the crowd sensed his mood and the noise faded.

In the hush, he looked at notes on a table. He fidgeted with them, a casual gesture witnessed with rapt attention by tens of thousands of people who seemed to be holding their breaths. Finally he looked up, and for just a moment touched that moustache, the one that looked as if a coal miner has wiped his sooty thumb under his nose.

A great burst of flashes suddenly washed him in photographic white light, and he posed for the cameras, crossing and un-crossing his arms. A photo-moment obviously planned in advance. Once in a while he held both hands clasped in front of him forming a V with his arms.

The crowd watched silently, and when the last pop of light faded away, he pursed his lips and narrowed his eyes. He took a deep breath and his words - the actual voice of the Fuhrer - came from the speakers in measured tones: "Fellow Germans..."

He looked down at his notes, "On January 30 of this year, the new National Government was formed. I, and with me the National Socialist Movement joined it. I believed that what I had fought for in years past had been achieved. In 1918, when the war ended, I felt, like many millions of Germans that I was not responsible for the causes of the war...nor the outbreak of the war...nor the conduct of the war...nor was I responsible for the political situation in Germany." His voice rose. "I was a soldier, along with eight or ten million others."

Tumultuous applause broke out, and I was carried away in the excitement. We were the good people, others were to blame for the problems my parents were experiencing. I heard scattered shouts of "Heil" before the noise abated.

"A time came when a German could take pride only in the past while the present was only something to be ashamed of. With the decline of foreign policy and the decay of political power, the internal collapse began." His voice rose again, in anger, "The dissolution of our great national institutions and decay and corruption in our administration began the decline of our nationhood. All this was brought about, all this was caused, by the men of November 1918."

He pointed up and off to the side, and another round of applause built. "And now we see the collapse of class after class, the middle classes are in despair. Hundreds of thousands of lives are ruined. Every year the situation grows more desperate for tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands. And now the ranks of the unemployed are beginning to swell...one, two, three million four million, five million, six million, seven million. Today it may be seven or eight million." He wiped the hair on his brow, flattening it across his forehead. "How long can this go on?"

The applause erupted into cheers of "yes!" and "you're right!" But the shouts were less adulatory, now infused with anger. Next to me, the other boys yelled their approval and one screamed, "Burn the Jews!" His friends laughed and he looked at me and smiled. "My father always says that!" he offered pleasantly.

Knowing no better, I replied, "My father says that people would shout 'heil' if Hitler farted."

From their shocked faces, I knew they had never heard such a thing from their fathers. They looked at each other in amazement, uncertain.

We continued to listen, but dark glances rested on me from time to time, and I realized I was in the middle of a half-circle. I chose the strategy of ignoring them.

That is the day I learned that such a thing is not possible.

After a few more minutes, in a hurt and angry tone, a boy asked, "Why would your father say that about the Fuhrer?"

"I don't know," I replied, truthfully. My sincere tone staved off the suspicion for a few more moments.

"You should leave," an older boy said, and I was old enough to understand what a suggestion delivered in a quaking voice meant.

Wisely, I didn't wait for a second offer, and they parted for me, shuffling with menace but restrained by an uncertainty that I worried would pass away soon enough. I scrambled down the scaffolding.

Even as I ran home, Hitler's voice echoed through the streets. "I am convinced that we must act now before it's too late. Therefore, I decided, on January 30th, to save the nation and the Fatherland.. And so will I, and so will we all toil and work for the resurrection of the German nation. People of Germany, I swear that as I took office, so will I leave it! Not for Reward! I did it for you!"

The crowd's tumultuous approval sounded more sinister, more militant. Even as a child of six I could detect the shift in mood.

Just ahead of me on the empty street I was surprised to see my school chum Gerd trailing his father who dragged him along.

“But I want to see the Fuhrer!” Gerd whined.

Mr. Schmidt, a man so rotund he looked as if he could roll if placed on his side, yanked his son around to face him. “Did you see the people in that crowd?” he yelled. “Tomorrow morning they will all want bread and we cannot wait until morning to start baking.”

His angry tone startled me. Everyone seemed so cross these days and I wondered why the joyous preparations for The Rally had turned so sour.

I wanted to say hello to Gerd, but I decided to avoid the family conflict and walk past. Mr. Schmidt looked up.

“Hey Banat, what are you doing here? How dare you show yourself today!”

I stopped. How did Mr. Schmidt know that I had been forbidden to go outside?

His face was as red as the flags that displayed the swastikas. “Get out of here you little bastard, go home before I...”

With one hand he grabbed me and lifted me up to his face. I was overpowered by the smell of beer, and his spit showered my face.

“You little Jewish prick! My boy has become lazy in school because of you! You are not to go anywhere near him!”

I started to protest that Gerd was my friend, but as I opened my mouth Mr. Schmidt slapped me across the face.

I gasped in surprise and shock.

And then Mr. Schmidt closed his hand into a fist and I watched in disbelief as it came for my face. I turned my head, but the blow came hard anyway, and my nose filled with a sharp scent. Then I opened my eyes in time to see the fist connect with my stomach, and he punched all the breath right out of me. I struggled to breathe but I felt another blow, and a wave of nausea overwhelmed me. I was a small child, in adulthood I stand at 5'5", how could this grown man beat me so mercilessly?

Mr. Schmidt dropped me to the pavement, where I curled up. I could hear Gerd crying.

"Stop that!" Mr. Schmidt ordered. "Don't cry for Jews!"

I heard them leave, and I heard others shuffle around me, watching. I gasped for breath and looked up at an older couple, dressed in their finest, and even through my pain I noted that they looked at me in anger, as if this were my fault. That I was responsible for my own beating by this brut.

I didn't want to cry, but I couldn't help it. Nothing like this had ever happened to me or to anyone I knew. I had known Gerd for years, and Mr. Schmidt had been kind to me in the past.

I struggled to my feet, sobbing, and the few people on the street looked away.

My mother's side of the family, Gunther, had lived in Heppenheim since 1750. The local cemetery was in an adjacent town called Ansbach, and my mother never tired of pointing out that about a third of the headstones bore her family name.

