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Flowers in the Gutter

K. R. Gaddy

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Part One

1932–1938

“She will be the one who has to deal with the consequences of this. She needs to understand.”

Dusk settled into dark over the Cologne skyline. On a broad street in a nice neighborhood of the city, Gertrud Kühlem—no one called her Mucki yet—heard a knock at her apartment door. She peeked into the kitchen, and in the dull yellow light of a petroleum lamp, her father leaned over and gave her mother a kiss.

“We won’t be alone anymore,” he said.

They had been expecting that knock. Almost every night, Gertrud would watch as a stream of her parent’s friends drifted into their spacious kitchen. Chairs filled up around the large wooden table, and dark brown beer bottles and white porcelain coffee cups filled the table. As far back as Gertrud could remember, the adults would talk about politics, but joke and laugh too. By the end of 1932, Gertrud noticed almost all the talk was politics, no laughing. She had turned eight that summer, and her parents let her stay in the kitchen. Words whirled around Gertrud as she sat in the corner, trying to parse what she heard: President of the Reich, monarchist, Weimar Republic, Social Democrat, National Socialist, SA, SS, Nazi, Fascist, Communist.

She knew her parents were Communists. On days when her father was particularly proud of his party, he’d hang a red flag with a yellow star and hammer and sickle in the middle from the window. He was a trained welder, who supported unions and wanted a better world for workers.

The people who came to the apartment were also Communists. That night, a friend named Franz said that the behavior of the SA was scary, but still seemed mild. “How will it escalate?” he asked.

His girlfriend, Ilse, looked worried. “Don’t you want to send your daughter out?” she asked Gertrud’s mom. “We shouldn’t be talking about this in front of kids.”

“No, she stays here,” said her father. “She will be the one who has to deal with the consequences of this. She needs to understand.”

Gertrud didn’t understand a lot of what they were talking about, but she did see that the world could be better than it was. Their family was lucky to have a big apartment in a nice neighborhood on the edge of the *Innenstadt*, or Center City. In other sections of Cologne, some apartment buildings looked like they were about to collapse. On the street, men stood around during the day, looking and hoping for work. Those who could sing or play the accordion played whatever tunes they knew and hoped for spare change to be thrown into their cups.

How such people lived and how to make it better was what the Communists talked about.

“All people on earth should have the same rights.”

“People are poor and they don’t have work. Inflation has destroyed the country.”

“When Hitler comes to power, they will say, ‘Oh, Hitler is good; he’s brought us jobs, and the kids have food to eat again.’”

“People won’t realize he’s abusing us, at least not at first.”

Gertrud knew her father hated Adolf Hitler, the leader of the National Socialists—the Nazis. “He will be a catastrophe for Germany. He is a criminal,” he told her once.

Gertrud had also heard the Nazis called Brownshirts, the SA, and the SS. These men hated the Communists, and sometimes the Communists went to the Neumarkt to confront the Nazis. This particular night, her parents had decided to stay in rather than go to the Neumarkt.

There was hard knock at the door of Gertrud’s apartment that stopped the conversation. Gertrud’s father disappeared into the vestibule and reappeared with another comrade, a man named Walter. Blood obscured Walter’s face.

Walter had been at the Neumarkt.

“He was an especially brutal SA man,” Walter said as he slumped down on a chair in the kitchen.

Gertrud’s mother grabbed a bottle of antiseptic and cotton bandages. Her work at the pharmacy helped in situations like these. As she cleaned Walter’s wounds, his whole being—from teeth to fists—stayed clenched, his body ready to fight.

Around him, the conversation came back to Hitler, the Nazis, and what they should do next.

2 — Fritz

Fritz Theilen strained his ears to hear what was going on in the next room. The voices from the cramped kitchen were audible, but hushed. Fritz was sitting in the bedroom of the apartment, where he and his parents had their beds. The apartment was just two rooms. His parents couldn’t afford a bigger place since his dad was constantly in and out of a job depending on whether the Ford factory needed him or not, and he didn’t earn very much when he did have a job. His father and uncle had inherited the house from Fritz’s grandparents, so his whole extended family lived in the four-story building in the Ehrenfeld neighborhood. Though they couldn’t often afford to buy meat, Fritz regularly smelled sausages cooking in his uncle’s butcher shop on the first floor. Fritz knew that others in the neighborhood couldn’t afford the meat either; they paid on credit, waiting until the end of the week when they got a paycheck to give his uncle money.

