

Excerpt from *Flowers in the Gutter* (Dutton, 2020)

Introduction - Late 1942

GERTRUDE // a.k.a Mucki

Mucki stepped out of her apartment onto the narrow Boisseree Street.[1] On Fridays, she had a standing date with her friends in the Volksgarten. Wearing leather loafers that probably needed to be replaced and white socks hanging around her ankles, Mucki made her way toward the park.

The mile between her house and the meeting spot was surrounded by destruction. Some buildings had roofs that looked like they had been removed by giants, others were just walls, or piles of brick and stone. Sides of buildings had black scorch marks streaming up around the windows. Trees with massive trunks had been snapped in half like matchsticks. Mucki was lucky the apartment where she and her mom lived was still standing. As she moved through the city, she knew that at any moment a siren could go off, signaling another attack, and she'd have to duck into the nearest air-raid shelter.

In the end, though, her trip was uneventful and when she arrived, the Volksgarten was empty. Before the war, the park would have been filled with people on a late afternoon like this: a mom out walking with her kids, a couple sitting on the bank of the pond whispering to each other, little dogs prancing around on their leashes. None of that happened anymore. The park was all but deserted, and that was how Mucki and her friends liked it.

This time, the Mountain Climber, Banjo Willi, Ätz, and Jus showed up. Sometimes

there were more people, sometimes less. Usually they talked, hung out, and sang songs. Lately, they'd been planning some stuff they didn't want anyone to hear.

"Listen up, I know what we should do next," said the Mountain Climber. He was skinny, with sinewy arms and legs, and on hikes, he was always the first to the top of a rock, or you'd find him up in a tree somewhere. He was newer to the group, but really committed, and really trustworthy.

"And what have you been thinking about?" Mucki asked.

The Mountain Climber looked around the park to make sure no one was lingering. "I thought that we could fill a backpack full of fliers, I'd throw it on my back, and make my way to the Cologne Central Station," he said.

He was crazy. They all knew that the main train station in Cologne was crawling with activity. Every day, the military used the trains to ship soldiers to battle, and to send Jews, leftists, homosexuals, and anyone else they didn't like to concentration camps. Every day, supplies and food arrived, along with forced laborers from Poland or occupied territories in the East. The Mountain Climber wanted to take the fliers and make them flutter down like dead leaves in an autumn wind, to show people that there was a resistance.

"That's a way for you to find yourself in a camp," Mucki said. She knew that the punishment for this kind of thing could mean jail, possible torture, concentration camps; her father had experienced it.

Ätz agreed with Mucki and added, "I don't want to see my neck in the noose yet. I have a lot to live for." Ätz was tall and scrawny too, and generally slanted his body in a way that made it seem like he didn't really care. But right now, he cared, and he wasn't convinced

by the Mountain Climber's plans.

"Do you think I want to play a game with my own life?" the Mountain Climber asked. "Look, we only take calculated risks, and we make the decision together. But at least hear my plan.

"I know the train station. In the middle is the big glass dome, and all around it are ladders for the workers, for when, you know, the electricity isn't right or they have to fix some other problem. I thought that I could climb one of those ladders with the backpack and just let all of the fliers go. Two or three of you keep watch below and I come back down. You'll all be safe. And then we get out of there."

"You realize that's really risky, right?" said Jus, who hadn't said a word yet. Jus and Mucki trusted each other; they'd been friends a long time.

"But what do we have to lose?" Mucki started to change her mind. "Yeah, we could get caught. But we could have also got caught when we graffitied buildings around town. We've done a lot and people haven't noticed. We need something to motivate us and something that reaches more people. I say we go for it."

"Do we have a choice? We're already in it pretty deep." Ätz seemed to change his mind too. "I'm in."

"There can't be a worse fate than Hitler," Banjo Willi said.

"It'll go well," Jus said. Sometimes, he knew exactly what to say. "So far we haven't had any big problems; why would it be any different this time?"

The long August evening had almost come to an end, and dusk was starting to settle in. They hurried up and made their plan before dark, when they had to be home. They gave

themselves two weeks.

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Mucki took on the duty of getting the fliers. She made her way to a small street in Pesch, on the northern border of the Cologne city limits.

Jus had introduced them to a man with a small print shop in his basement. He normally printed church newsletters for Catholic congregations in the area. He knew that what they were doing was dangerous. If he got busted with the fliers, he wouldn't get off easy. Creating the material was one of the riskier parts of the operation. He couldn't play dumb like someone just carrying the fliers. So he had one stipulation: no one could know his name. They called him Tom.

"Hello, Mucki," Tom said as she entered the shop. He didn't know her real name either.

Tom printed his church bulletins in large font so that the older readers in the congregation could easily make out the words. This was perfect for the fliers since no one would dare pick one up for fear of being carried away by the police. Even looking too long at one on the ground could be risky. People would need to be able to read the messages as they walked by.

"The fliers are under the canvas bags," Tom said. "Goodbye." He had said ten words to Mucki and that was all he would say. The less they knew about each other the better. The less Tom knew about the operation the better.