My father's father was a vintner and grain and wine merchant, following a family tradition that stretched back for centuries. But he had rallied to the patriotic fervor at the outbreak of World War I and put all his money in German government bonds. He'd died in poverty several years back as inflation and the depression ate all his money. My father always said it was the shame of losing the family fortune that had killed him.

With frugality and pluck, my father restored the family fortune, in the more modest form of the small factory. I don't remember much about the place itself because one detail towers above all other memories.

His name was Friedrich and he was hired as a metal worker. But his real talent was making small, exquisitely crafted furniture for dollhouses. He asked my father if he could sell them in the front office to make some extra money, and he reluctantly agreed. Soon customers began to arrive interested in nothing else.

My father was deficient in many areas, most prominently in marital fidelity. But he was a good businessman, and soon Friedrich worked on nothing else, using the factory scraps to make tiny chairs, sofas, sideboards – even grandfather clocks.

I once read that many heterosexual men date their sexual awakening to a sudden and unexpected thrill when an attractive female teacher would point something out with long, tapering female hands.

Friedrich had rough hands, scarred and dry. I loved watching him work, watching his hands, as he sanded his little furniture with such care. I relished the smiles he gave me, and those kind green eyes.

I tried to help him with his work but my fingers were too pudgy for the tiny chairs and tables. So every time I rushed up to him to help, he would smile and take me to the back room where the welders worked. He would give me

a torch and position my hands so that I could aim it at a joint. I loved the way the welding coil would melt and bubble.

“I’m going to be a metal worker someday,” I said, and it would be thrilling to report that I felt a chill of premonition, but I didn’t.

Friedrich laughed. “You’re too smart Banat, you’ll be something else. You watch.”

Mother helped around the factory, fluttering from room to room, commenting on the fabric patterns and new styles. If she had limited her involvement to her opinions her presence probably would have been resented. But she was never too proud to work just as hard as anyone else, even doing the most menial tasks like cutting canvas to line the undersides of couches and chairs. More than once I saw a worker woman break into a smile of relief when my mother arrived to help. It is a rare employer who can elicit such a spontaneous response.

Even in those desperate times, the factory must have done well. Our furniture was not fancy but it was of high quality and affordable, a simple formula for success in business. I don’t remember my parents ever discussing money in front of us children, a sure sign that any worries were small enough to discuss in private. Great tension causes unpleasant topics to spill out of adults in front of children. In fact, soon after Aryanism classes began at my school, my parents started to discuss the “Jewish measures” at home. I sometimes listened to them, but wasn’t very interested.

Our home was a pile of Edwardian brownstones with turret towers. It was not a huge estate, but the grounds were so large that today they accommodate 15 houses with swimming pools. But at the time land and real estate were very cheap.

At about that time, just after The Rally, the Jewish teachers began to lose their jobs. State appointed instructors were brought in to teach special courses and one of these was Aryanism.

Mr. Krieger was his name and he stood at the head of the class with a large moustache and slightly yellowish teeth. I thought he looked like a walrus.

“The word Aryan refers to the Indo-European peoples as a whole, including the Romans, Greeks, the Germans, Balts, Celts and Slavs. Today then we will speak of eugenics. We now have exact scientific measurements to determine who exactly is a true Aryan. By taking exact measurement of the eye set, cranium size, length of the nose....”

Some of what he said made sense to me at that age, especially the things about different races being ahead of others. I had a mental vision of the peoples of the world marching in a line and obviously some were further in front than others – I had heard my parents express similar thoughts about gypsies and Poles.

Gurntrude, a girl with an annoyingly shrill voice who sat in front of me, raised her arm. “Mr. Krieger, please, so the peoples of the world are like a cake, one layer on top of another? With the Aryan peoples the top-most layer?”

“Exactly,” he replied, “And for that exact reason we see the position of the German peoples of the world and their status. Look at these illustrations on the board, pictures of Aryan and non-Aryan people. Here are Semitic people and you can see the elongated nose and close set eyes. Observe how they contrast with the true Aryan in this picture.” He pointed to a picture of a German boy with the word “Aryan” beneath.

“But Banat is Jewish, yet he looks just like the picture of the German boy,” Gurntrude said. I never liked her.

“In some rare cases we see intermarriage of Aryan’s and other races that cause a shift where the Aryan traits become dominate in the offspring. Such is the case you cite here.” I wanted to raise my hand and tell him about the beautiful cemetery in Ansbach with almost 200 years of Gunther family plots, none of which were ever described to me as mixed marriages. My father’s family was the same. But he glowered at me so I remained silent. I remained silent in school often those days and lately I had begun to walk home on my own, since my friends were no longer allowed to play with me.

I repeated the story that night in the sitting room, where we normally gathered after dinner. My mother sat on her fainting couch in a tailored beige outfit, legs crossed and tucked away, reading a letter while father read a book in a chair next to the fireplace. Usually we had guests and conversation in the evening, but visitors were scarce these days.

I only meant to tell Pieter, for I knew he had Aryan classes too, but by the time I was finished both of my parents had stopped reading and looked at me.

“Did you tell the class you were Jewish?” my mother asked softly.

“No,” I replied, again bewildered. People had begun to say the strangest things. Everyone knew I was Jewish. It was like knowing my name. There was no need to confirm it.

I barely knew what “Jewish” meant. As far as I could tell, we lived no differently than anyone around us. It was strange that people seemed to care so much about something that seemed like a piece of trivia to me. Our everyday lives were woven into the fabric of Heppenheim. We loved German culture, German food, German music, German books, German clothes. And we loved the German mystique, the virtues of hard work and family. We knew nothing else.

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In October of 1934, my father was away on one of his frequent business trips. I had been asleep for several hours when I was awoken to the muffled sounds of urgency, voices and shouts.

My door flew open and Effie, a looming silhouette, shouted, "Put on your robe and come downstairs! Quickly!" She hesitated a moment, clapped her hands a few times and was gone.

I rushed downstairs and finished tying my robe in the small foyer. Paul stood with his hands clasped over his mouth and Pieter grabbed my arm. The terror in his eyes transferred to me.

