

The book cover features a detailed illustration in a muted, greyish-green color palette. In the foreground, two hands are shown clasped together, one from the left and one from the right, suggesting a firm grip or support. The background depicts a city street scene with a vintage trolley or tram in the middle ground. Behind the trolley, a row of multi-story buildings is visible, with a prominent swastika symbol on a flag flying from one of the buildings. The sky is filled with dark, billowing clouds and several silhouettes of military aircraft flying across it. The overall atmosphere is somber and historical.

THE END OF THE LINE

Sharon E. McKay



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WHEN STRANGERS WERE SAVIORS

Today, children are often told, “Don’t talk to strangers.” Not long ago, however, strangers were thought of as rescuers.

In World War II, when the German army invaded most of Europe, concern for the safety of children resulted in millions and millions of them being hurled into the arms of strangers.

This is the story of a Jewish girl in Holland who found sanctuary in the home of two strangers. Hiding a Jewish child from the Nazis was dangerous. If the child was discovered, he or she would be sent to a prison camp, where death would almost certainly follow. The rescuers would likely be imprisoned too, and possibly killed. To save a Jewish child took great courage. These strangers would eventually be recognized for their bravery and named the “Righteous Gentiles.”

CHAPTER 1



1942

Amsterdam, Fall

“You and your daughter must leave. My husband should not have brought you here.”

The woman stood in her warm kitchen but shook as if she were standing out in the cold.

“I am hurrying, Mrs. Dahl.” The young mother was on her knees in front of a child who was five or six years old. She did up the last button on her daughter’s coat. Three, four, five layers of clothes swaddled the child. She looked like a round little ball. The child blinked, swallowed, and tried not to cry. It was a promise—not to cry. “No tears, my darling,” the mother whispered into the child’s ear.

“You must understand, I have children of my own to protect. My neighbors could report us. We don’t know

who to trust. The Nazis will kill us all if they find you here. My children ... What would *you* do?"

"Thank you for letting us stay for a few days. And thank your husband for his help." The young mother put on a light raincoat and tied a gray headscarf under her chin.

"Remember, look for the woman in the green hat. She will take your daughter to a safe place. We wish we could help you too ..." Mrs. Dahl stood behind a curtain in the window and peeked out to the road.

"I will manage. It's my daughter's safety that's important." The mother spoke so quietly that the other woman did not appear to hear.

"Please, never mention our names, never. Leave through the back garden." The woman turned and dug deep into her apron pocket. "It is seven blocks to the tram line. Here, I have tickets. Take them, please."

"Yes, goodbye." The young mother tucked the tickets into her handbag.

"For the child." The woman handed the little girl an apple. "*Geb achtung*," she whispered.

"Do you speak Yiddish?" The mother was astonished.

"No ... a little ... do not ask questions ... just go, please." Mrs. Dahl sat down on a kitchen chair and put her head in her hands.

Mother and child walked out of the house, crossed the back garden, and stood at the gate.

"Mamma, is Mrs. Dahl crying?" asked the child.

"She is very sad ... and perhaps she is keeping a secret," said the mother.

At that moment they heard voices coming down the lane.

“Hide,” the mother hissed as she pulled on her daughter’s hand. The two crouched behind a shed and waited. The voices wafted past them and away, but still they waited.

“Mamma, what does ‘*Geb achtung*’ mean?” whispered the child.

Her mother put her finger to her lips, listened, and then spoke so quietly the child had to lean in close to hear. “It is Yiddish. It is the language of the Jews. It means ‘Be careful.’”

Geb achtung. Geb achtung. Geb achtung, the child repeated to herself.

“But Mamma, we are Jewish and we do not speak Yiddish.”

“Hush! Tell no one that you are Jewish. If anyone asks you, say no. You know this.” Her mother put her head in her hands, just like Mrs. Dahl.

“Don’t cry, Mamma. Don’t cry. I won’t tell anyone.”

“Come, we have to hurry.” Her mother brushed away her tears and took a deep breath. “I can’t very well tell you not to cry and then cry myself, can I?” Mamma gave a pained smile, the kind of smile where the mouth curls up but the eyes stay the same. She stood and took the child’s hand.

“Where are we going?” The child looked up at her mother.

“Hush, darling.” Her mother peered up and down the lane. When she was sure no one was watching, the two slipped out into the laneway.



“A watery sky. It looks like rain.” Lars shielded his eyes and looked up into a gray sky.

Hans locked the house, then looked up to see that all the windows were closed, as was his habit. It was a pretty little house. There were two small but tidy rooms on the main floor, two small, tidy bedrooms upstairs, and a tiny, tidy room tucked under the eaves at the very top. This had once been their playroom, when they were little.

Hans and Lars Gorter were brothers. Hans was round and short—egg-like, in fact. Lars was tall and thin, like a stick, or maybe a praying mantis. They were born two years apart. Hans, at sixty-five years of age, was the elder, and Lars, the younger, was sixty-three. Neither had married. They had lived with their mamma until she’d passed away ten years ago. Papa had died when Hans and Lars were just boys. Now the two brothers lived alone, together.