In the bedroom, Fritz was waiting for the voices in the kitchen to get louder, which they invariably did, so he could overhear what

the adults were talking about. His parents were members of the Social Democratic Party, and his dad’s friends would come over to the apartment, go into the kitchen, and close the door. Fritz’s mother would shuttle him and the other kids who had come over into the bedroom, where they were expected to play. But that was hard to do when they knew secrets were being discussed in the next room. Fritz desperately wanted to know what was going on.

He knew that politics were important, and there seemed to be news every day, and not good news. He knew that around his neighborhood, “Nazi” was almost like a curse word. You weren’t supposed to say it, and you definitely weren’t supposed to be one. He remembered there had once been a banner that was strung up across Venloer Street, the main street in the neighborhood. He was too young to read the words at the time, but the banner said EHRENFELD STAYS RED, a phrase people said in the neighborhood. It meant that they were Communist and Socialist party members, and had no plans to support the Nazis. He had also seen fights in the streets of Ehrenfeld between the leftists and the Nazis. He didn’t hear very much from his parents about what was going on or why these fights were happening, but the hunger, unemployment, and discord didn’t seem to be getting any better.

He also knew his parents thought that the Nazis would bring war to Germany again. When the voices in the kitchen got louder, Fritz could tell that the parents were scared.

Fritz was cleaning up in the basement with his dad when he heard the sound. The *boom-boom-boom* was faint at first, and too rhythmic and constant to be someone hammering. The sound got closer and louder. Then he could hear notes, rising and falling: the blasts from brass instruments melded with men’s voices in a strong chorus. Fritz and his dad ran up the stairs and outside to see what was going on.



Nazis march in front of Cologne City Hall after the takeover of power, March 13, 1933.

He was only five and a half, but he had already seen his neighbors rally together to protest the Nazi Party. And protests against hunger and unemployment were among Fritz's first memories. But this sounded more like a victory parade than a protest march.

Fritz and his dad ran out onto the street. The sky was starting to get dark on the short January day. When their eyes adjusted, they saw the men approaching. The brown and black came closer, feet in strict sync. Their right arms were outstretched like they'd never bend again. Their static faces turned toward their right shoulders, sternly looking into the distance. They moved forward in straight lines like an organized swarm of bees. They were Nazis, and they were celebrating that their leader Adolf Hitler had come to power.

Suddenly, a metallic clang erupted from somewhere above Fritz. Then, a low whistle, followed by a deafening crash of metal against the pavement. A faint slosh of something spilling. Another crash, somewhere farther off.

A funnel of brightness from a police searchlight shot to the top of an apartment building. Someone was up there, rolling full trash cans and throwing potted plants off the roof. The light moved from building to building, trying to spot the culprit.

Over the next days, Fritz saw groups of eight or ten men in Nazi uniforms making their way into apartment buildings and houses, wandering through the streets, looking for Communists and Socialists to arrest.

3 — Gertrud

The streets of the Innenstadt looked different now. Fewer and fewer windows had the little red flags like the one that Gertrud's father put out. In their place were other red flags, with a large white circle and the notorious broken black cross of the Nazi Party, the swastika. On the bridges that crossed the Rhine River—including the Hohenzollern—Nazi flags fluttered in the wind. Over the buildings in the inner city, they draped on old stone. And on the Cathedral, high above the city, a Nazi flag hung from the Gothic arches.

Gertrud cried when Hitler was appointed Chancellor of Germany on January 30, 1933. She cried for the murmurings she heard on the street: "The Communists have to be taken care of. They are standing in our way." She cried for the headlines she saw in Cologne's Nazi newspaper, the *Westdeutscher Beobachter*; that declared the "Eradication of the Marxists"—another word for Communists. A catastrophe was coming; she could feel it.

At the end of February, the Reichstag parliament building in Berlin caught fire. The Nazis quickly attributed the fire to a Communist plot. Gertrud's father told her he thought the Nazis had just blamed Communists so they could round up people who did not agree with Nazis and say that it was to protect the people.

