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THE WRONG BOY

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THE WRONG BOY

SUZY ZAIL

black dog books

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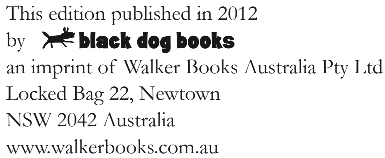
by 

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For the children sent to the left.

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No one is born hating another person because of the colour of his skin, or his background, or his religion. People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite.

NELSON MANDELA

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Chapter 1

They came at midnight, splintering the silence with their fists, pounding at our door until Father let them in. I tiptoed to my sister's bed, threw back the covers and slid in beside her. She was already awake.

"I hate them," I whispered. Mother didn't like us using the word *hate* but there was no getting around it; I hated them. I hated their perfectly pressed uniforms and the way they pushed past Father, dragging the mud from their boots across Mother's Persian rug. I hated them for nailing the synagogue doors shut and for burning our books. But mostly I hated them for how they made me feel: scared and small.

Erika pressed a finger to her lips. They were in the next room. I crept out of bed and peered into the living room. There were two of them: one was short, the other tall. Both were ugly. I hadn't seen them in the ghetto before, but there had been others with the same helmets and heavy black boots. The last pair who'd

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visited came for the radio. *Jews aren't allowed to have radios*, they'd said, wrenching the cord from the wall.

My father lit a candle. Mother stood behind him in slippered feet, her hair still in pins. The smaller of the two officers – a young man with a pockmarked face – was rifling through drawers, plucking silver spoons and napkin rings from their velvet sleeves and slipping them into his pocket. I couldn't hear what the taller officer was saying, but after he finished talking, Father reached into the pocket of his dressing gown and pulled out the keys to our apartment.

The officer took the keys. He drew two sheets of paper from his satchel, thrust one at father, and read the other out loud.

"By order of the Royal Hungarian Government, made this day, Monday the twentieth day of June, 1944, all persons of Jewish descent …"

We were to assemble outside the synagogue at eight o'clock the following morning. We were allowed one bag each and enough food for three days.

"You're being resettled," the officer said. "We're closing the ghetto."

He didn't say where we were going or how we would get there. He read the brutal words without pausing for breath, then he pulled another sheet from his bag and cast his torch over it.

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"Samuel Mendel," he said, looking down at my father. "According to this list you have two daughters. Get them."

Erika didn't wait for Father to call her. She stepped out of the shadows and stood in the doorway in her bare feet, her flimsy nightdress caught in the glare of the flashlight.

"Erika Mendel?" The officer aimed his beam through her thin cotton gown. His face was cold, his eyes hard. My sister nodded.

"Hanna Mendel?"

I stepped into the hallway. The officer shoved me aside and stepped into the bedroom. I watched him fling open cupboards and empty the drawers. It didn't make any sense. They couldn't be kicking us out of the ghetto. It was their idea to create it, their idea to cram us inside its claustrophobic walls. We'd done everything they'd asked of us. We'd painted yellow stars on our apartment buildings, we'd obeyed curfew, we didn't take buses or use the telephone. I wasn't a troublemaker. I was a straight-A student. I'd won a scholarship to the Budapest Conservatorium of Music. I was smart. I was talented.

Erika had told me that none of that mattered, but I'd refused to listen. *When they look at you they don't see a girl who hands her homework in on time*, she'd said. *They*

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don't care that you wake at six every morning to practise piano. They don't see a concert pianist when they look at you – they see a Jew.

The officer crouched down on one knee and looked under my bed. I pressed my mouth to my sister's ear.

"Where are we going?"

Erika looked at our father's face, etched with fear, and at our mother, standing next to him, wringing her hands.

"I don't know," she whispered, "but anywhere has to be better than here."

We'd been living in the ghetto for six weeks. It had only taken a few days for the walls to go up around us, hemming us in. Erika hated the ghetto. She hated curfew, and the guards at the gates. She hated that her friends couldn't visit her, or telephone, once the line was disconnected. She missed going to the cinema and eating *Sacher-Torte* at Cafe Gerbeaud. She missed the admiring glances of young men and the way they fought for her attention. One by one, they had all donned uniforms and stopped talking to her. She hated Hitler.

I just thought he was crazy. Before our radio was confiscated, I'd heard him rant about Jews on the BBC. We were a threat to the nation, he said, we stole people's jobs, we ate too much and we spread

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disease. I didn't think anyone in Hungary would take him seriously – but then the German tanks rolled into Budapest in March 1944 and the government started passing these crazy laws. Father's business was shut down and his bank account was frozen. We couldn't ride in trains or go to university.