They had hairy ears, rosy cheeks, and blue eyes that folded down in the corners. Their white eyebrows looked like wings about to take flight. They were honest and hardworking Dutchmen, through and through.

Before starting out for work, Hans and Lars looked across to Mrs. Vos’s home, as was their habit. Her blinds

were up and therefore so was she. Mrs. Vos, eighty, had been their mamma's dearest friend. To young boys who'd had no living grandparents, or indeed any living relatives, she had been auntie, granny, and friend all neatly tied up in one person. Satisfied that all was right at Mrs. Vos's house, they carried on.

There were eight pretty houses on their cul-de-sac, a road that ended in a little circle. Each house had fading flowers in the tiny front garden. Doors were painted barn red, indigo blue, sunny yellow, minty green, or plum purple. The homes were surrounded by wrought-iron fences with gates, and instead of indoor toilets most of them had privies, or outhouses, tucked in the back garden. There was a busy street at the far end of their little road. Here large trucks filled with the invading Nazi soldiers barged up and down the cobblestone roadways spewing great clouds of black smoke. Occasionally they passed German soldiers on foot. Large guns were slung over their shoulders. Their black boots made clicking sounds on the sidewalk.

The Germans had invaded their beloved Holland two years ago—on May 10, 1940, to be precise. On that day, German aircraft had raced across the sky, and the sound of the engines had so frightened Mrs. Vos that she had run across the road to the brothers' home in her nightdress. With blankets over their shoulders, the three sat around a dying coal fire in the parlor.

"The army is prepared," declared Hans.

"Yes, we will fight them off," Lars agreed. Although at his advanced age he could hardly count himself among the "we."

All three had lived through the Great War and a depression, but it was only Mrs. Vos who was not so sure that her lovely country could successfully battle the great German military machine. She nodded her head anyway as the three huddled around the dwindling fire.

The Nazi invasion was swift. In the beginning, the Nazi soldiers called themselves “brothers” of the Dutch. They paid top dollar for food and rent. The Dutch had suffered a depression for years and so the Germans’ money was very welcome. At first, things seemed to be looking up. But then everything changed.

The Dutch remained loyal to their Queen Wilhelmina, who had fled to London, along with the Dutch government, when the Germans invaded. And, despite all the rules and threats issued by the Nazis, many people in Holland continued to listen to a Dutch-language news broadcast—Radio Oranje—that came from London, England. This stubbornness infuriated the Nazis.

The brothers knew of Dutch dissidents who blew up train tracks and caused trouble for the Nazis. The Nazis retaliated by arresting people, shooting many, and sending others far away to prison camps. What these camps were really like seemed to be a matter for speculation. Some people said they were terrible places. But Hans and Lars believed that the Germans might be conquerors, and this Hitler fellow might be rather awful, but in the end they were all Europeans and therefore civilized. Civilized people did not go about murdering other people. That was how they thought.

Hans and Lars carried on down the road. Life had changed in two short years. For one thing, there were sandbags everywhere—in front of buildings, around lampposts, under large windows. They wondered what they were for. If a bomb dropped, Allied or German, a sandbag here or there would not do much. It was curious.

Their once beautiful city now looked dowdy and unkempt. Everyone was fearful and afraid. Everyone was in a hurry. Smiles were rare and greetings unspoken.

Hans checked his watch. Every morning they arrived at the tram depot not a minute too early or a minute too late, as was their habit. Hans drove a city tram, although in the past foreign visitors called it a streetcar. That was curious too. There was nothing car-like about a tram.

Lars was the ticket collector. They had held these positions for forty-three years.



“Mamma, I am hot.” The child, with eyes the color of chocolate and two long auburn braids tied with small ribbons hanging down her back, tried to keep up with her mother’s strides, but it was hard with all the clothes she was wearing.

The woman stopped, pulled the child close, and whispered, “Rest a little. It won’t be long now, my darling girl. Soon you will be safe. But remember your promise? You must not tell anyone where we have been. It would get them in trouble. Promise?”

The child bobbed her head. There were so many secrets to keep, but that one was easy. She didn't know where they'd stayed, or even where they were right at that moment.

They stopped in front of a shop window. The child cupped her hands around her eyes and peered into the store. "Look, Mamma!" She squealed with delight as she pointed to the sweets and pastries that sat like jewels on lace-covered pedestals. There were almond-coated cakes, jam-filled cookies, swirls of lemon-drop icing, and her favorite, a ginger cake called *peperkoek*. Her mouth watered and her eyes grew as big as pies. Would her mother buy her a sweet? She looked over to the entrance of the shop. She could not read yet but she knew what the ugly words brushed on the glass door with black paint said—no Jews.

The young mother didn't notice the sweets. She looked past the window display to a clock on the far wall. They still had to walk four more blocks to the tram stop, board the tram, and travel five stops. There, Mrs. Dahl had assured them, they would be met by a woman wearing a green hat. The woman would take her child to a safe haven. Everything rested on this woman—a stranger.

"Come." The mother reached out her hand and the two walked on. The child looked back at the sweets in the window but said nothing.



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