She was eight and a half, and her dad wanted her to know what was happening. He told her how his friends were pulled out of their beds in the middle of the night and thrown into the basement cells of the Gestapo, the secret state police. The Gestapo was above the law, tasked by Hitler to find those who committed treason, sabotage, and other crimes against the government. They decided how strictly to enforce laws, and could arrest someone for listening to foreign radio, or speaking ill of the Nazis, or simply because a neighbor claimed that you did any of those things.

Her dad didn't need to tell her that the Gestapo tortured their

prisoners; she had seen the friends who came to her apartment with broken and bloody faces and bodies covered in bruises. People who had come and gone from her apartment as long as she had been alive were being beaten for no other reason than that their views did not align with the Nazis.

"It's only going to get harder for us," said a man named Karl as he sat in Gertrud's family's kitchen, now a makeshift clinic. His words were barely audible from his swollen face and lips. Spread out on the table were bottles of different shapes and sizes, filled with tinctures and medicines. Gertrud helped as her mom cleaned and bandaged wounds.

"The Nazis do nothing but lie," Gertrud's mom replied. "You can't just accept that. Everyone has to be able to say what they believe."

But voicing the wrong opinion was cause for arrest.

4 — Jean

They had been a family: Jean Jülich, his older brother, Franz, his mom, and his dad. The Jülichs had lived in an apartment on Barbara Street on the north side of the city. The apartment was small, just a bedroom, a kitchen, and a hallway. Jean remembered the walls being an ugly blue



Jean Jülich around 1931.

and the whole place being a little lifeless. But it was home, and they were all together.

In 1933, that changed. Everything changed. Jean's father was an official in the Communist Party and saw what was happening with the arrests and fights after Hitler came to power. He left. Jean's mom couldn't afford to support both children, so Jean went to go live with his grandparents. Jean was four, and his grandparents doted on him. And he loved his grandparents, and their apartment was nicer and bigger, but his family was broken and would never be put back together again.

5 — Gertrud

One day in the spring of 1933, Gertrud heard a knock at the door. There in the hallway was her friend Margaret, dressed normally in a colorful skirt and white blouse. But there was something wrong with her eyes. They were confused and desperate, searching for something.

"They've beaten her to death! They've beaten my mother to death!" she screamed.

Gertrud pulled her inside. Margaret's mother had often been at the Kühlem apartment, sitting on the very same leather sofa in the living room where they now were. Margaret explained what had happened:

A few days earlier, five men had come to their door, ripped Margaret's mother out of bed, and dragged her from the apartment. Margaret's dad was working in another city, so she just sat there in her bed all night, alone, wondering what to do. She'd heard about

the Brown House, where the Gestapo took prisoners, so the next day, she went there to ask about her mother. They told Margaret that her mother had jumped out of a window.

Gertrud and her mom took Margaret to her grandparents' house in the Deutz neighborhood. They were the family that could take care of Margaret now. Losing a parent was something that happened in fairy tales, not in real life. But now Margaret's mother was gone, and she wasn't a character in a book. She was a friend who had sat on their leather couch in the light of the petroleum lamps and talked about Communist leaflets and newspapers. She would never sit there again.

On their way home, marching Nazis appeared on the street—something that happened more and more. Her mom quickly wrapped her arm around Gertrud's shoulder and pulled her closer. At any moment, one of the men could stop and start asking questions, start making demands. *Why didn't you give the Hitler salute? Why did you look me in the eye? What are you doing out?* There might not be a right answer.

The brown-shirted SA troops moved past without noticing them. They exhaled and continued home.

Meanwhile, Gertrud's family was managing. Her parents still had jobs. They had an apartment. They had each other. In the days following Margaret's mother's disappearance, Gertrud wondered if her friend would cry at night now. Gertrud couldn't really imagine living with her own grandparents. She didn't like her mother's parents. They were stiff and formal, and they didn't like her dad because he was working-class and talked about politics. She loved that her dad talked about politics with her and read her political books.

Before dinner one night, she found him reading an autobiography of Communist Party member Max Hoelz. Hoelz was German but had moved to the Soviet Union. She called her dad to dinner.

Gertrud had put out cheese, sausages, and pickles to go with the bread her mother had baked for a light supper. For this place and time, such a spread was a feast. But no one felt like eating; they were too occupied with what was going on around them: the arrests, the beatings, the people going missing, the friends lost.

The silence was broken by a loud crash followed by thumping.