"Our garage is on fire," he said.

"Quickly. Out front," our mother shouted, harried and arriving from the kitchen with Effie trailing stupidly. She herded us outside and despite her protests we boys ran for the corner for a better view.

Our garage was a small structure at the far end of the property. It was not connected to the house, so even though it was aflame it was obvious just from looking that the fire wouldn't spread.

"Did you call the firemen?" I asked, fascinated with the way the flames consumed the little building.

To my astonishment, Paul slapped the back of my head and Effie said, "Foolish child."

I looked up at my mother, who stood silent, arms crossed, tears on her cheeks reflecting the light and color of the flames so that her face seemed seared by fire.

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“What happened?” Pieter asked.

“Someone set it on fire!” Paul shouted in reply.

I noticed neighbors peering from darkened windows, ghostly faces framed by lacey curtains. But none came outside.

“Maybe it was an accident,” Pieter said in a weak voice.

Effie snorted with derision.

Just then, a black Citroën flew out of from behind the garage in a rage of squeals. It fishtailed, straightened and came right for us. My mother shrieked and grabbed me about the chest, drawing me back.

I could just make out three hulking figures in the small vehicle. The car flew past, and deep voices yelled a torrent of insults. I could discern “fucking Jews” and “leave Germany,” among the taunts.

The garage collapsed in a heap of sparks and smoke. Father had the car so it was empty. Once the fire had brought down the building, it was clear that it would soon burn itself out.

Shaken, mother said, “Effie” in a warbling voice. Her tone was plaintive, beseeching.

Effie looked up sheepishly at the neighbor’s windows, where the faces vanished and the curtains fell back into place.

“There’s nothing I can do,” she said, her voice rising. “You will just have to learn to live with it.” She shook her head and went inside, muttering all the while.

We stood for a while longer, watching the fire.

“We have to do something,” Paul said. He was angry.

“What do you suggest?” mother shot back with equal force.

He clenched his fists and shouted, “It just keeps getting worse!”

When mother made no attempt to correct him, I felt a dread worse than even when Mr. Schmidt picked me up.

When father returned we rushed to tell him the news, but he had already seen the blackened remains of the garage and knew what had happened.

After dinner that night we gathered as usual in the sitting room. Nobody read or played or talked. We just sat, staring, trying to come to grips with the madness all around us.

After a while I broke the silence by asking, “Father, why do people hate us Jews?”

I worried that I would prompt an angry response, but instead he sighed as he said, “Jews have always been blamed when things go wrong. The people are angry at the humiliation of defeat and the burdens of the Treaty of Versailles. They look to people like Hitler to feel better about themselves.”

“Hitler is a lunatic, a stupid little man,” mother spat out. We all stared. Mother was not an emotional person, but she spoke with such vehemence that we all felt the force of her desperation.

Father nodded. “Yes, he is. But he is merely the latest in a long line of such men who harness the rage of the mob. I don’t know if he has the talent of other tyrants. He may not be able to keep power.”

“Then someone else will come along,” mother replied forcefully. “There is so much irrational hatred.” She waved a hand about. “When the people become angry there will always be someone to take advantage of it, to stoke it and gain power that way. Don’t fool yourself. You said it would blow over. You said that two years ago. But it only gets worse and worse.” She shared a glance with Paul.

“There are still intelligent people in power,” father replied.

“Yes, and there are still kindly people. But they are afraid, all of them. We can do nothing to fight that fear. Don’t they see that when everyone is afraid that nobody is safe? Not Jews, not Christians. Nobody.”

Pieter said, “But how long will they be afraid?”

Father shrugged. “It is hard to predict. But I do think that it will take a huge event to change the course of Germany.”

“And in the meanwhile?” mother asked in a high pitch.

Father didn’t reply, but a week later he made a stunning announcement at dinner – he had sold the house and we were moving to Amsterdam almost immediately.

“We got chicken feed,” mother said, but relief tempered her bitterness. “This house should have brought us much more.”

“It is the price we must pay to escape this madness!” father said angrily, and she nodded and never raised the topic again in front of us children.

Father’s plan was to sell the factory building but move all the equipment to Holland. He explained that it was more affordable than buying new machinery. But since this would take a while to arrange, we moved first to a neighboring city named Darmstadt, halfway between Heidelberg and Frankfurt. I think my parents just wanted to feel like they were making progress towards leaving Germany, or perhaps they just wanted to get away from the burning smell of the garage which was an ever-present reminder that violence lurked everywhere. Either way, Darmstadt was embroiled in the same madness, but at least there was a Jewish school for us children and the town was large enough to give us some anonymity.

I didn’t make any friends. I remember the school as a depressing place, with teachers that looked spooked all the time.

In fact, I have only one clear memory of this brief time in Darmstadt: Friedrich came to visit.

My breath caught in my throat at the sight of his dark brown and wavy hair. He had grown a trim little moustache, but his rugged face always looked like he needed a shave. I loved the shadow of brown stubble that covered his checks and jaw line. It made him look strikingly masculine.

He greeted me with a boisterous smile and hug and I felt a hot rush of excitement. I sat at the table while he and father discussed the plans for moving the factory equipment to Holland. Mother was cooking the afternoon supper as they spoke.

Over the course of the conversation, I realized that Friedrich was planning to move with us! I could barely contain my joy, but the only sign I gave was sitting up straight in my chair.

At one point, Friedrich licked his lips, and I reflexively imitated him.

“Banat!” mother yelled, and I suddenly realized she had been watching as I gazed at him. She looked at me oddly and said, “You look flush Banat, a little warm.” I put my hand to my lips and realize they are warm and a little fuller than normal, “Go wash your face with some cool water then get your brothers and we’ll eat.”

My trousers felt tight under my shorts, and I had to adjust myself. I went to the bathroom and looked into the mirror. I was thrilled that Friedrich was moving with us, but I felt so strange.

A short while later, at the end of 1935, we moved to Amsterdam. Father’s military service in WWI was still worth something, and we were given permission to emigrate with all of our belongings. The process became more difficult in the following year.