She grabbed the package and put it under the padding of a baby stroller she'd

borrowed from a neighbor. She arranged pillows and a blanket inside the blue stroller to make it look like a child was snuggled inside. She gripped the handles as she quickly pushed it down the street.

The big wheels bounced over cobblestones and destroyed sidewalks. Her heart must have been pounding as she pushed the stroller through the outskirts of Cologne. What if someone wanted to peek at the sleeping angel? What if someone questions the fact that she was eighteen with a baby? How would she cover? What would she say?

In the end, people around her didn't pay her any attention. They had their own worries. Would another air-raid come tonight? Would their rations last until the end of the week? Could they get a new coat for winter? Had their neighbor overheard that private conversation? People in Cologne were known to mind their own businesses, and since the beginning of the war, that was even more true.

Finally, Mucki made it to a specific pile of rubble in Cologne. To someone who didn't know the city, that's what it looked like: one of the thousands of piles of stones, mortar, wood, and bricks that used to be a home, office, school, or church in the city. This pile of rubble had been a Catholic church. The steeple had fallen, the bells had been taken off to be melted down for the war long ago. This was the perfect place to stash the fliers until they needed them.

Mucki looked around to make sure no one was watching or had followed her. Quickly, she lifted the mattress, placed the fliers in a hole, and put stones on top. Her job was done. Tomorrow, the Mountain Climber would begin his. He'd climb to the top of the train station and let all of these go. He'd be risking his life. They'd all be risking their lives.

* * *

The Central Train Station was a magnificent building. The train station was almost as grand as the nearby cathedral. On the southern end, a clock tower like a turret ascended into the sky. The stone front was covered in Romanesque architectural details, like carved lions, columns, and little cherubs. The main entrance was under a semi-circular glass window, probably forty feet in diameter. The glass dome arched just behind that window. This was where the Mountain Climber would ascend. At the busiest time of the evening, he'd drop the fliers.

At 5:00 p.m., they were all there: the Mountain Climber, Mucki, Jus, Ätz, Banjo Willi, and the Guardian, who hadn't been at the park. They gathered near a ladder inside and the flow of rush-hour traffic moved around them. They had been visiting the train station daily around this time to figure out the layout, the best ladder for the Mountain Climber to use, and whether it really was safe.

No one seemed to be paying them any attention. People just moved about as normal. One of the group winked. That was the sign. Time to start.

The Guardian and Ätz went to two corner positions, Jus made his way to a platform across the tracks from where they had met, and Mucki and Banjo Willi stayed by the ladder, disguised as a couple in love. Willi slipped his hands around Mucki's waist and pressed his nose closer to her neck. Mucki's arms were around Willi's back. A train station was the perfect place to camouflage themselves; there were always people standing around, waiting, embracing. But their embrace was code: arms around each other's waists meant "hold." They

looked over each other's shoulders and could whisper without looking suspicious.

They looked for men in uniforms, taking in a 360 degree view of the station. Mucki looked over Willi's shoulder, and whispered in his ear. Was everyone in place? He looked over her shoulder, and whispered back. Were there any men in uniforms nearby? They whispered again. This was as clear as it was ever going to be.

The Mountain Climber was keeping an eye on them near the ladder, waiting for the sign to begin. They whispered one last time. Slowly, Mucki raised her arms from Willi's waist up to his shoulders, and he did the same.

This was the sign: all clear, now you can start. Like a cat, the Mountain Climber bounded to the top of the ladder, his long, chestnut brown hair bouncing as he climbed. Mucki and Willi scanned the station. No one seemed to have noticed. No expressions changed. No one looked up. No one was screaming about the boy on the ladder. No police. This was good. With each passing moment, the risk increased.

All at once, paper sailed down from the ceiling. The words on their fliers were simple, the message clear:

"Put an end to the brown-shirted hoard!"

"Soldiers lay down your weapons!"

"We perish in this misery. This world is no longer our world. We have to fight for another world or we will perish, we will perish in this misery."

Before the first flier hit the floor of the train station, the lovers had let go of each other, the Mountain Climber was down on the ground, and the others were safe too. The whole action had probably taken under fifteen minutes. They didn't stick around. They all

moved quickly in different directions away from the train station.

The next day, the newspaper had the story: the action at the train station had been committed by a group of criminals.

JEAN // a.k.a Schang

Jean had first noticed them in Manderscheider Square, right next to the school he went to.[2] The square was like a little park lined with trees, central to the neighborhood. Jean had seen the guys and girls hanging out there almost every afternoon. The first thing he noticed was the way they looked. The guys had long hair, not the militantly-short cuts he was used to seeing in the Hitler Youth. They wore short leather pants, checkered shirts, handkerchiefs around their necks, and big wristbands with the Edelweiss flower. The next thing Jean noticed was that they were playing guitars and singing songs he'd never heard before. One of the ones Jean liked the best went:

If you come to Hamburg to the seaman's bar "At the Blue Shark"

You'll see the vagabond drinking, the man called Tall Hein

He'll tell you about Charly and Jimmy, the grasslands and prairies

And sometimes he'll tell you about Shanghai, where they met, all three

It was in Shanghai, in the Ohio Bar

The three hitchhikers met, who'd travelled around the world

Jim Johnny, he came from Frisco, from Hamburg came Tall Hein

And Charly, the little Frenchman made the suggestion:

Let's all hitchhike together.

