

# DANIEL'S STORY

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# 1

What has happened to me? I feel just like I did when I was around ten years old and I got hit by a soccer ball right between the eyes and I wandered around the field disoriented, not knowing who I was, where I was, where I should be going. I feel like that now — stunned and confused. Who am I? Where am I going?

This much I know. My name is Daniel. I am fourteen. And I am Jewish. I am on a train with my mother, father, sister, and what looks like over a thousand other Jews from Frankfurt. We do not have any idea where we are going, only that the Germans no longer want Jews in Germany. My country. Generations of our family have lived here going back a thousand years, but it looks as if we will be the last.

Father and Mother sit across from me and speak in low voices to each other. My sister, Erika, who at twelve is two years younger than I, sits beside me humming a tune to herself, no doubt composing a song for her violin. I bend over and pull my photo album out of my rucksack. I feel the need to look at

my pictures, pictures of my life. Perhaps they can help me understand how I came to be on this train, who I am, and what has happened. I open the album to the first page.

The first picture in my album is that of me on my sixth birthday. Marked on the bottom is *March 30, 1933*. I am smiling at the camera, all pudgy cheeks and thick black wavy hair, my brand-new gleaming toy train on display in front of me.

Uncle Peter, my favourite uncle, would have taken this picture. He was the unofficial family photographer. The picture just beneath it is one he took later that day of our whole family. Everyone looks serious because they don't want to appear silly in the photograph. Still, I remember that day. The adults talking and laughing, the hustle and bustle as dinner was being prepared, the smell of freshly baked bread and roasting chicken, and, of course, the screaming and noise of all my cousins.

I look at each face in the photograph in turn. Uncle Peter isn't in the picture because he was taking it. He was married to Auntie Leah, my mother's older sister, a nurse. She always bossed us around and tried to organize our lives. Uncle Peter and Auntie Leah had four children under the age of five — Friedrich, a year younger than I, Mia, age four, Gertrude, age two, and Brigitte, age one. The children look so quiet and well behaved in the photo. But in reality they would run, scream, fight, and drive me crazy. I remember the first thing they went for when they got

in the door that day was a magnificent castle I had made from my building set. I had laboured over it for weeks, methodically snapping the pieces together until I thought it was perfect — it was demolished only seconds after their arrival. “Daniel,” my mother *always* said to me just before they came over, “you are the oldest. You must hold your temper even if they do things you don’t like.” When I was five, I’d bopped Friedrich on the arm, hard, for breaking one of my toys. He’d cried. And ever since then all I’d heard was “You’re the oldest.” I looked at the shambles of my castle and felt like bopping them all. Strange, really, that they should be so wild, considering how strict Auntie Leah is. Perhaps she is better at controlling other people’s children than her own.

Also in the picture is my mother’s younger brother, David. He was an engineer and a bachelor, and we usually saw him at dinnertime, when he just happened to drop by to visit.

Standing beside my father are his three brothers: Leo, who came from Berlin with his family; Walter and Aaron, and their wives. Sitting on the floor are their children, three per family, most around my age or younger. I remember that as the photo was being taken Uncle Walter and Father were fighting, talking back and forth with clenched teeth so as not to ruin the picture.

“Palestine is the answer, Joseph,” said Uncle Walter to my father. “We should all emigrate there.”

“And do they need concert violinists in the Holy

Land?" Father had replied. "No, Walter, they'll put you to work in the fields."

"Even a new country needs music," Walter retorted. "And the Jews need a country of their own."

"We have a country!" Father exclaimed. "Our family has lived in Germany for over six hundred years. How long does it have to be before you call someplace home?"

"And my family," said Mother, and then the entire family joined in, "*has been here for almost one thousand years!*" Mother turned red. "Well, we have."

"*We know!*" Everyone laughed.

Auntie Leah spoke up. "It never hurts to be reminded."

Everyone laughed again. The picture had to be delayed while the adults put their serious faces back on.

Oma Rachel and Opa Samuel, my mother's parents, are in the picture too, as is Oma Miriam, my father's mother. Oma Miriam lived in an old-folks' home in Frankfurt, but was with us for my birthday. Opa Karl had died two years earlier. Right after the picture was finally taken, I remember Auntie Leah began to lecture me.

"Now, young man, I hope you'll work to deserve such a fine present. I understand your mother has just returned from *another* trip to see your teacher. It seems to me that she's called to your school at least once a week!" She looked at me sternly, and I was so mad I could have kicked her. She was always

butting in! And it was so unfair! All I did in school was crack a few jokes and make some funny faces. My classmates thought I was funny and so did I. Why did my teacher, Mr. Schneider, have to be so sour? He always looked like he'd sucked on a lemon just before coming into the classroom.

"Leah, it's his birthday," Mother protested.

"I know, I know," Auntie Leah replied. "But you're too soft on him — he should realize how hard these meetings are on you."

"If Mr. Schneider wasn't so mean and stupid, I'd behave better!" I declared defiantly. Auntie Leah looked like she wanted to run over and cover her children's ears. They were all listening with great interest.