Having blue eyes and blond hair, I didn't attract the attention of the black-booted SS soldiers who patrolled the streets. Not until April when, in keeping with the Führer's orders, mother sewed a yellow star onto all of my clothes; a six-pointed Star of David as big as my palm, inscribed with the German word for Jew – *Jude*.

I wished I could wear my star proudly like Erika did. We weren't a strictly religious family, but the way Erika saw it, if she had to be stamped a Jew, she'd make her own labels. She found a length of bright yellow silk at Zimmerman's haberdashery on Utvar Street, and fashioned her own glimmering stars that she wore proudly on her left breast. I hid mine when I could, under scarves, my hair, my schoolbag strap.

There were others at school, branded like me, and it made me feel a little less alone. But I hated that star. It changed everything. The girls I spent every lunchtime with told me that they would understand if I felt more comfortable eating with my Jewish classmates. My best

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friend stopped inviting me over.

At least I still had Bach and Beethoven for company.

The officers had moved into our living room. The young one with the bulging pockets was seated at the piano, running his sweaty fingers over the keys. He hit middle C.

"Nice piano. An August Förster," he said, turning to look at his colleague. "I've always wanted an August Förster."

"Take it," the older officer said. "Come back for it tomorrow with the truck."

Erika pulled away from me. "Don't!" I pleaded. I grabbed her arm and held it tight. "Don't go in there. You'll get us in trouble. He won't let us keep it, and even if he did," I whispered, "I can't take it with me."

Erika froze at the sound of our mother's voice.

"Please, sir," my mother stepped towards the officer, tears streaking her face, "not the piano–"

"Shut up!" The older officer swung his torch at my mother and she leaped back in fright.

He turned to my father. "The synagogue. Tomorrow. Eight o'clock." He opened the front door and stepped into the corridor. The young officer smiled and followed him out.

"They can't do this. We won't let them." Erika ran to the piano.

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Father locked the front door. "We need to start packing. We have a lot to do." He took my sister by the shoulders and steered her back to the bedroom. My mother sat, slumped at the piano, her head bowed. I sat beside her.

"I'm so sorry, Hanna, so sorry," she repeated, as though it were all her doing. Tears stained her collar, and when she pulled me to her, I felt her body shuddering beneath the soft fabric of her dressing gown. I pulled away. I didn't want to see her despair, I wanted her to be brave.

"I should go and pack," I said. Mother rose from the stool and shuffled into the kitchen. I retreated to the bedroom.

Erika pulled a rucksack from the cupboard and threw a pair of hiking boots into it. She pulled a straw sunhat from a drawer and tossed it onto her bed. I grabbed my backpack from the floor and tipped it upside down, letting the contents spill onto my mattress: a pocket torch, bandages, medicine, spare underwear, a packet of crackers, a can of sardines. There had been more food, but we'd eaten our way through the bag a few weeks earlier when we had been trapped in the building's basement during an air raid. I crammed the food and medicine into a suitcase, burying it under a pile of blouses, a skirt, a pair of sandals, and three pairs

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of underwear. How did they expect us to pack when we didn't know where we were going? I tossed in my hairbrush, then scooped it out, added a handkerchief, pulled out a skirt and threw in a toothbrush. I left my floor-length gowns – the stiff taffetas and gossamer silks I wore when performing at the community hall – on their hangers, and my high-heeled shoes and silk gloves wrapped in their boxes of tissue paper.

"I know we have to be practical," Erika said, pulling a pale yellow dress from the cupboard and draping it over my suitcase, "but you have to take this. It's your favourite."

A few weeks earlier Mother had lugged the bolt of fabric from the attic and cut the pattern herself. She'd finished sewing the organza gown but hadn't gotten around to stitching a Star of David onto it. I was going to wear the dress the following Saturday night at our youth group's summer dance. I knew it was ridiculous – going to a dance in the ghetto – but it was my first dance, and Michael Wollner had asked me to partner him. *You're not going to let the Nazis stop us dancing too, are you, Hanna?* Erika had asked. And she was right. They'd put us in the ghetto and sealed the gates; what we did inside its grimy walls was our business. I folded the dress into the suitcase.

There was still a little room left, enough for my

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framed photo of Clara Schumann at her piano, and my leather-bound collection of her early compositions. Ever since I could remember I'd wanted to follow in Clara's famous footsteps. When I'd turned eight, I'd convinced my parents to hire out the Debrecen Town Hall for my public debut, because Clara first performed at the age of eight. At the age of eleven, she played Chopin in Paris, so I played Chopin at the Goldmark Hall. By the age of eighteen Clara was performing to sell-out crowds in Vienna and receiving rave reviews. I'd be turning eighteen in two-and-a-half years.

