

## Prologue to Choosing Sides

October 1934

Karl-Heinz backed out of the crowded sweet shop slowly, ever so slowly, as if that might help. He forced a smile onto his face, as if that would be enough. He made sure to close the door completely, praying that would keep them from following him.

Turning toward home, he breathed a quick sigh of relief, then started to walk briskly, eager to believe the danger had passed. After a few paces, he glanced over his shoulder, hoping against hope they were not coming after him. Maybe, just maybe, they would stay inside, content they had made their point.

But such was not the case. The door of the shop opened, and all three boys stepped out. They stood for a moment, laughing and admiring their reflections in the window. In their starched tan shirts, black kerchiefs with brown leather slipknots, dark corduroy shorts, mid-length white socks and leather shoes, they could be poster children for the Party youth group. But then again, so could Karl-Heinz, who wore the same uniform and had golden blonde hair and brilliant blue eyes.

In near perfect unison the trio looked to the right, then to the left, looking for *him*.

"There he is," the oldest boy cried out. "Let's go teach him a lesson."

Karl-Heinz quickened his pace, hopeful they would lose interest in teaching him anything. With another backward glance, though, he saw they were gaining on him, marching faster than he was.

He sped up, going from a walk to a trot to a full-on run by the time he'd gone the two-kilometer distance to the edge of town. His pursuers matched his pace until all four boys, the hunters and the hunted, were in the open countryside. As he sprinted over the one lane bridge where the straight, paved roadway turned into a winding road of hard-packed gravel, Karl-Heinz noted that this was slowing him down and causing his legs to strain harder. Sweat began to stream down his forehead and darken the back and underarms of this shirt as he hurried on.

Sensing his lead was shrinking, Karl-Heinz ran as fast as he was able. But he continued to lose ground, especially to Konrad, the fastest of the three. He turned off the road to go up the hill, toward the cemetery, hoping he could outdistance them on the steeper terrain. But he didn't.

He heard the indistinct shouts of his pursuers coming closer. Ever closer. As he reached the graveyard entrance, he raced down the gravel lane between two rows of tall elm trees. He raced past row after row of neatly manicured plots, many decorated with mementos and flowering shrubbery.

"*Hilfe! Hilfe!*" he shouted, "Help! Help!" though he was sure no one would hear him, no one would come to his aid. He felt the ringleader's hands grasp his shoulders, forcing him to a stop. The stocky, red-faced Konrad spun him around and spit in his face as Willi and Ludwig caught up.

"Take this as a warning, you American rat, you *Ausländer!*" Konrad bellowed as he punched Karl-Heinz in the stomach and pushed him to the ground.

"We're watching you, Yankee," he added, kicking Karl-Heinz in the side to help make his point. Then kicked him again; and yet again. "We're watching you *good!* Now stand and show us how to do a proper salute!"

Fighting the pain in his side and stomach, and a strong desire to smash Konrad in the face, Karl-Heinz rose reluctantly to his feet, thinking he'd better do as they say. He hoped they'd be satisfied and let him go with this warning.

Still winded from the run up the steep slope, Karl-Heinz could not stand very straight. Somehow he managed to raise his right arm toward the heavens. He winced a bit but shouted "*Sieg Heil*" as loudly as his laboring lungs would allow. Then he grimaced and fell to his hands and knees, his head hanging down.

Konrad barked a command to the other two boys. "Hit this stupid little *Scheisser* so he will know how to show proper respect from now on!"

Each of the boys delivered a blow, one to Karl-Heinz's right shoulder and the other to his left. With a final kick in the buttocks from Konrad, the three attackers turned their backs on their victim and walked proudly out of the graveyard. Konrad whistled a marching song to celebrate their stellar accomplishment. The other two boys walked down the hill with him: silently, two paces behind their leader.

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With the afternoon chill settling in, Karl-Heinz now sat alone, outside the old hilltop cemetery, gazing upon the empty graveyard and the village below. He looked up at the stone memorial to those who had fallen in the Great War, his own Uncle Albert among them. A violet carpet of autumn crocuses accented the faded red brick walkways between each section of tombstones. Tall, pyramid shaped linden trees provided shade and shelter over the sturdy black wrought iron benches in each corner of the yard.

The grand sugar maple in the center of the cemetery caught his eye; its brilliant red and burnt orange leaves momentarily distracted him from the pain of his wounds. A smile came to his face as he eyed the potted chrysanthemums of pink and yellow and orange set amongst the white crosses and the gray granite headstones. He felt comforted and safe, sitting here alone, surrounded by so many markers carved with his family name.

He rose and tucked the now grass-stained tail of his tan shirt back into his black *Lederhosen* as he limped over to the nearest bench. Here he could see the family plot with his surname carved in a bold Gothic font. He reached for a cluster of tiny cream flowers and smelled the sweet, honey-like fragrance as he rubbed their soothing nectar on his bruises. Mom is sure to see these.

He rubbed his sore shoulder and fought back tears as he took stock of the things he knew, and the things he did not.

Werner and Ludwig each hit me pretty hard, but without the same force and delight as that Konrad had. They were clearly just following Konrad's lead.

But why do they think of me as an Ausländer. I'm not a foreigner. True, I lived in America for a few years, but now I'm back; back with my mom and little brother; back in the house I was born in. I'm no outsider; I'm from here.

Karl-Heinz stood slowly and shrugged his shoulders gently to test his muscles as it occurred to him that his father would be coming back to Germany in a month or two.

Pop will be anxious to see Oma and his sister and brothers, all the nieces and nephews, and cousins living nearby. I hope, but can't say for sure, Pop will be happy to be back home.

Feeling the strength returning to his legs, Karl-Heinz walked gingerly around the bench. It hurt a bit, but he at least he found himself able to walk.

Mom will be upset when she sees this soiled shirt and my grass-stained knees. She'll be so angry! Not with me, but with the way things are these days.

And she'll do something about it! But I can't be sure what.

He brushed off his shirt and his knees as best he could while his mind continued to race.

I know there are a lot of problems in town; everyone is talking about the changes going on. My aunts and uncles grumble constantly about kids joining gangs and the minister complains about them acting like bullies and hooligans.

I don't know how much Werner or Ludwig really like this Hitler Youth thing, but Konrad sure does and I certainly do not. Today's beating made this quite clear, again.

There are certain to be more days like this if I don't somehow turn things around. I would quit if I could, but I know I cannot.

He straightened his kerchief and tightened the slip knot, pulled up his knee socks and brushed his hair back in place.

I know there are bigger problems than mine in the world. The screaming headlines and stark photographs in the morning newspaper make that clear; so do the evening radio broadcasts.

It seems everyone is more angry and bitter each day. God forbid, there is even talk another war will be coming along .

With a sigh, he noticed the growing darkness enveloping the headstones. With the sun's golden rays lighting his path, he made his way back toward the village and into the house, where his mother was waiting.

Karl-Heinz opened the door and called out in both German and English, "*Hallo Mammi! Ich bin zuhause!* Hi Mom! I'm home!"

As he closed the door behind him, he wondered if this was true.