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The English German Girl

Written by Jake Wallis Simons

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THE ENGLISH GERMAN GIRL

Jake Wallis Simons

Polygon

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To the children who escaped from the Nazis on
the Kindertransport, and to their families.
And to my own children, Libi, Isaac and Imogen.

I catch sight of my face in the mirror of a shop, and am horrified to see that I am smiling. You can't help smiling, in such beautiful weather. The trams are going up and down the Kleiststrasse, just as usual. They, and the people on the pavement, and the tea-cosy dome of the Nollendorfplatz station have an air of curious familiarity, of striking resemblance to something one remembers as normal and pleasant in the past – like a very good photograph. No. Even now I can't altogether believe that any of this has really happened.

—Christopher Isherwood

PART ONE

31 January 1933, Berlin

1

The grand city of Berlin lies milky in the morning light. Amid the avenues and alleyways, the tram stops and department stores, a little girl by the name of Rosa Klein hurries through the freezing air to buy some rolls for breakfast. She turns onto the Wilhelmstraße, a trail of vapour from her mouth lingering in the air beneath a canopy of tram cables, and, a little breathless, reaches the Konditorei and heaves at the heavy door. A little bell chimes, and a cloud of delicious, moist scent blossoms into the street, floating like a blessing towards the dogs scrounging in the gutters. Rosa enters the bakery, a Reichsmark note clenched in her fist like an autumn leaf, brimming with pride; she is not usually allowed out alone, after all she's only nine, but there is not a crumb of bread in the entire apartment, and she was awake anyway, and Mama decided that it's time for her to spread her wings, or at least start to unfurl them.

In the Aladdin's cave of browns and golds, with mirrors multiplying her every move, Rosa Klein approaches the counter. The steely-eyed Fräulein in a black-and-white uniform cocks her head curiously, twisting a paper bag in pink, chapped fingers. Rosa smiles politely but no such smile is returned; instead the Fräulein rearranges the Mandeltorte, shuffles the Apfelkuchen and wipes down the surfaces, which are already spotless. Only then does she acknowledge the little girl in the blue felt hat, raising her eyebrows the tiniest of fractions. Rosa smiles understandingly, for the Fräulein is clearly a very busy lady, asks for a dozen Schrippen rolls and presents her Reichsmark note. The Fräulein speaks not a word as she slots the rolls into a bag, places them on the counter and activates an ornate cash register, which rattles, whirrs and produces a single ring. Then suddenly she says, wait a moment, and reaches for her lapel where there glints a small golden pin. A deft movement of her fingers brings it away from the fabric, and she places it on the counter, gesturing for the girl to take it – Rosa, confused, accepts the gift, enacts an awkward bow and makes her way to the door. She heaves it open, the bell chimes again, and a bracing gust of air freshens her face; she responds to the Fräulein's salute by mumbling Heil Hintern, as her big brother Heinrich taught her, then

hurries from the Konditorei, clutching the Schrippen, into the wintry watery light.

As she runs home with the Schrippen in her satchel and the lapel pin cold in her palm, and her curls bounce like the hair of a clown from beneath her blue felt hat with the big flower on the side which Papa says butterflies will land on come summer, a shadow passes across Rosa's face. How clean the bakery was, how spotless; it made her feel dirty just for being there, just for breathing, just for having hair, just for being composed of flesh and blood rather than perfect surfaces and pure, moist bread. As for the Fräulein, well she fitted right in, cool as the stainless-steel trays, manipulating the loaves with fingers mercury-cold, her white cap like an ice-cap upon the undulating straw-coloured waves, her apron white and starched and stiff against the creaseless black of her skirt. Yes, that bakery is beginning to seem a little sinister, and so, come to think of it, is the Fräulein, although it isn't so nice to think like that, she should always think the best of everybody, or that's what Mama says at least.

