

I looked at Mama and blurted out, “Do we have to leave because we’re Jewish?”

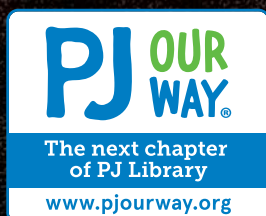
BERLIN, APRIL 1938. One night, eight-year-old Käfer Avigdor uses his specialty toilet-paper roll binoculars to spy on his Mama and Aunt Charlotte. The whispered conversation he overhears alerts him to a danger he didn’t know existed and starts him rethinking who he really is and where he belongs.

Within hours, Käfer and his family flee their comfortable life. In a desperate race to stay one step ahead of the Nazis, Käfer is called on to be braver and more resourceful than he ever imagined possible. But will it be enough?

Boy from Berlin is based on real people and actual events.

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Boy from Berlin

Nancy McDonald



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To Heinz

Who having read this book would have declared,

"I wrote that."

Part One

Berlin, April 1938

Chapter 1

Something was definitely afoot. Most of the servants, including Nanny, had been given the evening off. Just Ursula, the maid, and Marta, our cook, remained on duty. I couldn't remember when that had ever happened. That's why I crept down from the nursery, leaving Peter and Ellen doing their homework. I planned to use my spy skills to find out what was going on.

Mama didn't see me. I hid in the shadows on the landing. But I had a clear view of her through the bannister. I looked through the binoculars Aunt Charlotte had helped me make from two empty toilet paper rolls. Mama stood in the drawing room, smoking a cigarette. As always, she looked elegant. Her curly chestnut hair was swept back from her face and she wore a black fitted dress with a red belt and matching high-heeled shoes. But even from a distance, I could see she was agitated. She paced back and forth across the Turkish carpet. And every few minutes she looked at her wristwatch, the gold one Father had made her himself, a gift for their first wedding anniversary.

The doorbell rang. It was so loud, I almost jumped. I shrank back deeper into the dark and watched Ursula cross the front hall, her shoes clicking on the shiny parquet floor. Ursula was new. She always did as Mama asked, but her attitude was faintly superior. Almost as if she was better than Mama.

As she opened the front door, cool air rushed in. It had that sharp, fresh smell that promised rain.

“Good evening, Fräulein Charlotte.” She greeted my aunt pleasantly enough then self-consciously patted her thin blonde hair, which was tidily braided in coils and pinned securely.

Aunt Charlotte! Mama hadn’t mentioned she was coming. Maybe we could play hide and seek after she and Mama visited. Like we’d done on Saturday. I adored my aunt. We all did. Mama called her a maverick. I wasn’t exactly sure what that meant, but she didn’t particularly care what other people thought of her. And she was the only woman I knew who regularly wore trousers. Tonight she must have come directly from work, though, because she had on a severe grey suit. She looked serious.

“Good evening, Ursula.” Aunt Charlotte had a throaty voice that commanded attention.

Ursula stood a bit straighter. “Frau Avigdor has been waiting for you.”

At the sound of the doorbell, Mama had put out her cigarette and come to the drawing-room doorway. She hugged Aunt Charlotte and kissed her on both cheeks.

She turned to Ursula. “Thank you. You may have the rest of the evening off, and tell Cook she can go too, as soon as she’s laid out dinner.”

“Very good, Madame. I’ll be back at eleven o’clock.”

Ursula turned, smiled slyly, and disappeared with Aunt Charlotte’s coat and hat. Mama and my aunt walked arm in arm into the drawing room. Mama slid the door firmly closed behind them.

Now what? I wouldn’t be able to hear what they were saying from where I was hiding. But with the servants out, Father still at work, and Peter and Ellen safely on the third floor, I decided to risk eavesdropping. I crept down the stairs, careful to avoid the few creaky spots, and crouched down silently, my ear pressed against the door.

I was in luck. They talked quietly, but by concentrating hard, I could just make out their words.

“Else, I’ve had a long day and I’m tired. What’s so important you couldn’t tell me over the telephone?”

“We’re leaving tonight, Lotte. Rifat says we can’t wait any longer.”

My heart started to pound. I hoped Mama and Aunt Charlotte wouldn’t hear it.

“Tonight! Do the children know?”

“No, we didn’t want them to say anything to their friends. Once Rifat gets home, we’ll have dinner and tell them. We’ll pack up a few things and be gone before the servants get back.” Mama paused. “Lotte, for the last time, will you come with us?”

Aunt Charlotte sighed. “We’ve been through this, Else. I can’t leave Berlin now. My work is too important. Even if I could, where would I get a job? Where would I live?”