He liked all the songs: Russian songs, American cowboy songs, and German traditional songs. Jean thought that the blatantly anti-Jewish songs he had to sing in the Hitler Youth were awful. These guys and girls at Manderscheider Square were different from the Hitler Youth, and that was cool. Their outfits looked different from what other people were wearing; the songs they sang were different. They didn't have a leader; they just got to joke around and do what they wanted.[3] They didn't look uptight and weren't into authority.

Jean's friend Ferdinand Steingass had started talking to the kids, who called themselves "Edelweiss Pirates." Like Jean, Ferdinand was also raised by his grandma and grandpa, and also hated the fact he had to join the Hitler Youth. Ferdinand was outspoken and gregarious, and Jean shouldn't have been surprised that he went up and made friends with a group of kids he didn't know.[4] Ferdinand wanted freedom like he thought Americans had freedom.[5]

Soon Jean was hanging out with the Edelweiss Pirates in the evenings too. Jean chose the nickname "Schang," like Shanghai in his favorite song, and Ferdinand went by Fän. When Jean joined the Pirates, he was still thirteen, and the others he hung out with were pretty young too. For them, going on hikes and trips, and just being with each other were the most important things.

The Manderscheider Square Edelweiss Pirates didn't plan political activities like

other groups, they mostly sang songs and complained about the Hitler Youth and the Nazis. The actions that they took ended up being more like pranks. The only thing they had in mind was to irritate the Nazis.

One man that annoyed them was a newspaper stand owner in the neighborhood. Every time they wanted to buy a comic with stories about Native Americans, he'd suggest that they get something about war heroes instead, so they'd be better soldiers for Nazi Germany. Jean and his friends thought the glorification of war in those books was gross. They knew first hand what bombs falling on your neighbors really looked like. They were convinced that this man was an actual Nazi, who had turned people in for not having proper Nazis beliefs. That was annoying.

One night in the late fall of 1942, when the newspaper stand had closed for the day, they attached a metal chain to the stand, which was just sitting on the side of the road. They attached the other end of the chain to the last wagon of the streetcar, stopped nearby. When the trolley started up again, the chain clanked and became taut, and then pulled the newsstand down the trolley tracks.

Jean burst out laughing. He was proud that he could do some damage to an old Nazi jerk.

FRITZ // a.k.a Fritz de Plaat

The fact that Fritz had been thrown out the Hitler Youth when he was thirteen still haunted him two years later.[6] Now he had a job at the Ford factory, but someone had told a supervisor that Fritz had once been kicked out of the Hitler Youth, and he was called into

the office of the foreman, who was also a leader of the Hitler Youth.

“Listen here, we know that you are in the Edelweiss Pirates. What do you say to that?” Someone had said they’d seen Fritz hanging out in the Volksgarten with the Pirates. This was true, but he couldn’t admit it. Fritz tried to come up with an excuse, to downplay the whole thing and pretend like it wasn’t a big deal. It didn’t work at all.

“You know that it is forbidden! That it’s against the law. But we couldn’t expect better from you, you’ve always made problems, and we are done with you, you can count on that,” the foreman’s words and his spit struck Fritz’s face.

He knew this sort of tirade was coming.

“As a traitor against the Führer, the country, and the people, the process will be short, and we have our methods.”

With the last sentence, a hand smacked across Fritz’s face. Fritz’s body stiffened instinctively but he didn’t have time to react. He fell backwards. Those were the methods. “To be an apprentice at Ford is a privilege for a German boy, and you will be out of here if you act with so little discipline again. You are not bearable for the German people.”

Fritz scurried out of the room, feeling like a dog who had been kicked and was somehow embarrassed for being struck. He heard the foreman and his supervisor laughing behind him. This was just one more reason why he hated the Nazis and loved hanging out with his friends, the Edelweiss Pirates.

[1] Koch, Gertrud. Edelweiss: Meine Jugend als Widerstandskämpferin. Rowohlt

Taschenbuch Verlag: Hamburg, 2006. The chapters about Gertrud are taken from her memoir unless otherwise noted.

[2] Jülich, Jean. Kohldampf, Knast un Kamelle: Ein Edelweißpirate erzählt sein Leben.

Kiepenheuer & Witsch: Cologne, 2003. The chapters about Jean are taken from his memoir unless otherwise noted.

[3] Jülich, Jean. Erlebte Geschichte. <http://www.eg.nsdok.de/>

[4] Steingass, Ferdinand. Erlebte Geschichte. <http://www.eg.nsdok.de/>

[5] Steingass, Ferdinand. Erlebte Geschichte. <http://www.eg.nsdok.de/>

[6] Theilen, Fritz. Edelweißpiraten. Hermann-Josef Emons Verlag: Köln, 2003. The chapters about Fritz are taken from his memoir unless otherwise noted.