As she turns onto the grand boulevards of Tiergarten and her nose grows pink and chilly, she feels a little confused because the symbol on the pin in her palm has appeared all over Berlin since yesterday. In practically every window it stares, an angry swirl, spinning mechanically in its pure white disc in the centre of a scarlet rectangle, hundreds of them, like wheels in a vast machine, row upon row spinning all along the Tiergarten, even hanging from the lamp-posts, and when she gets home she will want to know the meaning of this! She takes a short cut and is cast into shadow as she veers down an alley, the slopey floor clip-clopping its response to her flapping feet; then she emerges once again into the light, arrives breathless at her front door and rings, and rings again, until finally the door is opened by Frau Schulz, and Rosa cries, Schrippen im Anmarsch! Schrippen im Anmarsch! Here comes bread! and hurries up the polished staircase to give it to her mama.

Frau Schulz shivers, rubs her shoulders and shuts the door against the biting Berlin air. Rosa takes off her little coat and flings it over the banisters, and the maid gathers it up for her, following her pattering patent shoes into the spacious, high-ceilinged, high-windowed apartment, full of air and light, with a fine fire roaring in the fireplace, and rugs imported from the Orient stretching luxuriantly underfoot, and blond oak panels lining the walls to chest height. The breakfast things are all laid out beautifully, gleaming even, reflected in the mammoth gilt-edged mirror above the fireplace. Rosa hands the rolls to her mama

and climbs up onto one of the high-backed chairs with the stripes that she likes, looking intently at Papa, and what she really wants to know is:

—What is the meaning of this?

She holds out her hand, displaying the pin like a golden bullet; but Papa is not paying attention, he is talking to Mama, who is standing with her hands on the back of her chair, rolling her eyes.

—Come on now, Otto, she is saying, come on.

—But it's just not possible, says Papa. The man is a hypocrite. However can he remain in his position as if nothing has happened?

—Ah, stop being so anxious, replies his wife. Wilhelm is nothing but an honest policeman. Politics has nothing to do with his job.

—Of course it does, Inga. The police force is riddled with politics. You saw how they behaved during the riots on the Fasanenstraße. It's a matter of principle.

—Really, Liebling, really. This will not last, that's what everybody is saying, you said so yourself. You shouldn't worry so.

By this time Rosa is sitting on her father's knee, her dress tumbling in a fan over the edge of the seat, tugging at his slippery necktie, and he is benignly swatting her hands away.

—Well at least now we have Schrippen, he says, a morning without Schrippen is almost as bad as a morning without tea.

—I need an entire pot of coffee this morning, says Inga, after last night.

Last night – suddenly Rosa remembers. It had been forgotten along with her dreams, but now it all comes back. Woken by a commotion outside, she got up, straightened her nightdress and padded along the dark-wooded hall into the drawing room. Papa and Mama were standing side by side at the window, their hands clasped behind their backs, gazing down at the Wilhelmstraße, where a flickering ocean of flaming torches could be seen, and marching music and drums could dimly be heard, together with the roar of massed voices. Papa passed his hand over his sleek hair and said: one cannot pretend that this new Reichschancellor is not bad news, but in reality, my dear, he is only a figurehead, he cannot survive very long. At this point he drew the curtains in a strange sort of way, and Mama lit a cigarette; Rosa got a funny feeling behind her knees and crept back to bed, where she burrowed into the blankets and, to the sound of her parents' voices, fell into a fitful sleep.

—Was it a fire last night, Papa? she says.

—It was nothing, Püppchen. Your mother and I just stayed up too late, talking.

—Why? says Rosa.

—Because to talk, says her father, is good for the soul.

He lifts Rosa from his knee and places her on a chair.

—There, he says, have one of your Schrippen. Now, has anybody seen Heinrich? It's not like him to miss breakfast.

—I think he came back late last night, Liebling, says Inga. Ah, that boy.

—How late? says Papa. I'll get to the bottom of it when he deigns to make an appearance, that's for sure. And here he is missing the Schrippen. Frau Schulz, the tea please? And a pot of coffee for my wife.

—Hedi, says Inga, come here! Oh, Hedi, please. Be a good girl.