“You know you can stay with our friends until you find something. It isn’t safe here anymore, Lotte. We’ve already lost our citizenship and Rifat thinks it won’t be long before we lose the house and everything in it. And for you it’s even more dangerous.”

I frowned. What was so dangerous about working as a secretary in an automobile factory?

“Why tonight, Else?”

Silence. Then Mama, her voice lowered, said, “Yesterday, Peter had a new teacher, a Herr Vogel. He wore a Nazi Party uniform. He made Peter’s friend—you know him, Miriam Hirsch’s son Solly—stand at the front of the room while he pointed out how he was ‘different’ because he was Jewish.”

My aunt gasped.

“How long before that happens to Peter? Or Ellen? Or little Heinz?” I heard the catch in Mama’s voice. “And now that Peter is ten it would draw attention if he didn’t join the *Deutsches Jungvolk*. We can’t stay in Germany.” What did Mama mean? Peter couldn’t wait to be part of the German Youth and go hiking and camping with the older boys.

Mama paused, and when she spoke again it was in her most persuasive voice. “Berlin has changed, Lotte. You know this. Nazi soldiers strutting in the streets. Hitler Youth swearing allegiance to that man. More restrictions for Jews every week.”

More silence as my aunt absorbed this.

“But your friends, Else, they’re taking in the five of you already,” said Aunt Charlotte slowly. “They won’t want a sixth. Don’t worry. I’ll be all right here until you’re settled in your own home. Then, I promise, I’ll join you.”

“You must, Lotte. Your life depends on it. I can’t live without you and neither can the children. You know how they treasure you.”

At that, both Mama and my aunt choked back sobs. The grandfather clock struck just as a motor car turned into the drive. Father was home! I scurried back up the stairs to the third floor, my mind in a whirl.

The nursery was my favourite room in the house. It was cozy with its light green walls and multicoloured quilts. The lamps on all three bedside tables gave the room a warm glow. Outside, the setting sun

streaked the clouds pink. New leaves covered the linden tree just outside the front window and the soft cooing of a rock dove floated through the open window.

Peter lay on his stomach in bed, reading. Ellen—or Bibi as we mostly called her—was crouched at her dollhouse, putting up the miniature framed portrait of Adolf Hitler that her friend Anneliese had given her that afternoon. When she'd seen it, Mama had pursed her lips and turned away without a word. There were posters of Hitler all over Berlin. He promised to save Germany, but Mama and Father didn't like him at all.

"Are we Jewish?" I blurted out.

Peter looked up and rolled his dark eyes. "Of course not," he said in that superior tone he often used with me. "What would make you think that?"

"Mama just told Aunt Charlotte that we're leaving Berlin—"

"Leaving Berlin?" Bibi interrupted. "Why?"

"I don't know. But I think it has something to do with being Jewish."

"Did Mama say we're Jewish?" Peter closed his book with a snap and sat up. He swung his legs around, put his feet on the floor, and stared at me.

"Not exactly, but—"

"You're sure you heard Mama say we're leaving?" Bibi interrupted again.

"Yes, tonight—"

"We can't just leave tonight," Peter cut me off. "My science fair is in two weeks. Papa said he would come. I know he'll be impressed with the microscope I made using fuse wire and water. It's *ingenious*." Peter was a year older than Bibi and two years older than me. He liked to use big words we didn't understand.

Bibi suddenly remembered her upcoming art show. "You must have heard wrong, Käfer," she said, using the nickname Mama had given me because I'd been born on May 1, when the *Maikäfers*—May bugs—appeared. "Mama and Papa have to see my painting of the Elephant Gate at the Zoo. Herr Weber says my brushwork has really improved."

"Mama said we were leaving," I insisted. "And she talked about Jews—"

"We're not Jewish," Peter said definitely. "I think Papa and Mama would have told us if we were. Besides, we don't go to a Jewish school or to church on Saturday."

"But—"

Bibi suddenly put her fingers to her lips. "Hush," she said. We heard Mama's footsteps coming up the stairs.

"Don't let on I told you anything," I begged them.

"Maybe you should stop being a snoop," Peter said in a loud whisper.

"I'm not a snoop," I shot back indignantly. "I'm a spy."

"Not a very good one."

"Better than you."

Mama poked her head inside the door. "What are you three talking about?" Her voice sounded unnaturally cheerful to me. She didn't wait for an answer. "Papa is home and it's time for dinner. Come."

We looked at each other and instantly formed a silent pact. Neither of them would give me away. We followed Mama wordlessly down the stairs.

There was no sign of Aunt Charlotte or Father, but the dining room table was set and Marta had left cold cuts and salad on the sideboard.

"You sit down, Käfer. I'll make you a plate." Mama tousled my hair.