"You must show respect for your teachers, Daniel," she scolded.

"Why? They don't show respect for me," I shot back.

At that point Uncle Peter intervened.

"Who wants birthday candies?" he asked with a smile. I loved Uncle Peter.

"I wish *you* were my teacher, Uncle Peter," I said, giving him a kiss as he handed me a huge piece of chocolate toffee. "I'd never be bad in your class."

"No, Daniel, I'm sure you wouldn't. I agree with you, mutual respect is very important." Then he whispered in my ear, "But just to make things easier for your poor mother, maybe you could *pretend* a little respect."

I giggled and he gave me a wink. That made me feel so grown up that I decided to try it. Not that I could *always* control myself, but after that my mother visited Mr. Schneider every month or so instead of every week.

I stare at the next page and the next picture. Uncle Peter took this one two days after my birthday. It shows my father's hardware store. My father had a very successful business. People came to his store from all over, not so much for his merchandise, but for his advice. He knew how to fix anything and always took the time to show the people who came in what the best tools would be for a specific job. There was also a large section of household items like pots and pans and knives, and he would discuss the advantages of one over another with his customers as seriously as if they were deciding the fate of the world. That's why his customers would never consider shopping anywhere else — even if the price was a little cheaper. My mother worked in the back of the shop, doing all the accounting. I stare at the picture. Across the front window, written in large letters, is the word JEW.

I still remember when I first saw it. I was so confused. Jew. What was wrong with that? I went to a regular public school and most of my friends at school weren't Jewish, but that didn't matter. It was just a different religion. We lit candles on the Sabbath and went to synagogue — a reform synagogue where the service was mostly in German — and celebrated Jewish holidays. They celebrated Christian holidays.

So what? But that day there wasn't only writing on the window. There was a storm trooper — Father said he was called a Brown Shirt because of the brown shirt of his uniform — and he was standing outside the door of the shop. With a gun! I had run there to help in the store, and then I didn't know what to do. I was scared.

I thought that maybe the storm trooper would shoot me if I got close. He looked so mean. And then Mrs. Werner came around the corner. She walked very slowly because she had to use a cane. She walked up to the man and said, "Excuse me, please."

The Brown Shirt looked at her and replied, "All Jewish shops are being boycotted. You can't go in there."

Mrs. Werner tapped his boot with her cane.

"Now you listen to me, young man. I walked a long way to get here. I'm ninety years old. Don't you tell me what I can and can't do!"

And the Brown Shirt stepped aside. I ran up to her and took her hand and we went in together.

"Daniel!" my father cried. "Mrs. Werner! You shouldn't have come. He might have hurt you!"

"Nonsense," she replied, and then went about her business. All she had needed was a light bulb!

I think back to that incident now and I wonder if the madness could have been stopped then. What if Father's regular customers had insisted, like Mrs. Werner, on being allowed in? Mrs. Werner wasn't Jewish and she didn't care that we were. But how

many people had the courage to walk up to a young man holding a gun? What if he should shoot?

The next day the Brown Shirt was gone, and Uncle Peter came to the store to take the picture. As we stood in the street gazing at the shop, I asked him to explain what was happening.

“Have you heard of a man called Adolf Hitler?” Uncle Peter said.

“Of course!” I replied, insulted.

“Who is he?”

“He is chanskellur of Germany,” I replied.

“Yes, Daniel, you mean chancellor, appointed by President Hindenburg. His party, the National Socialist Party — they are called Nazis — has lots of seats in Parliament. Hitler has changed the constitution so that he now rules us. He can do anything he wants, Daniel, and the German people are happy to let him. They think he can solve all their problems of unemployment and that he can stop the fighting.”

I nodded knowingly. I’d seen people fighting in the streets. “But why won’t they let people shop in our store?” I asked.

“That’s a good question, Daniel. Hitler wants someone to blame all of Germany’s troubles on, and he’s decided it will be the Jews. And anyone else that isn’t a ‘pure’ German of the ‘Aryan’ or ‘master’ race. I’ve heard they’ve opened up camps — they call them concentration camps — where they’re putting all his enemies — communists, socialists, Gypsies, Jews, anyone who disagrees with him and anyone he

doesn't like. And they are making sure everyone has heard of these camps — so people do not protest, for fear of getting arrested too.”

“But,” I said, “how can everyone love him so much if he's so mean?” I thought of the huge rallies father had told me about, where tens of thousands cheered Hitler, and of the torchlight parades I'd seen many nights, in which his followers would march through town singing. I often felt like running out and joining the parades. They always looked so exciting.

“People think he will make Germany strong again — give it back its dignity. Come, let's go help your father wash that sign off.”

The boycott of Jewish stores lasted only three days, and like any six-year-old, I quickly forgot all about it and went back to my happy life. My mother and father must have started to worry then, but they hid it well and I had other things to worry about — such as whether or not I would make the school soccer team and if I could convince father to buy me the beautiful model car that was displayed in the shop window next to his.