“That sounds like boots,” Gertrud’s father said.

The noise got louder. Then, a crack.

In an instant, the specter that had been haunting the street was in their home. Four men in uniforms were in the kitchen.

Her father jumped out of his chair. Almost automatically, Gertrud’s mother grabbed her daughter and spun around, putting herself between the men and Gertrud.

“We’re searching the house,” growled one of the men. “Looking for weapons.”

“There are no weapons here,” said Gertrud’s father.

“We’ll see about that. Search!”

The soldiers pushed their way into the living room and bedrooms. With unnecessary force, they sliced open the leather couch cushions, the bedding, the pillows. They upended the coffee table, knocked over chairs. Gertrud’s mother pressed her closer.

When a man walked into Gertrud’s room, she broke away from her mother to see what he was doing. Looking for guns, in her room? There weren’t any in there. There weren’t any anywhere in the house. But in the middle of the floor was her favorite possession, a dollhouse her great-uncle had given her. Gertrud watched as the big, black boot of a Nazi came down, the wood cracking and splintering everywhere. His foot slammed through the walls. He turned his destruction to the doll family whose home he had just destroyed, and crushed them too.

“You can’t destroy my toys! They’re not yours!” Gertrud cried as she hid behind an armchair that was now spilling its innards like an exploded goose.

“Kühlem, come with us!” the leader yelled.

“Can I bring my jacket?” Gertrud’s father asked.

“You won’t need it.”

Her mother was silent as the men dragged Gertrud’s father out of the apartment.

The fastest way for Gertrud to get to school was to walk toward Rathenau Square at the end of her street, walk along the small park, and then make a right on Lochner Street. Her short hair brushed against the side of her neck, and her skirt swished around her thighs as she hurried to the three-story brick building.

Gertrud often met her friend Waltraud on the playground before school and during recess. On this day, Waltraud had brought Gertrud a doll because she’d heard Gertrud’s father had been arrested and all of Gertrud’s toys had been destroyed. Gertrud was grateful for a new toy—and for a good friend. She stuck the blue-eyed, blond-haired doll under her arm as she walked across the playground.

Then four or five girls confronted her. They too had heard what happened to her father.

“Your dad is a criminal.”

“He’s in jail. The daughter of a criminal doesn’t deserve a doll,” they taunted.

A hand reached toward Gertrud and pulled the doll out from under her arm.

Fury erupted from inside her. She flailed her arms at the girls, and her skirt flew up as she kicked wildly. A high-pitched scream spewed out of her mouth and she cursed at the bullies. Tears welled up in her eyes and rolled down her cheeks.

When the girls finally left, Gertrud couldn’t go into the classroom. She just stood outside, alone with her thoughts. Why were these girls so mean? She wasn’t a criminal. And her dad wasn’t a

criminal. She didn't think he deserved to be arrested or in prison. He just wanted to make things better for everyone, especially the workers. These girls were no better than the men who had broken into her apartment.

The girls in Gertrud's class were mean, but they weren't her biggest problem. Nazis had infiltrated the whole school. Students didn't talk about politics in school, unless they were saying how great Hitler and the Third Reich were. The teachers couldn't simply avoid politics. They had to be members of the Nazi Party to keep their jobs. And every morning, they were supposed to lead the students as they raised their hands in the air and shouted, "Heil Hitler!"

Before Hitler, the students at the Catholic elementary school would say "Greetings to Jesus Christ," or "Greetings to God," at the beginning of the day. Hitler demanded a more German greeting and wanted people to be reminded of him—and him alone—daily. So the teachers took down crosses and put up pictures of Hitler at the front of the classrooms.

But Gertrud just couldn't bring herself to salute. Hitler was the reason her dad was gone.

One day,* her teacher noticed she wasn't doing the greeting and sent her to the principal's office, and her mom was called in. The principal's gray suit looked as stiff as a uniform. Gertrud suspected that her teacher was a real Nazi, but she wasn't sure about her principal's views.

"Why does Gertrud refuse to do the Hitler greeting?" he asked.

"You can ask her yourself," Gertrud's mother replied.

The principal turned to Gertrud.

"Gertrud, why did you not say, 'Heil Hitler'?"

"Hitler locked up my father for no reason, and I'm not going to greet a man like that," she responded.