We drove our own car across Europe to Holland with enough luggage to keep us clothed for about a week. Our furniture, clothing and such, were to come with the factory equipment later.

“We are here!” mother declared happily after we had driven across the Dutch border. There was a quick boarder check by military guards. We went on, rain had begun to fall. She clapped and smiled back at us boys in the back seat. Isn’t it lovely here? Look. The cows are happy here, even in the rain!”

“Do not worry about Dutch cows. They are all waterproof!” father replied, and we all laughed.

Pieter said, “You haven’t told a joke in two years!” We all laughed harder.

Each mile we drove felt like we were leaving the madness further and further behind. Our moods lifted. We smiled and laughed and joked. Within the hour, my brothers and I were shrieking with laughter at the corny jokes our father told, one after the other, in high-spirited voices. By the time we pulled into Amsterdam we were all exhausted from hilarity.

It was late in the afternoon when we arrived. Our parents had made arrangements with a Dutch family to host we brothers until our furniture arrived. Our parents, however, would stay in the empty apartment.

“I don’t want you kids under foot,” mother said while the elderly Dutch couple looked at us. The woman smiled kindly, but the man was suspicious. “That apartment needs desperate cleaning,” mother continued. “You’ll be fine here. I know it’s strange. But remember that we are safe now.”

Paul looked at the old man with apprehension and said, “We could help you clean, mother.”

“Effie will arrive on the morning train,” she declared. It was the first any of us had heard of this and I didn’t like it. All I could remember was the way she spoke at us with such contempt the night our garage burned. I didn’t understand why my parents wanted to bring the madness with us to Holland, but I didn’t know enough to say anything.

Chapter 2: Life goes on. Bohemians. Danger Still

The salon glowed amber. Lace curtains surrounded by heavy drapes diffused the sun's rays to foggy light, and cigarette smoke coated most of the objects in the room, including a crystal chandelier that still managed to throw off rainbow patterns beneath the soot. Of course, it reeked of cigarette smoke, but also smelled of coffee. Such a satisfying combination.

The unemployed Jews of Germany's movie industry found their last refuge in the salon. They'd been pampered as celebrities, and had scores of adoring fans from Hamburg to Munich who were eager to attend to their desires. They'd floated easily among the upper crust, dined at the finest restaurants and spent weekends as guests at sprawling estates where they supplied glamour and wit.

They were the last of Germany's Jews to realize what was happening and they clustered here in Amsterdam, dazed by how poor their usually reliable and shrewd instincts had served them.

"No, no, no, that's not Einstein's point at all," said Rudy, a writer and a handsome man who held his cigarette with his hand bent at his mouth while he gestured. "It's not that we have energy inside of us. It's that we are made out of energy - that matter itself," he knocked the chair with a knuckle "is simply compressed energy."

The house's owner was Mr. Becker, a man with dramatic white hair that flowed across his head like a snowdrift and who, with his wife, had owned the most prestigious talent agency in Berlin. He asked, "How can it be? If all of our insides is made of pure energy, then we'd all be exploding all the time."

"It's all contained," Rudy replied with a cheerful tone while he made a fist.

“I met an English Duke with that emotional range once,” said Gisala, Rudy’s beautiful red-haired sister who lounged on a velvet day bed, her dress dripping lace off the edge.

A burst of restrained laughter filled the room before Rudy explained, “It’s called electromagnetisms.”

“What is dearest?” asked the hostess, Mrs. Becker, while flipping through phonograph records. Even though it was only four o’clock in the afternoon, she wore a white robe that draped dramatically off her shoulders and arms, along with a pair of fuzzy white slippers that had blackened at the soles.

“The force that holds energy together to create matter. It’s an electric and magnetic force, hence the name electromagnetism. You can’t release the energy inside of matter without breaking that force and nobody has figured out how to do that. It’s an extremely powerful bond, the most powerful in the universe, apparently.”

“And what happens if you do find a way to break it?” Mr. Becker asked.

Rudy flipped his hands outward. “Boom,” he whispered and it sounded like the distant roar of a crowd. “If we were to break the electromagnetic bond of just one of us in this room, we could level the half of the city.”

“I hate to be contrary,” Mrs. Becker replied, fiddling now with a record on the turntable, “but it is possible to break it. You’d know if you ever saw my father after five belts of Scotch.”

“I think I broke my electromagnetic bond on the set of “Three-Penny Opera,” said Gisela. Everyone laughed but she blew out an impressive funnel of smoke and said, “I couldn’t be more serious. It took six hours – six hours – to set up a scene in the café and just as we were ready to shoot, the camera tipped over and crashed to the ground. I went ‘boom’ let me tell you.”

“But just imagine,” Rudy said as soon as the laughter died, “that sort of power in the wrong hands. Hitler, for example.”

Clothes rustled and throats cleared.

“You are a ray of sunshine,” Mrs. Becker said, placing a record and positioning the needle. She turned away to the sound of ragtime. “I’m not sure any of us should listen to you. Remember what Leviticus says – thou shalt not lie with mankind as with womankind. It is an abomination.” She smiled mischievously and sat. “And why on earth should anyone listen to an abomination?”

“You have it quite wrong, darling,” Rudy replied, equally mischievous. “You are the abomination. In this case, God meant “thou” to be women.”

Everyone chuckled, but the mood had been shattered. They all smoked quietly for a minute or two.

“Banat, I didn’t see you there, “ said Mrs. Becker in a voice of pleasant surprise. “Why are you sitting out there in the hallway? You know you’re always welcome to visit with us.”

I was crouched next to the door, knees to my chin and arms wrapped about my legs. I gave a weak smile and stood. “I’m here to walk Kaiser.”

“Oh, that dog,” said Rudy with a fey wave of his hand that dislodged a precarious tunnel of ashes from the end of his cigarette. He wiped it away as he said, “No creature has the right to be so happy all the time.”

“He’s a very good-natured dog,” Mr. Becker observed and his wife replied, “And Banat is a very good-natured boy. That’s why they get on so well.” She beamed. “You will find him out back. He got into the trash again this afternoon and he’s been banished to the yard.”

“Did you catch him while he was eating the trash?” I asked.