Hedi, being quite good but only two, slips from her chair and toddles off after Frau Schulz on her short plump legs, her little white dress ruffling in all directions like a moving heap of doilies, and Mama strides up behind her and gathers her squealing into her arms and returns her to the breakfast table, pfumpf on her nappy. And Hedi slips down again and makes for the hall again, and Mama, slightly impatient now, gathers her up once again and firmly places her at table, ignoring her yelps and fixing a puff pastry Schillerlocke in her hand.

As Papa reaches for the silver teapot with one hand and smooths his moustache nattily with the other, and the sun falls upon his slicked-back hair, his eye is caught by the glint on Rosa's palm – finally – and he notices what is lying there – finally – and he takes it from her and gets to his feet. Dropping his napkin to the carpet he crosses to the fireplace, holding the pin delicately before him in long, surgeon's fingers.

—Where did you come upon this little thing, Püppchen?

—From the bakery Fräulein.

Her father pauses.

—You must not go back there, he says.

—Why?

—No questions now. Frau Schulz, place the Schrippen in the fire.

—In the fire?

—We have some Schillerlocken, do we not? That will do. And some green herring or something, I don't know. Just bring whatever we have for the moment, yes, Frau Schulz? And hurry please, Rosa needs to go to school.

Frau Schulz, looking somewhat bewildered, gathers up the Schrippen and takes them through to the pantry.

—Don't you think you may be over-reacting, dear? says Inga in a low voice. Rosa did purchase the Schrippen specially, you know.

Klein turns to Rosa, sees her anxious expression.

—Püppchen, next time you see such a Hakenkreuz, close your eyes and have nothing to do with it, do you hear?

—Yes, Papa. But what does it mean?

—Sit up straight, Püppchen. No questions now.

Well, all this seems like madness to Frau Schulz, but then this type of madness has become commonplace in the household of late. First it was the newspapers: Herr Klein instructed her to cancel his beloved subscriptions, every one, saying the papers contained nothing but nonsense cover to cover, and she said, are you sure, even the *Berliner Tageblatt*, and he snapped at her, yes, Frau Schulz, I am quite sure. It was unfathomable – to think of it, Herr Klein without his newspapers! More curious still, he ordered her to set up a subscription with the *Jüdische Rundschau*, even though he cannot stand that newspaper, he had been saying so for years. He is losing his mind, in Frau Schulz's opinion. How about last week: she was walking down the hall towards the kitchen late at night, getting a drink of water, when she heard a strange noise from the drawing room, so naturally she went to investigate. The door was ajar, she put her head round it and who did she spy but Herr Klein, alone, hunched over on the floor, shirt all untucked and with no collar on even, a cigarette clamped between his teeth, a screwdriver in his hand, dismantling the wireless, yes, dismantling the wireless! And burning the walnut casing in the fire. Very methodically and everything, in his surgeon's manner, but there was something frightening about it, breaking up the wireless, now what will she have to listen to in the long evenings when the children are in bed and Herr Klein and his wife are at the theatre? She has never been one for books, and these days everyone should have a wireless, should they not? Then Herr Klein looked sharply up from the screws and walnut panels on the floor and saw her, he looked as if he was going to scold her, but he said, Frau Schulz, dispose of this dreckige Goebbels' Schnauze, would you please? And, ignoring her alarm, he strode past her and slammed the door to his study, to work on his book no doubt, he is obsessed by that book at the moment, and the smell of cologne and cigarette smoke hung in the air, and more than a little Schnaps, as well as a positively poisonous feeling. What language, she thought to herself, dirty Goebbels' gob indeed, not the kind of phrase that she was accustomed to from Herr Klein, but

what was she to do? So she cleared up the remaining bits of her poor precious wireless and went directly to bed.