This was an answer that could have easily gotten her thrown out of school. Or worse.

"All right, go home," he said.

The next day she was put in the other class, but she made sure to sit in the back of the classroom so the teacher didn't see if she said Heil Hitler or not.

Gertrud missed her dad, especially after school, at the times when he'd usually come home from work. Before, she would snuggle into the big leather couch with him, where they read books together about Communism and Socialism. His favorites were the *Communist Manifesto* and writings by Ernst Thälmann, the leader of the Communist Party in Germany. Gertrud's hero was Rosa Luxemburg, the first female editor of the *Leipzig People's Newspaper* and founder of the Communist newspaper *Die Rote Fahne*, or *The Red Flag*. She was for the working people's revolution and wanted workers to strike, but she was also a pacifist and didn't believe in violence. She had been murdered in 1919 for her beliefs. Gertrud wanted to study politics, economics, and history like Luxemburg. She wanted to write and bring people together so that they could live peacefully with one another. She could never understand why people who simply had different political beliefs would be killed for their opinions. Now Gertrud had to read Luxemburg on her own.

After nine months in a concentration camp, Gertrud's dad was released and came home in April 1934. He looked different. He had been a big, heavy man, with snow-white hair and a small mustache. Now he was a thinner, smaller version of himself. Before, he had always liked to look good. When he came home from work, he'd change out of his coveralls and wash his hands so he wouldn't

* I can't precisely date this, because Gertrud just writes it as a thing that happened at some point when her father was gone. Technically, it appears in her memoir right after her description of Kristallnacht, but she jumps around in time even after that to things happening before 1938.

have the grime from the day on him. Now, the camp had left him dirty, skinny, and worn-out. She thought he finally looked older than he was.

She noticed his spirit wasn't broken, though; he wanted to keep working for the Communist Party underground. He told her that every time he'd dug his shovel into the dirt at the camp, his conviction to resist grew stronger. Gertrud knew whatever her dad wanted to do was dangerous, but she couldn't ignore his conviction. This was a way she could help him.

"We are going to hand out advertisements," Gertrud told her school friend Waltraud, the one who'd given her the doll. "Do you want to help?"

"Advertisements" was a lie, but she wanted Waltraud's company. When she agreed, they headed to the printer.

Gertrud and Waltraud put the papers in their bags and went to meet Gertrud's dad. As they walked up to him, Gertrud's father gave her a look. She knew she had done something wrong, but she didn't know what. He didn't say anything.

They walked along the streets, going into apartments and slipping the papers under doors, facedown. They didn't go to every house, only to the ones Gertrud's father knew were safe. They also didn't want to just leave the illegal material in a mailbox where someone could accidentally pick it up.

They walked and walked, and after they had given out all of the copies and Waltraud went home, her dad finally said something.

"What were you thinking?" he asked. "You will not do that again, do you hear me? It is too dangerous. Her parents are not Communists. She doesn't belong with us." Her dad had never used such harsh words with her before.

"But it's just a newspaper," she replied.

"Yes, my child, but the Nazis do not like what is written inside." Gertrud hadn't thought about how dangerous handing out

papers could be, for them or for Waltraud. If Waltraud had been caught, the Nazis might not have believed that she didn't know she was handing out illegal material. Waltraud might also figure out what was going on and tell someone about the newspapers.

Gertrud thought that the truth needed to be told, and *The Red Flag* told the truth about the Nazis. But she also needed to know whom to trust, and to be sure that if she was doing something illegal, the other people with her could be trusted completely. The days of openly flying the red Communist flag outside her home were over.

6 — Jean

Jean had started first grade—his first year of school—in the fall of 1935. In his photo on the first day, his blond hair hangs down his forehead, and his smile pushes his round cheeks up toward his large eyes. He looks like a happy six-year-old. And his grandparents had tried to make him as happy as possible. It wasn't an easy job. Hitler had come to power promising employment and a better life, but his family hadn't experienced that. Jean saw his dad sometimes, but not often, and his mother couldn't visit often either. She worked in an umbrella factory and took work home in the evening to earn extra. Jean's older brother lived in an orphanage because she rented a room in an attic and couldn't afford to take care of him. Jean's grandfather had to work to support Jean and his grandmother. They lived on sauerkraut, potatoes, and green beans. Sometimes they had eggs or fish, but rarely meat.