“We found it afterwards.” She smiled and wagged her finger. “The evidence against him was overwhelming, especially the teeth marks. Are you attempting to defend his honor on the grounds that we didn’t catch him in the act?”

“No. But it won’t do any good to punish him if he doesn’t know why he’s being punished.”

“Oh, we’re talking about my father again?” she replied, and the genial hilarity was back.

I fetched Kaiser from the back yard, where he greeted my arrival with an ecstasy of wet kisses and wags. I leashed him and let him drag me through the house to the street, where he bounced down the steps with the restraint of a rubber ball and rushed off to sniff two bikes at the base of a tree. Bikes clustered in a huge jumble at the trees bases like so many posies.

The German Jews had settled into a depressed neighborhood near the center of the city along Beethoven Stradt. In the five years since we’d fled Germany, this area had gone from empty and disheveled to bustling and blooming. All it took was a bit of scrubbing and planting, and the orderly feel of the neighborhood was restored. It was all carefully planned and laid out, with regulation houses of regulation height, but with enough turrets and bay windows to make it all feel trendy, not regimented.

I learned to speak Dutch in this neighborhood, and learned to forget Germany. I was 10 by the time I began walking Kaiser, earning a bit of extra money. My father's new furniture factory was doing quite well, so I always had enough for sweets and chestnuts.

I considered myself Dutch by then, although I never told this to my parents. They were always speaking to us in reassuring voices about how we were German and should never forget it, no matter what anybody said. I was perfectly content to forget, and didn't understand why it mattered so much to them.

Effie had returned to Heppenheim, and I was happy to see her go. She had lasted a year with us, and all the while her sour personality took on darker tones. She caught me on the fainting couch once and merely shrugged when I scrambled off.

"What do I care about your mother's furniture?" she asked angrily. "My mother never had such fine things. It's not fair that you..." She stopped in mid-sentence and shook her head.

A few weeks later I came upon my mother and Effie facing each other in the kitchen. My mother held a pamphlet with a swastika on the cover and Effie held her chin up in indignation.

"But you must know how we would feel about this," mother said.

"And you must know my feelings, too," Effie replied.

"They are hardly the same things. If you follow National Socialism then you are required to believe in all the racial laws that say we are inferior. You saw how they drove us out of our country."

“My brother says there are different ways to interpret things.” She moved to the sink and began scrubbing. “I am allowed to read what he sends. You can’t stop me.”

My parents should have asked her to leave then, because even I anticipated what happened a few weeks later as I lounged on the fainting couch, running my fingertips lightly above the velvet.

“Get up!” Effie screamed upon entering the room.

Startled, I stood.

“Haven’t you been told to stay off that couch?” Spittle flew from her mouth and I stood agape and the redness of her face and the rage in her expression.

“You are all the same!” she screamed. “Your father is cheating with a woman down the street who is also married! Perverts! Frauds! Cheats!” She raised a fist and I pulled back, but she spun around and just before leaving the room she turned back and screamed, “Jews!”

I told my parents, and they ordered Effie to pack. She flew into another rage that lasted for hours while she gathered her things. She screamed about the traitorous Jews, the conniving Jews, the decadent Jews and she told my mother that father was having an affair. When my father slammed the door behind her, my parents looked at each other a long time before they embraced. I noticed that they shook.

There were a lot of Jewish couples holding on to each other in those dark days. Affairs and other betrayals were quickly forgiven in the absolute necessity to support one another. Family squabbles and personality conflicts began to seem like insupportable luxuries, affordable to only those who lived in a normal civilized world. When you are being ejected from a

civilization, marched to the borders and ordered to leave, you stay together for safety's sake in the wilderness. It was a feeling I would have almost all of my life, and is probably why I am most comfortable at the margins of what is called polite society.

Much later I would learn that there are pressures that can splinter even this model of self-preservation.

For now though it was the happiest time, definitely, of my childhood. Especially the winters. They were long and cold and wonderful.

"Come children," Father would say "let's go sledding." With that Father would tie our sleds behind our car and drag us a little bit thru the neighborhood, it was great fun.

We could ice skate day & night because the winters were so cold and the canals & ponds would freeze easily. One night Pieter and the boys were planning to skate to school the next day.

"Normally we can't take our skates to school. But Proctor says it looks like the roads are going to be too icy for walking or bicycles that he would allow us to skate to school and so the rule would be suspended."

I sat on the edge of my bed listening, "Does that mean I can skate too?" I asked.

"Sure Banat but come with us, we must test the ice before any of us can start."

I went and dug out my skates. I know they would need a little oil to remove the rust from the blades. They were yellow wood platforms with heel indents to lock them onto my shoes. I had made braided red leather straps for them

myself. I tried them on that night, really excited about the next mornings run. Positioning my foot on the wooden platform, using the braided leather straps, I was able to get them on tight. They were perfect over my school shoes, which were really a low topped boot. I took them off and rubbed a very little amount of oil to the sides of the metal blades. They were ready for tomorrow.

That next morning we set out with our skates in the ready. Walking on the ice was very normal for one of the other boys since he grew up with a large pond in front of his house. So he elected himself the ice tester for that morning run.

“Our pond would freeze over for a few days each winter.” He said.
“Sometimes I was among the first to venture out there... usually at the crack of dawn... I remember listening intently for cracking noises... strange echoes from air trapped under the ice.” We all stood around itching to get skating.
“We had a saying that ice that crackles does not break but I found that to be a myth one day when I went through the ice. It was shallow water.”

With that we all laughed and just put on our skates and started off to school. We could skate all the way to school, circuitously all be it. But we could skate to school. It was wonderful, the cold air and speed was so magical. It was also very quiet, no sound but the sweett sweett sound that our skates made on the ice. Canals, gables, bridges all whizzing by. On the way home from school that day there was a festive atmosphere on the ice: people were skating and strolling on the ice, selling hot chocolate milk, pea soup and mulled wine... it was like being in a 17th century painting by Avercamp. Life was really wonderful for us as children there in Holland.