Frau Schulz: she has been working for the Kleins for several years now, with her starched apron that never stains and her widely spaced grey eyes. She is, Otto Klein felt at first, too angular to be a maid, maids should be softer, more homely, and Frau Schulz is not soft or homely in the slightest, but she is extremely competent, she runs the house like clockwork. Yes, the only thing that stands between Frau Schulz and the Aryan ideal is her chestnut hair, several shades away from blonde, which she wears in a propeller bow, black for weekdays, white for weekends; she is a woman whose attractiveness is eclipsed by her preoccupation with getting things done. Yet that is a good quality in a maid, in Klein's opinion, you don't want one who gets above her station. Often when he visits his colleagues to play a rubber of bridge and is exposed to the sorts of maids that some people are forced to put up with, he thanks his lucky stars for Frau Schulz.

The children like her too, particularly Rosa, who is terribly fond of the maid, which at times seems to bother her mother, who appears to feel a little dethroned, shall we say, but in Klein's opinion there is nothing to worry about: better a maid she loves than a maid she loathes! And Inga, reluctantly, tends to concede at this point, in the face of such irrefutable male logic. But there is enough to think about at the moment without worrying about maids and servants, there is an overwhelming quantity of work at the hospital, and several colleagues are now card-carrying members of the Party – the expressions they wear in the corridors, it is practically laughable – no, it doesn't help, this political madness that is blighting the proud face of the nation, the sooner it passes the better. But where on earth is Heinrich?

Heinrich is, somewhat guiltily, allowing himself to wonder what it would be like to kiss Frau Schulz. Lying in bed, he calls through the door, I will be there directly, just give me a moment. These illicit thoughts make him feel rather schmutzig, but he can't help but wonder what her mouth would feel like upon his own, ach, it makes him feel sick to consider it, incestuous almost, kissing the maid Frau Schulz. Yet at once somehow attractive. Then again the fantasy collapses in the face of reality, for when he lays eyes upon her he realises that he would not like to kiss her in real life, not at all, with her dry lips and unnerving stare. It was Klaus who put these ideas into his head, he is always talking about her, in fact he is obsessed, the only reason he comes to

visit is to stare at Frau Schulz as she comes in and out with tea, his mouth slightly ajar like a lizard. Heinrich can still recall the expression on his face when she dropped a spoon and bent over to retrieve it – his eyes bulged like eggs and he gulped visibly, it was funny, of course – ach, to hell with Klaus after last night, the coward, and now Heinrich has a splitting headache to show for it, and there is blood on the pillow, and he does not know how to explain it to his parents.

—Goodness gracious, Heinrich, what on earth happened to you? says Inga, alarmed.

—It's nothing, Mutter, just a graze. I took a tumble playing handball and—

—Where were you last night? says Klein. You came in awfully late. You gave your mother and me cause for concern.

—I was just visiting Klaus, Vater . . .

—Fighting again, says Klein.

—Of course not, Vater. Just playing handball. Are there no Schrippen this morning?

—No, this morning there are Schillerlocken. You won, of course.

—I did my best.

—Liebling, you should not encourage him, says Inga.

—I was referring to the handball, says Klein.

—Ah, says Inga, come on.

Klein glances at the grandfather clock and gets to his feet, taking a final gulp of tea.

—I must go, he says, time waits for no man. I will be a little late this evening, dear, I am meeting the publisher from the Jüdische Verlag, I have to submit to him the manuscript. Those green herrings were perfect this morning, Frau Schulz. Goodbye everyone, goodbye.

—Can you teach me to ride my bicycle after school, Papa? says Rosa, and Papa promises that he will and leaves the room. Already his thoughts are with his work, and it is a relief when, after a smooth journey, he arrives a few kilometres north, in the district of Wedding, where his beloved Rudolf-Virchow Hospital is located.

2

This week Klein has an extremely full schedule; there are several patients still in the hospital whom he operated on last week, and more operations scheduled over the coming days. And he senses that his position is increasingly under pressure; he must fight to keep his job, prove

himself, demonstrate that he is first and foremost a German and a doctor and an accomplished surgeon, and not Jewish in the sense that the Ostjuden are Jewish, indeed, far from it, far from it.

