

THE BOY WHO DARED
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ISBN 978-0-439-68014-1

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 19 20 21 22 23

Printed in the U.S.A. 40

This book was originally published in hardcover by Scholastic Press in 2008.
This edition first printing 2019

Book design by Phil Falco
The text type was set in Palatino.

Special thanks to Hermann Teifer, archivist at the Leo Baeck Institute, for his
expert fact-checking of the manuscript. Thanks also to National Holocaust
Museum docent William Werner Hess and to LDS Church members Tim
Wadham and Nadine Hubbard for their invaluable consultations. And to
Carole Hess of Nürnberg, Germany, for translating the notice on page 185.

DAY 264

It's morning. Soft gray light slips over the tall redbrick wall. It stretches across the exercise yard and reaches through the high, barred windows. In a cell on the ground floor, the light shifts dark shapes into a small stool, a scrawny table, and a bed made of wooden boards with no mattress or blanket. On that bed, a thin, huddled figure, Helmuth, a boy of seventeen, lies awake. Shivering. Trembling.

It's a Tuesday.

The executioner works on Tuesdays.

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Memories drift through Helmuth's mind like clouds. Clouds that obscure his intense fear of what is to come. Slowly they shift into shapes. Helmuth. Holding Mutti's hand.

It's 1928, and Helmuth and his mother stroll up Luisenweg, the Hammerbrook street in Hamburg, where they live in a small flat next door to Helmuth's grandparents.

Helmuth is three. He is wearing short black pants and brown ankle boots that lace up. His older half brother Hans is eight. Hans is wearing short pants and ankle boots, too. So is Gerhard, who is seven. They are walking ahead of Mutti. Helmuth worries that his brothers will get lost, or worse, that they will have fun without him. Helmuth tugs on Mutti's hand. He wants to escape, wants to catch up with his brothers, but Mutti tugs back.

"No," she says. "Stay close, hold my hand. I don't want to lose you." That makes Helmuth feel dark inside. It isn't fair that he has to hold Mutti's hand and his brothers do not.

A street. Helmuth sees this, too. A noisy, crowded street. It's a parade. Brown-shirted men wearing red-and-black armbands and tall, black, shiny boots are marching. One swaggering Brownshirt bends over Helmuth. "What a big boy you are," he says. "Do you want to be a soldier for the Fatherland?"

Helmuth likes to play with toy soldiers. He forgets he is angry at Mutti. He nods and tells the Brownshirt, "Yes!"

The Brownshirt laughs a big booming laugh. He pats Helmuth's head. "A smart boy!" he says to Mutti. "And

brave! Already he wants to fight for the Fatherland. And his eyes! So alert! Look how they take in everything."

"Yes," says Mutti in a proud voice. "He's very smart. And very brave, too."

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A loud bell clangs. Bright prison lights snap on. Helmuth sits, stretches. It's cold. He rubs his arms beneath his drab gray prison smock. He steps across the bare floor to the corner. Raises his smock, urinates into the slop bucket. For a moment, the cell grows thick with the stink from the bucket, and then thins, becomes ordinary again.

He lifts his bed against the wall, hooks it into place. Sits on the stool. Waits.

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Another memory. 1932.

It's nighttime. Helmuth is seven.

He lies on his back, tucked into bed between Hans and Gerhard. Helmuth hears Mutti dressing for work, the smooth wooden glide of bureau drawers, *Open, shut. Open, shut.*

His grandparents live in the flat next door. Through the wall, Helmuth hears a sonata from Opa's gramophone, a somber cello, warm and penetrating. Brahms.

It is a comfort to have Opa and Oma so close. That's what Mutti says, though sometimes she presses her lips together as she says it. And a help, too, since Mutti works nights at the nursing home and needs someone to check on her boys.

Moonlight floods the bedroom, shimmers the walls, opalescent. It makes Helmuth think about God and heaven. "Heaven goes on forever, doesn't it?" he whispers to his brothers.

It's always Gerhard who answers these questions, never Hans. "For infinity," says Gerhard, who is nearly four years older than Helmuth and knows about heavenly things like planets and stars and suns and moons. Gerhard likes precise words and numbers. Hans, five years older and with little patience for deep discussions, is already asleep — or pretending to be.

"How can something never end?" says Helmuth. "How does it go on and on, for infinity?"

"It just does," says Gerhard. "That's the way God made the universe, without beginning or end, in all directions."

"In all directions," repeats Helmuth, awestruck. "It makes me dizzy just thinking about it." He stops, thinks about the feeling. It isn't dizzy, not exactly. "I'm floating," he says.

"Then stop," says Gerhard.

"I can't stop. I'm going to float away, right this minute. Hold on to me, Gerhard."

"Don't be ridiculous. You're not going to float away." *Ridiculous* is one of Gerhard's favorite words.

"I will, too."

"No, you won't. There's such a thing as gravity. God made that, too, you know."

"But I am floating," says Helmuth. He rolls toward Gerhard, clutches his arm.

Gerhard pulls away. "You're ridiculous." He gives Helmuth a heave, shoves him toward the center of the bed, says in a practical voice, "When you're old enough to think about infinity, it won't make you float. Now go to sleep."

"But I like floating," whispers Helmuth into the shimmering darkness, and he does. It makes him feel drawn to God, as if God is drawing him toward heaven. He doesn't say this to Gerhard, because he doesn't want the feeling to disappear. Besides, he knows that Gerhard has stopped listening. That's the way Gerhard is, so able to remain anchored in the world.