By 1938 we'd been living in Amsterdam for nearly three years and Effie was long gone and life seemed normal. That March, Hitler invaded Austria and entered Vienna to a cheering throng, every “heil Hitler!” shouted with full-throated sincerity since his arrival. Hitler's arrival wasn't announced until the last moment and no public displays of support had been planned, strangely the Austrians fell right in line.

Within a day, a concrete block of laws and regulations that had gradually been lowered onto the backs of Germany's Jews landed with full force on the Jews of Austria. They were not manhandled out like we were, with rude comments and shoves. They were grabbed by the throats and thrown from the room in terror.

Eight months later, Kristallnacht erupted in Germany. The synagogues burned and professionals across the country finally cracked under violent public pressure and stunned doctors, professors, artists and intellectuals found themselves unemployed. Their German friends and colleagues looked away in embarrassment, and new laws against emigration closed their escape routes. Their lofty status was yanked from them on one side, while special taxes sapped their fortunes away on the other. There they stood in a land of people who hated them, penniless and powerless. Vulnerable.

We heard all of this on the radio, the next evening. It was a report from the BBC, and an announcer with a shaking voice said, "The world trembles, torn by conflicting forces. Throughout this day, event has crowned upon event in tumultuous Germany. Meanwhile the outside world is gravely shaken by the events in Germany and moves cautiously through a maze of diplomatic perils. Since late last night the German citizens and storm troopers have been ransacking the homes and stores of Germany's Jewish people. And so the world's spotlight is fastened there. Now by special broadcast direct from Paris, at this late hour, we have communications channels available. Reporting is Bob Trout with news of Europe in turmoil."

So it began. My parents and brothers and a smattering of neighbors sat transfixed at the unbelievable words coming out of our radio. "This is Bob Trout with a quick glimpse of the situation in Germany. It has been a night of rampage, throughout all of Germany. Gangs of citizens and military personal with sledgehammers and stones have been destroying buildings owned by Jewish people. Store fronts are shattered leaving large piles of glass in streets everywhere that Jews have established themselves. Reports from all over Germany talk of synagogue after synagogue being burnt to the ground. There are scenes of sadistic violence that can be described only as ghoulish in nature. Jewish prayer books, scrolls and artwork are being

burned in town squares everywhere. Even in the smallest of villages, children can be seen throwing stones at the windows of small ancient synagogues. Momentous decisions must be made outside of Germany. When will foreign governments respond?

And we also heard German propaganda.

“The decadent American society is so accommodating to the Jewish influence that her people suffer from the most horrible depredations,” a nasally German voice declared. “In the city of Cleveland, over 65,000 people have died from cold and starvation this winter alone.” His voice lightened in that laughably propagandistic way. “But the people of Germany have declared that they will not suffer under Jewish oppression and have taken matters into their own hands. Every German knows that Jews need have no fear, as long as they obey the laws of the Fatherland and our Fuehrer. But if they do not, they will suffer the consequences.”

“What do they take us for?” asked my aunt, my mother’s sister who had fled with her family the year before and joined us in Amsterdam. Tears streamed down her face as she asked, “Can we not judge the evidence before our eyes? Are we not to believe the things we see? How can they expect us to pretend?”

Two days later a telegram arrived from my father’s sister. Her husband had been arrested on Kristallnacht, along with the husband of their other sister.

For the next few weeks, my father worked every angle to get our uncles released. He bargained away a pricey lot in Heppenheim that he’d wisely kept. The new laws forbade him to sell the land, but he still had the right to barter, and that is how he got his sisters and their children across the border. They rushed to Amsterdam with suitcases so hastily stuffed they had tied them with rope to keep them closed.

Mr. Frank, one of father's business friends and who had a daughter named Anne who went to my school, sat in our parlor one day and spelled out reality. "You need cash to get your brothers-in-law out of prison. Hard currency."

"I can pay you generous interest for hard currency," my father promised.

Mr. Frank was an extremely polished and kind man. "I'm not bargaining for a higher interest rate. I have American dollars, but they are in limited supply." Left unsaid was that he needed dollars himself.

"Surely you can spare some for others?" he asked, and in the end Mr. Frank agreed to exchange Dutch currency for American. "Let's make the exchange a bit higher," he suggested. "You should keep some for yourself too. You will need it, mark my words."

My uncles arrived and with the escape of cousins over the past few years, every member of our family made it out of Germany in time.

At about the same time, my brother Paul became an ardent Zionist, raging against Germany with great passion.

"Only the Jews can help the Jews," he told Pieter and me. He had grown so tall in recent years, and his face was more masculine and rigid, the softness of puberty melting away. "Go look throughout history. It is amazing what I've learned that our mother and father have forgotten. But we must be the new generation that remembers that Jews only survive by banding together. With our skill and our talent, nothing can stop us, but the Romans scattered us across the world and we are still wandering around separate. We must return to our homeland." He'd been going to an agricultural training school in north Holland, for a year or so. It seems now he had been preparing carefully to leave for Palestine.

At dinner one night with my parents, he gave another version of the same speech.

My mother stopped eating half way through, watching as he expounded with icy passion and resolve.

“You are thinking of joining a kibbutz?” she asked, but in the tone of a statement.

“No,” my father said instantly, bringing his hand down on the table. “I need your help at the factory. We are starting to recover from the expense of bringing your aunts and uncles here, and we must save up enough for us to get to America.”

“We have enough,” Paul replied with cool logic. “Everyone else in the family is getting ready to leave with much less than we have.”

“We have enough money to flee, yes, but while things are so prosperous for us we should take advantage of the situation.” His voice was respectful, and Paul listened instead of storming out. “I know that we must leave eventually, but the Dutch are very tolerant people. I have as many gentile customers as Jewish, and many of my business contacts are not Jewish either. We are very safe here for now. I think too I have special dispensation because of my war medals and my performance in the German Army during the great war. We should fair well because of that. I think you know that as well.”

“Yes,” Paul said, and I was glad that he agreed. These years in Amsterdam had been happy ones, full of skating in canals, laughing in the streets, good food, warm clothes, integrated schools. He would have seemed foolish to me if he’d denied all of that.