On a normal day his first task would be to complete a round of his patients in the wards, striding with squeaking soles over the shiny green floors, stethoscope bobbing, pausing to read a chart, or take a pulse, or enquire after a particular patient's bowel movements overnight. This is his favourite part of the job, at these times he recalls just why he trained as a doctor – the patients rely on him, and he is confident of his ability to help, and this puts a power in his voice, a certainty in his stride, and as he strokes his fingers across his natty moustache and peers at them with his sharp, clever eyes, their poor heads sunken in the pillows like potatoes, he can see that his mere presence is bringing comfort. His patients have become accustomed to these morning rounds; it brings stability to their day knowing that their doctor will be there every morning with his imposing gait, cheery belly-laughs, fingertip knowledge. But this morning, as he enters the wards, they are being visited already by a younger doctor with circular wire-rimmed spectacles and a wave of blond hair swept back across his head. Klein approaches and politely enquires what is happening here – the man introduces himself as Dr Möller, informs Klein that the head physician, the Chefarzt, wishes to see him and turns his back.

Unnerved, Klein makes his way to the head physician's office, takes a seat in the uncomfortable wooden chair and waits nervously, telling himself that he has nothing to hide; and then the Chefarzt himself enters, does not offer him a drink, does not enquire after his family, sits down and begins his speech: in the hospital we are attempting to create an Aryan atmosphere, but you are not being sacked of course, after all you saw action as a Frontkämpfer during the war, we are just changing your position in the hospital, for the good of the patients you understand, who will be best treated by a Volksgenosse, a national comrade, and at all times the well-being of the patients must be foremost in our minds. The sun pricks on the Chefarzt's lapel, on a small golden Hakenkreuz pin; he never used to wear it, or not in Klein's presence at least. The Chefarzt, reiterating his point, says that sadly Klein is ein Deutscher aber ein Jude. Klein nods, mouth opening and closing drily, and, most uncharacteristically, cannot think of a thing to say. He clears his throat once or twice and strokes his moustache, trying to muster his sense of authority, trying to get his bearings; but still no words come, so he backs out of the office and closes the door behind him.

As he makes his squeaking way back to his own office, trembling and pale, he is aware of Dr Möller's upright figure striding towards him, white coat whipping against the metal legs of the beds, clipboard perched jauntily against his hip, his circular lenses white in the light, and the two men ignore one another, icily; Klein, his moustache bristling, holds his head higher as Dr Möller's stony visage glides past his ear like a ship. Then he is back in the privacy of his office – he shuts the door heavily and stands there for a moment clenching his hands to his temples. Suddenly, with rapid movements, he crosses to his desk and pulls out one of the drawers. It shoots from its socket and tumbles onto the floor, spilling neatly piled papers and stationery across the carpet. He kicks the papers into the air, falls to his knees, picks up a handful of pencils and begins to break them into halves, and quarters, and eighths, it doesn't take long before not a single pencil remains intact. Then he sweeps the debris back into the drawer, crams the papers into the wastepaper basket, pours himself a shot of Schnaps and throws it down his throat; finally he collapses into his chair and gazes at the ceiling, massaging his forehead. Gradually his agitation settles and he tries to marshal his thoughts. This is not something that he cannot endure. He did not survive the war, battle to the very pinnacle of his profession, just to be discouraged by the prevailing idiocy of the times. He will lie low, bide his time until it passes. He gets to his feet, removes his white coat and hangs it on the peg, loops his stethoscope into a ball and pushes it into the pocket. Then he sits at his desk again, spreading his long fingers on the green-topped surface and staring at them in silence, his white coat hanging on the back of the door like a ghost. From the window, street sounds break the quietude: motorcars backfiring, trams jolting, shouts, laughs, barks, conversations, snatches of music, and if Klein were to get to his feet and look out of the window he would behold Hakenkreuz after Hakenkreuz, as far as the eye can see. But he does not; he remains sitting at his desk in silence, staring at his hands. Somebody has put a pile of paperwork, three fists in height, on the desk of the obliging Herr Doktor Klein, who will have lots of spare time now that his schedule has been cleared of patients. And of course, your salary will be altered in line with your new position, it is only a token alteration, a small reduction, you do understand, Herr Klein, we must keep in mind at all times that this is for the good of the hospital, for the good of the patients, and the well-being of our patients should be our foremost concern, should it not?