Then, suddenly, Father was there. Wearing his trademark navy suit. He wasn't particularly tall, but he filled the room. Mama's friends declared him dashing and clustered around him at parties, hanging on his every word. I tried not to attract too much of his attention. Ever. I always seemed to annoy him. I looked at my plate as Mama put it down in front of me.

Father stroked his sleek, dark moustache as he surveyed us quickly. He was very proud of the hair on his upper lip.

"You're all very quiet." He helped himself to some food then took his place at the head of the table. "Is there something I should know?"

He didn't wait for us to answer. "Your Mother and I have something to tell you." He looked at Mama. "We're going away tonight. All of us. To The Hague."

"The Hague? In Holland?" said Peter, doing a good impression of someone who hadn't already heard the news we were leaving Berlin. Perhaps he really hadn't believed me.

"On a holiday, Papa?" Peter continued.

"Not a holiday. I've been offered a better job."

"We're moving?" Peter asked, brushing back a forelock that always fell into his eyes.

“Yes.”

“But what about school? And our friends?” Bibi wanted to know.

“You’ll go to a new school, and you’ll make new friends, Schatzi. You’re good at it,” Papa smiled. But Bibi, her brow furrowed, didn’t notice. She was probably thinking about her two best friends, Anne-liese and Erika. They were all “blood sisters,” she’d told me. They’d pricked their fingers until they drew blood, then rubbed them together.

“But my science fair—”

“We’ll miss that, Peter. And Bibi’s art show. I’m sorry.”

Into the silence that followed I looked at Mama and blurted out, “Do we have to leave because we’re Jewish?”

Mama’s mouth dropped slightly, but she quickly closed it.

Father turned to me. His voice was tight. “What is the matter with you, Heinz? I told you. I have a new job. That’s it. No more questions. Any of you.” His steely gaze moved from me to Bibi to Peter. “Eat your dinner. Then Mama will help you pack. We’ve got a long journey ahead of us and I want to leave by ten o’clock.”

I ducked my head and shrank down in my seat. But the servants wouldn’t be back until later! No goodbye to Nanny, who always had a special hug for me. Or Marta with her treats when I came in from the park. Or Fritz, who let me wear his cap and sit behind the steering wheel while I pretended to drive Father’s motor car.

Mama reached over and squeezed my hand. I looked at her and she gave me a little smile. But I wasn’t consoled. I’d seen the look in her eyes when I’d said the word *Jewish*.

After dinner, we helped Mama drag the suitcases out from the back of the cupboard. I hadn’t used mine since I’d gone to Rome with her and Father over a year ago. It looked a lot smaller than I remembered.

“How am I going to fit all my things in there?”

Bibi and Peter were staring at their suitcases, and I knew they were thinking the same thing.

“We’re not taking everything now,” explained Mama. “We’re packing as if we’re going on a holiday. It’s spring in The Hague, so take some of your lighter clothes.”

“What about our toys and books?” asked Bibi.

“Just take one of each. Your favourites.”

“But, Mama—”

“Don’t argue, Bibi.” Mama sighed. “I’ll get Ursula to send us the rest once we’re settled. Come now, let’s get going.”

I didn’t much care what clothes Mama chose, but I wasn’t going anywhere without Funny Bunny Blue! Aunt Charlotte had brought him back from England when I was born. His real name was Peter Rabbit, but I called him Funny Bunny Blue because of his blue coat. He slept with me every night even though Peter said eight was much too old to be cuddling a stuffed animal.

I grabbed him from under my pillow. Mama smiled. A real smile. “Of course you can take your bunny, Käfer,” she said. “Now, let’s see what else you’ll need. Then I’ll help you and Peter, Bibi.”

We spent the next few hours debating what to take and what to leave behind. I felt like I was in a dream.

Then Father called from the landing downstairs. “Are you nearly done? We need to leave now.”

“We’re coming, Rifat,” Mama called back. She closed the top of my suitcase and snapped the two brass clasps shut. “Peter, you can take your own bag. Bibi, I’ll carry yours and Käfer’s.”

“Käfer, your book!” said Bibi.

I ran back to my bedside table and picked up *Emil and the Detectives*. Nanny and I had been reading it together. How would I find out if Emil got his money back from the mysterious Herr Grundeis? Emil was smart and brave. I longed to be like him. Then I knew Father would notice me. In a good way.

Father was waiting for us in the front hall. On the round, marble-topped table, beside a vase filled with tall pink cherry boughs, was a little pile of white envelopes. The top one had *Nanny* written on it in Father’s large, neat script. Gifts for the servants. Like Father gave them at Christmas.

Mama glanced at them, then at Father. They exchanged a look filled with private thoughts.

“Here, let me take that,” Father said, reaching for my suitcase. “All ready?”