But he would not change his mind. “The future is in Zion, the promised land. I have friends with contacts that can get me into a kibbutz near the Dead

Sea. I know that your Jewish identity is not important to you, but it is to me and I will teach it to my children.”

Mother gasped. “Paul, be fair. Just because we lived a certain way does not mean that we don’t care about being Jewish. It’s true that your father and I did not raise you in a religious tradition, but we would never prevent you from practicing it, if that is what you want. You have freedom of conscience. You may blame us for many faults as parents, but not for that.”

Paul blinked a few times and asked, “Father, I need your permission. If you don’t I will be forced to lie and cheat my way to Palestine, but I will do it. It will be easier for me if you agree.”

Father raised his voice. “You are a young man with romantic notions.”

Paul began to rise, but father held out his hand. When he spoke again, his voice was softer.

“But I cannot compete with that. Nor should I. You are a young man and young men have very little of anything except spirit. I suppose that is how men acquire all the rest, with that initial spirit. It doesn’t last for long, let me tell you.”

Unsure, Paul asked, “So I have your permission?”

He sighed. “Yes, my son. You have my permission. And my admiration.”

Paul had begun turning as soon as he heard “yes,” but he stopped and looked my father in the eyes.

“Thank you, father,” he said in a formal tone. He even bowed his head a little.

A few weeks later he was packed and ready to go. He stooped down to my level at the front door and said, “Banat, I think you’re the one I will miss most. You have such strong qualities, I will miss seeing them developing in you,” He handed me a belt. “Here, one of my belts to remember me by.” With that he turned and left, and I was amazed that my annoying older brother had become such a dashing man. Soon after he made aliyah, and reported back that in Palestine he was helping to build a Jewish state.

Such scenes played out all over Amsterdam for the next few years. The pattern became familiar, with many visits and long lines to obtain visas, and with news about new immigration quotas from abroad that spread like wildfire through the Jewish neighborhoods. But there was always the undercurrent of steady, ominous drums from the south when new indignities befell Jews in Germany and Austria.

One by one, my cousins moved to England and America, yet we stayed, accumulating money to make our move easy and establishing ourselves in a foreign land more plausible. I used to blame my father for thinking like this but now I realize that he was only human and simply needed to believe that things would get better. It is hard to resist such a magnificent temptation. There’s so much comfort in belief. The mistake is not realizing that reality and belief are often at war and that reality always wins. Every time.

My father was scarcely the only one. It is clear to me now that many of the Jews who remained in Amsterdam lived in a state of denial, or fantasy. We were guests in a tiny country with a pitiful army that bordered Germany, a belligerent country that had begun to resemble a snarling beast that was baying for blood – Jewish blood at the top of the menu. Many people longed to leave but immigration laws barred exit from this port, or entry to that one. But those who remained willingly, well, they had an enormous capacity for self-deception.

They were also kind and good people, generous and sweet. One day in 1939, a woman wearing a striking purple dress arrived at our house and asked for my mother. Her hair was as yellow as butter and carefully arranged in folds, like the pictures from Hollywood magazines. Jewels glittered and dripped in all the usual places. She had a warm smile.

“I’m Gretle Becker,” she said, “Mrs. Helmuth Becker.”

“From the Becker Agency of Berlin?” my mother asked, delighted, as they settled into the parlor. “Banat, please fetch us a pot of tea and some refreshments,” she asked me pleasantly. “And don’t forget the cream and sugar this time, darling.”

Tea? Refreshments? I’d never made tea before, and I quickly deduced that by refreshments she meant some little things to eat. I raced to the kitchen, enjoying the charade as much as my mother was.

As I reached for one of the cups we used every day, I remembered my mother’s collection of “plate”, as she called it, on display upstairs in a cabinet with glass doors, next the fainting couch.

My parents had, of course, forbidden me to ever touch the dainty little cups and saucers with curly handles and borders, all gleaming with glaze. Women in full-length, poofy dresses and men in colorful waistcoats frolicked in hand-painted scenes of carefree joy. Be-wigged in white curls that cascaded past their shoulders, the women swung from ropes of flower garlands, and the men wooed them with dogs and trinkets, wearing the same silly wigs.

I opened the cabinet and carefully removed the tall teapot with scrolling handle, the cups and saucers, the milk and sugar containers, some tiny gold spoons and knives. I also took a few plates and bowls, and I placed everything on the richly-painted carrying tray that occupied the central location of the display. It was a sumptuous piece, bursting with flowers and vines and fruits.

My heart pumped wildly while I took everything down to the kitchen, wiped it quickly and poured the milk and sugar. I trimmed a pan cake in the icebox into little squares, then into little wedges, and arranged them on a plate. I put crackers and cheese on another plate. I didn't know what the bowls were supposed to hold, but I cut up an orange and an apple and curled the pieces inside. After I arranged it all symmetrically on the tray, I carried it to the front salon, pushing the door open with my elbow and shoulder.

"Oh, my, how lovely," Mrs. Becker said.

My mother smiled grandly, giving me a secret look that communicated her massive approval, but she was still nervous enough to stand and take the tray from me. "Thank you, Banat. I'm having a serious conversation with Mrs. Becker, so please go to your room and study."

I wanted to stay, but somehow knowing that my mother had impressed this impossibly beautiful woman was satisfying enough.

My mother was still giddy when father came home several hours later. "And she knows Marlene Deitrich," she told him. "They are very close friends. And Fritz Lang, Emil Jannings. Oh, and Ernst Lubitsch."

She smiled at me with such affection it felt like warmth. "Banat was the perfect gentleman who knew just what to do. You should have seen the way he served the tea. He used the plates. I guess your children grow up when you don't even realize it." She rubbed my hair playfully.

"You do realize that you haven't even told me why she was here," father said. He tried to sound exasperated, but her excitement was so infectious he didn't carry it off well.

“Oh, a mutual friend in England asked her to visit. Do you remember Elsa Grubner? Her son died. A suicide.” She did seem momentarily downcast by the news.

“There’s not enough Jewish blood being spilled these days that we need our young men to kill themselves?” father asked, and I was surprised by the anger in his voice. Didn’t suicide warrant compassion?