There is an urgent knock at the door and Klein calls his permission to enter; a white-coated figure rushes in and closes the door hastily behind him.

—Herr Doktor Klein. May I have a word?

—Of course, Doktor Fehr, take a seat.

—I see you are not wearing your white coat and stethoscope?

—It seems there is no need at the moment.

—They have taken your patients away?

—For the moment, yes.

—Me too.

Oskar Fehr removes his spectacles and places a thumb and finger on his eyelids. He is a senior doctor, an ophthalmologist, a surgeon even, not as accomplished as Herr Doktor Otto Klein but distinguished none the less; normally he is industrious of activity, deliberate of movement and intense of disposition, yet this morning he is in a state of distress.

—Because of our racial origin, he says, a little pointlessly.

—I would suppose so, Klein replies.

—This can't do. This can't do. These are our careers, Doktor Klein. We are Germans. They have cut your pay?

—A little.

—Me too. Those Hurensöhne.

—Doktor Fehr, calm yourself. You still have your private practice. Would you like a glass of Schnaps?

—Not for me. I cannot drink in the morning, you know that. Yes, my private practice, I still have that. Would you care to join me for lunch, Herr Doktor?

—Yes, that would be grand. Shall we say half past twelve?

—I have a mountain of paperwork to do. An absolute mountain. Do you think this state of affairs will be permanent? My wife is talking of emigration.

—Doktor Fehr, it will not do to panic. I'm sure this madness will blow over. Haven't you read Artur Landsberger? Almost fifty per cent of doctors in Berlin are of Jewish origin. They can't do without us.

—Yes, yes, of course, you're absolutely correct. I suppose this represents the worst of it.

—Let's hope so, says Klein, smoothing his collar.

—It's not unbearable, of course, says Fehr. It's just the humiliation of it. Such a humiliation.

—Just focus on the bigger picture, replies Klein. This will all be over before long.

—Yes, you are absolutely correct. Very well. I shall make a start on that paperwork.

—That sounds like a good idea.

—Goodbye, Doktor Klein.

—See you at lunch time.

The door closes smartly, Fehr's footsteps squeak away and all is still once more. That's the habit of an officer, thinks Klein, to keep a level head and inspire others with confidence, regardless of the fact that one may be falling apart oneself.

3

As Rosa sits in her classroom next to her best friend Frieda Fischer, the teacher's voice washing around her, she thinks about how she went out this morning, by herself, for the first time, reliving each detail proudly. Usually she goes with Mama to buy the groceries, and when it comes to buying bread Mama prefers to shop not in the upmarket Konditorei, but in the Jewish quarter, the Scheunenviertel, which is some distance from their apartment, but Mama says it is worth the journey to support the impoverished Ostjuden. Not that Mama cares about God as such, pfui, she is an atheist, and Rosa has heard her declare it many times to anyone who will listen, and even some who won't, that is the sort of person Mama is; as she always says, I am someone who is more impressed by Goethe than by God, more enamoured of Bildung than of the Bible, more Mozart than Moses, and always will be. Nevertheless she wishes to support the Jews in some small way, even the Ostjuden, who, with their hunched backs and their papery skin, and their inability to understand proper German Hochdeutsch, appear like people from another age, different from the respectable reformist types who frequent the Spandauer Viertel.

But Rosa loves the Scheunenviertel. She loves wandering through the teeming streets with that strange mix of feelings, carrying her little shopping basket daintily by her side, holding Mama's hand, placing one square heel clip-clop in front of the other; and she always feels inexplicably warm, as in the thermal springs in Wiesbaden where the family spend their Christmases, only the Scheunenviertel warmth comes from a geyser hidden deep within.

Now Rosa is no longer in the classroom, she is in the Scheunenviertel, holding Mama's hand, tingling as she gazes up at the ribbed golden dome of the Neue Synagogue, resplendent against the blue ribbons of sky,