At two in the morning, while Erika and I were still packing, my father appeared at our bedroom door with a biscuit tin tucked under his arm. He reached for my hand and pulled me into the hall. Mother took Erika's arm and followed us out. We went silently down the stairs and through the yard. The moon was pale, the sky gunmetal grey. Father stopped at the door to the basement, but he made no move to open it. Instead he spun around, took five paces into the yard and stopped. He mouthed the word "five", held up five fingers, and then stepped three paces to his left. He held his hand up again, extended three fingers and whispered the word "three". Crouching on his heels, he lowered the battered biscuit tin onto the soil and raised his hand again, extending first five fingers, then

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three. Satisfied that we had understood the code – and committed it to memory – he pulled a small shovel from his trouser pocket and began to dig.

Father's breath was short and the back of his shirt was stained with sweat by the time he finished digging. He laid the shovel down, pried the lid from the tin and took out a clutch of gold coins, then a wad of notes, a handful of gems, and finally a velvet bag containing a gold pocket watch.

"There's enough here to buy you a new piano, Hanna." He smiled weakly. "And anything else you might need." He placed the velvet bag, gemstones, coins and notes back in the tin, then lowered it into the hole. Mother reached into her apron pocket, pulled out a yarmulke and a frayed leather prayer book and placed them on top of the tin. Finally, with trembling fingers, she pulled her wedding band from her finger and dropped it into the hole.

We crept back to the apartment. I was glad to be inside again, seated at the kitchen table, watching my mother peel potatoes. The familiar smell of simmering cabbage was reassuring. I didn't want to think about Father outside packing the hole with soil. I didn't want to think about digging up the ground and dusting off Mother's wedding ring. I didn't want to think about tomorrow. Erika couldn't wait to escape the ghetto. I

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didn't want to leave, not when I didn't know what was waiting for us outside.

Inside the ghetto walls no one called you a *dirty Jew*. There was no *us* and *them*. It was just *us* and we all wore stars, and no one had new clothes, and we all shared our bedrooms with our brothers and sisters. Nothing divided or distinguished us from one another and – like the cabbage simmering on the stove – it was comforting.

Mother had stopped crying, distracted by the task of preparing food for our journey: cheese, hard-boiled eggs, pickled cucumbers. Her pantry emptied into a bag. She had once had a full pantry, its shelves fringed with white lace and bursting with preserved fruits, jams, biscuits, a dozen types of tea. Mother had been happy then. Now her eyes were ringed with dark circles and she had grown thin with worry. She cleaned incessantly. Outside, in the gutters and alleyways and front porches of the ghetto, rubbish piled up. But mother waxed and polished and dusted and swept till our apartment gleamed. I left her slicing potatoes and went back to bed.

I woke the next morning to piercing whistle blasts and the tramp of boots.

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"Jews outside! Fast!" Hungarian police officers were at the end of the street emptying apartments. Angry voices floated up through the window. A dog barked. A child screamed.

Erika was already dressed and placing the last of her belongings into her rucksack.

"You can't take that," I said, reaching for her camera. "No photos outside the ghetto, remember what Papa said? Besides, the soldiers won't let you."

"The soldiers won't know." Erika plunged the camera deep into her pack. I slipped out of my nightgown and pulled on a dress. Mother had prepared eggs for breakfast but I couldn't eat. I sat at the piano so I wouldn't have to listen to my father's whispered prayers or watch the tears trickle down my mother's face. I'd been so naive. I'd thought we were lucky when the ghetto walls went up. Our apartment building was in the heart of the ghetto, so we didn't have to move. I still had my piano, my bed and my family. I thought if we stayed behind the brick wall, we'd be okay.

I sat at the piano and began to play, and after a while I forgot about the guards in the street. I forgot about the buried treasure in the backyard and Mother's bulging bag of food. I forgot about Father's big, sad eyes. I was playing piano and there was only me, the black-and-white keys and Mozart.

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“Hanna, grab your suitcase. It’s time to go!” Father stepped into the corridor. The soldiers were outside our building.

I placed the black felt cover over the keys and closed the lid. Two weeks ago I’d promised Piri, my piano teacher, I would perfect Liszt’s *Hungarian rhapsody No. 6* before our next lesson. Then the ghetto had been sealed and I hadn’t seen Piri since. And now we were leaving the ghetto and I couldn’t practise, and that sour-faced police officer would get his sweaty hands on my piano, and I’d never match Clara Schumann’s concert schedule.

“Hanna, come down at once!” Father’s voice was urgent.

I thought of my piano-thief and his fat fingers and his ugly smile.

“Just a minute, Papa,” I called, throwing open the lid and tossing aside the felt. I ran my fingers over the keys, feeling for the one loose black key, the wobbly C-sharp Father hadn’t gotten around to fixing. Pressing down on the keys either side of the C sharp, I pulled and tugged at the note until it jerked free. Then I shoved it into my pocket and ran downstairs.