Mother flicked her eyes at me and Pieter and said, “He was a mietzje. It had nothing to do with being Jewish.”

My father didn’t reply, and the way my mother pronounced “mietzje” prevented me from asking what it was.

Mrs. Becker and my mother became good friends, and that is how I ended up walking their dog after school, and listening to the tales of the Ufa, the Universum Film AG. The Ufa was one of the Weimer Republic’s cultural jewels, a prestigious designation in a country that suffered so much misery at the time. It turned out classics like “Metropolis,” “The Blue Angel,” and “Dr. Mabuse.” And “Three Penny Opera.” Although now Ufa was nothing but a propaganda machine for the Nazis’.

Every afternoon a group would gather in the Becker’s salon, and it almost always included the handsome Rudy and his sister Grisela who rented two rooms in the house. Strangely, they were not Jews, but had been banished from Germany for political reasons. No one ever explained what those were.

Nobody objected when I began to come early and sit quietly in the corner listening to the conversation.

Even though I was a boy of 11, they never censored their discussions. They talked as openly of romances as they did of politics, and on both topics nothing ever met their approval.

I loved Rudy's voice, his silky laugh and the way he always sucked in his lips after taking a sip of any beverage. His smile gave me thrills, compounded by orders of magnitude when it was directed at me.

But after a while, I began to notice that nobody ever talked about Rudy. He always made observations, but always about other people, and nobody asked about the things that were happening in his life.

As soon as I realized this strange fact, I paid even closer attention but the pattern was always the same. Everyone spoke to Rudy, and he talked to everyone else. But never about himself.

I wondered about this all the time, and that's why I was thinking about it one day as I walked Kaiser along the green, wide, medium strip that ran down the center of the street. It stretched for two miles, and trams and auto traffic raced by on each side.

As I approached the Becker's home that day, Rudy emerged. He smiled at me and said, "I'm off to meet some people."

"Can I come with you?" I asked. I had no idea I was about to ask that question, and surprised myself as much as him.

"I'm afraid only adults are allowed where I'm going."

"Why?"

"You are a good boy, Banat. You are smart, dependable and very clever. But there are some places that are off limits to little boys." He patted my cheek. "I have a feeling that you will understand me one day in the future."

“Can I ask you a question?”

“Yes, of course.”

“What is a mietzje?”

He coughed out a laugh, but it was different from his usual light-hearted chuckle.

“And why do you ask this question? Have people been talking about mietzjes?”

“My mother had a friend with a son who was a mietzje. He killed himself.”

“That kid in England? I heard about that.”

“What is it?”

He stooped down to look into my eyes. “A mietzjes is a person who kills himself. He denies himself to everyone, including himself.” He looked at my confused expression and laughed softly, but with sorrow. “Poor Banat. You’re nearly 12 now, huh?” I nodded. “You know something is wrong in here,” he points to my head, “ and here,” now pointing to my heart.

“Yes,” I whisper, mortified and thrilled at the same time. I explained that I was different from everybody else. I was a little effeminate for a boy and didn’t participate in the rough-housing the other boys participated in. “I’m teased all the time Rudy.”

“I just wish I could stop the teasing is all” I said with sad eyes to Rudy.

He smiled. “We are different then everyone in the world. Where the Germans hate the Jews, the world hates the homosexual. You like being with boys, yes?”

“I’m not sure exactly.” I summoned my courage. “I wish I could kiss Friedrich like in the movies.” I rushed to explain that Friedrich worked for my father. “Is that what you mean?”

“Yes. Banat you are a very smart little boy and I’m not saying that like every other adult who says that to every little child. You are smart. So listen to me. Stiffen your walk, deepen your voice and hide your feelings for other boys. Never speak of this to anyone, and never allow a grown man to touch you in your pants. You will soon get to know boys you can trust. Be alert, you will be able to see who is the same as you and I. We adults call ourselves Uraniërs in public so the others do not know what we speak of. You will make up your own words when you think someone else is the same as you. Be careful in life. Don’t be frightened and never believe the horrible things the world says about us. We are human, and deserve respect. Never forget that.” He kissed me softly on the forehead, then left.

That night I cried after dinner, but wouldn’t tell my worried parents why. I always had a sense of there being something different about me but I didn’t suffer from it or anything like that. It was what it was. Now I had an explanation. I would remember Rudy’s words for the rest of my life. And for my school days after that, well I was not teased in school by the other boys anymore. Every once in a while somebody remarked about my girlishness but for the most part I did as Rudy said. I continued my days in school knowing what I was now. I knew what was different about me now. Frankly I liked being different, special almost. I liked having my secret and Rudy’s secret. I never felt bad about it. It is what it is.

But by parents forgot all about my crying when my mother's sister arrived, bursting with news. She, her husband and their two daughters had received US visas.

"We should reach San Francisco on May fourth," she said, between excited giggles. "The Jewish Agency has arranged an apartment and a job."

"Are you sure?" my mother asked, both depressed and happy.

"Yes, here's the address." She sorted through papers and pulled out a form. "We will be living on a street called Castro." She wrinkled her nose, but it was a fake show of displeasure. "That's a funny name."

Weeks later we said goodbye to them at the port and as the ship slid away in the water, my mother said, "Everyone has left Europe. All of our family. We are the only ones left."

"Everything will work out fine," my father said, encircling his arm about her shoulders. "The business is doing better than ever, and Banat and Pieter are enjoying school. You have good friends and we have plenty to eat. There is no reason to be fearful."

Three weeks later, Hitler invaded Holland. May 10, 1940 Germany invaded the Netherlands, starting the Battle of the Netherlands, and Belgium. Given the historically good relations with its much larger neighbor, the invasion came as big surprise to most Dutch.

On May 14 the Germans demanded the surrender of the port of Rotterdam, threatening to bomb the city. Soon after the ultimatum, Rotterdam surrendered. However, bombers that had already been sent and were not called back and the city was still heavily bombed, resulting in approximately 800 deaths and 78,000 homeless. This was supposedly caused by a

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communications difficulty. After this bombardment the Dutch army surrendered.

We Jews of Amsterdam trembled as the Nazis roared northward to our city.