And so Helmuth keeps floating toward heaven until he falls fast asleep.

Another memory.

School is out, and Helmuth is sitting on the floor playing with lead soldiers. He is next door at his grandparents' flat, because Mutti is still asleep, tired from her night shift. He forms two lines, with blue-clad French soldiers dug in on one side and gray-clad Germans attacking mercilessly on the other, just as they had fought on the Western front during the Great War.

Gerhard comes in and squats next to Helmuth. "Your right flank is in trouble," he says, pointing. "You can't keep your soldiers in a straight line. You must circle the enemy."

Helmuth tenses his jaw. He wants to argue with Gerhard, such a know-it-all he is, but he also sees his brother is right. Gerhard is always right. And so Helmuth moves a handful of Germans to protect the right flank.

Gerhard nods in approval. "That's better. You can't think in straight lines, not if you want to win."

Gerhard plops down on the stiff, flat sofa and cracks open his Karl May adventure novel. Helmuth crouches over the battlefield. He signals a charge to encircle the French. He imitates the sounds of artillery, exploding grenades, storms of shrapnel. He imagines billows of smoke as the brave German infantry attack with all their might. Their faces are dust-covered, their uniforms tattered.

Opa returns from his midday walk with a newspaper he has bought from a stall in the market square. He stands over Helmuth. "Who's winning?"

"The Germans," says Helmuth.

"Are the grenade launchers on their way?"

Helmuth nods vigorously.

"Your strategy is working. The French are trapped!" says Opa. "As it should have been, my boy. We should never have lost that war."

Oma bustles from the kitchen, carrying a teapot. The sharp scent of peppermint hovers in the air.

Opa sits, flaps open the newspaper, mutters about the headlines. "More head-cracking," he says. "More fighting between Communists and the Social Democrats and the Nazis. Each party promises jobs and a stronger economy."

"Can it get any worse?" asks Oma.

"Only if that lunatic Hitler comes to power," says Opa. "That will mean only one thing. War. That warmonger wants to make his mark on history."

Oma sits next to Opa and says, "Hitler frightens me. Those crazy eyes of his! And the way he knows exactly how to bring a crowd to hysteria."

For a long while, Opa and Oma sit in silence, his hand cupped over hers. Helmuth knows they are afraid of Adolf

Hitler, the leader of the Nazi Party. But he doesn't understand why they fear a man who wants to fight for Germany and make it better.

Helmuth rocks back on his heels, looks at his toy soldiers. If he were a soldier, he would fight bravely for Germany, just as Hitler fought in the Great War. He knows he would. He wouldn't be afraid.

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Footsteps. A rustling sound at the heavy blue door. Helmuth takes a great gulp of air. His heart pounds in his ears. The small latched window slides open. Please, God, no, not the executioner.

He sees an eye, a nose, half a mouth, half a face. The morning guard. Helmuth breathes again. Part of a prisoner's punishment is not knowing his execution date.

For a second their eyes meet. The guard pushes a cup of lukewarm malt coffee and a hunk of dry bread through the window. The window snaps shut.

Helmuth rejoices with relief. Gives thanks for the meager breakfast, for living to eat another morning meal. He knows letters have been written on his behalf, asking for clemency. Perhaps today will bring good news.

He gnaws on the hard, stale bread. Thinks about the breakfasts Mutti made — rye toast slicked with red currant jam made with berries that Helmuth picked himself. For supper they ate

whatever Mutti could afford to cook that day, usually turnips and potatoes and cabbage. Helmuth and his brothers never went to bed hungry, Mutti made sure of that. But there were plenty of nights he wished for something more to eat.

He remembers how all of Germany was very poor and how Adolf Hitler promised to make everything better. Work and bread, that's what Hitler promised. Helmuth remembers the day Hitler was appointed chancellor, how the flat smelled of fresh rye bread and sausage and fried onions. Mutti celebrated. Everyone did.

∞

It is January 30, 1933, and nearly noon. It's almost dismissal time, and Helmuth is sitting on a hard wooden chair in the school auditorium. He is waiting for a special radio broadcast, a broadcast so important that the whole school has been gathered to listen.

At first his classmates sit quietly. As the minutes tick toward dismissal, the boys fidget, swinging their legs, tapping the floor with their heavy brown shoes, whispering and snickering when their teachers aren't looking.

Helmuth is filled with a sense of anticipation. Something big is about to happen, he can feel it, has felt it for days. It has something to do with Adolf Hitler, he is sure.

At the front of the auditorium, a fifth-grade teacher turns on the large radio. It crackles, and a stormy arpeggio

from the final movement of Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata* bursts forth. Its ferocity underscores the day's unquiet.

The teacher twists the knob, tunes in the German Reich station, the RRG. The radio squawks and then a newscaster speaks in a whisper. "*Guten Tag.*" Good day, he says as if he doesn't want to disturb anyone, as if he is about to apologize for interrupting the school day.

But he doesn't apologize. Instead, his booming voice fills the auditorium. "Reich president Paul von Hindenburg has just formed a new government! Adolf Hitler, leader of the National Socialist Party, has been sworn into office as the new chancellor of the Reich!"

Martial music swells from the speakers. Something inside Helmuth swells, too. It has happened! Hitler is chancellor!

This is big news.

The room buzzes. Several older boys — sixth graders — leap to their feet. They clap one another on the back, thrust out their right arms in the Nazi salute, and bark, "*Heil Hitler.*"

Helmuth is amazed at their boldness, even more amazed that not one teacher grabs them by the collar and shakes them, tells them to sit, to mind their manners.