THE BERLIN PASSPORT OFFICE

By Flora Johnston

The Paris Peacemakers
The Endeavour of Elsie Mackay
The Berlin Passport Office



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For all the Prowe Morrisons, my Scottish-German family, with love

'Now the people here really and finally believe that the stories of 1938–9 were not exaggerated. They were understated in fact. It is all too horrible. Looking back, I feel grateful that our little office in Tiergartenstrasse was able to assist some – far too few – to escape in time.'

Frank Foley to Werner Senator, 19th April 1945

'And if the authorities round up a few hundred Christians, put them through a solemn trial and find them guilty, then they'll get all the curses, and Nero will only have to appear on his balcony in uniform to have all Rome lining up below and shouting Hail!'

Naomi Mitchison, *The Blood of the Martyrs*

PART ONE

Anschluss

March to April 1938

Chapter One

As Frank approached the ornate façade of the Nathan Israel Department Store, the chill he felt had little to do with the sharp east wind slicing through him. He resisted a backward glance to the shadowy windows of the imposing town hall: in Berlin these days it was best just to assume you were always being observed.

Inside, he paused in the warmth, assailed by mingled scents of perfume, polish and new leather.

'Can I help you, sir?'

'It's fine, thanks. I'm just here to collect a parcel for my wife.'

That much was true. Kay often did this, because what was more unremarkable than a housewife collecting an order? But Kay was laid up with a feverish cold and had looked at him weakly from under a heap of blankets that morning. 'It's no use, Frank. You'll have to go yourself, or send someone from the office.'

'I'll go myself. How hard can it be?' They stopped talking as their maid Ingrid entered the room with a hot drink for Kay, and Frank turned to look out of the window at the shared courtyard. Once they were alone again, he moved towards her but Kay held up her hands, fending him off.

'Last thing we need right now is you becoming poorly. The

parcel contains blue felt for Ursula's new coat, but there should be some stockings and underclothes for her too. I handed the order in last week.' She broke off, giving way to another violent outbreak of coughing.

'My poor love. Shall I stop by the pharmacist and ask him to make up some more of that cough mixture?'

She lay back weakly on the pillows. 'Ingrid can do that, but I don't want to send her to Nathan Israel.'

'No, indeed.'

'Ask for Johanna in the haberdashery department. She'll have laid the package aside specially. Then take it straight to the office and give it to Miss St Clair.'

He saw a glimmer of fear in Kay's dark eyes and took her hand, squeezing it tightly. 'My dear, I'm sure I can manage. Just rest and stop worrying.'

Now Frank paused to scan the vast central hall, his senses alert. A uniformed SS officer appeared to be absorbed in a display of jewellery, but Frank paid more attention to those customers who were not in uniform. The Gestapo preferred plain clothes. Not recognising any faces, he strode more confidently than he felt across the atrium, touching his hat in greeting as the SS officer glanced up.

At the foot of the grand staircase Frank looked up at galleries whose intricate carving seemed to glow in the light of the beautiful glass dome soaring above. No sign of Wilfrid. Nathan Israel was one of the oldest department stores in the city and still proudly proclaimed itself 'Das Kaufhaus im Zentrum', although in truth the retail heart of Berlin had long since moved further west. There was a timeless grace and elegance about Nathan Israel, though, which perfectly reflected the grace and elegance of its owner.

If you spent long enough in this palace of light and beauty,

you could almost forget what the Berlin outside these walls had become.

Frank climbed the stairs and passed through an archway into the haberdashery department. At a long counter near the wall a young woman, deep auburn hair neatly pinned back, was serving an older lady who was swaddled in furs. The sales assistant glanced up at Frank briefly before returning her attention to her customer. A man with a measuring tape draped over one shoulder came towards him. 'May I help you, sir?'

'I'm here to collect a parcel for my wife. Some material for a coat for our daughter, I believe.'

'What's the name, sir? I'll get that for you.'

'Captain Foley. The order was placed by Mrs Foley.'

The young woman behind the counter broke off from her conversation. 'Excuse me a moment. Captain Foley, your wife's parcel is in the storeroom. If you don't mind waiting a few minutes, I'll fetch it.'

'Where is it?' the man demanded. 'I'll get it, Johanna. It doesn't do to keep customers waiting.'

'And we're not nearly finished here,' put in the woman dressed in furs snarkily.

'Oh, I'm in no hurry to go back out into that cold wind,' Frank said, noticing the anxiety in Johanna's eyes. 'I'll happily wait until you're ready.' He nodded to them and turned aside to a display of buttons, seeming to give it his full attention. The male sales assistant frowned. Frank watched surreptitiously as he opened a ledger and began running his finger down the entries. Had the man's suspicion been aroused?

The woman in furs hummed and prevaricated over the array of ribbons spread out before her, then eventually left without making a purchase. Johanna disappeared to the storeroom and

returned with a brown paper parcel. 'Your wife's order, Captain Foley. Here's a note of the items it contains. I've added a little purse that your wife admired and asked me to include, should we ever have it in the right colour.'

'All on account, I presume?' Frank asked, as he took the parcel. He gave the briefest of glances towards the other counter, where the tape-measure man still sat frowning over his ledger, clearly listening to every word. Frank made a mental note to warn Wilfrid about him. He seemed a little too interested.

'Yes, sir.' She was twisting a loose strand of hair around her finger. 'I hope Mrs Foley is well?'

'Just a nasty cold. Thank you.' He took the parcel with a quick smile. At the foot of the stairs he looked around, as if taking in his surroundings one more time before leaving. There on the balcony above, a slim man stood watching him. The weak March sun had emerged from the cloud and filtered through stained glass, drenching him in colour. Their eyes met. Wilfrid nodded briefly and turned away.

Frank reached the exit at the same time as the SS officer, who now cradled a small, beautifully wrapped box in his hand. His mouth dry, Frank stepped back. 'After you,' he said politely, trying not to think about the parcel he was holding. Was it his imagination, or did the man's eyes dart towards it? He followed the SS officer outside and watched him stride across the road and enter the red-brick town hall. Frank looked up at it and wondered how much longer the Nazi authorities would stomach looking out of their office windows directly into the defiant splendour of this palace of Jewish success. But then, if they closed it down, where would they buy gifts for their wives?

Frank paused only to pick up a newspaper from the kiosk on the corner and hailed a cab. Twisting round, he was fairly sure

nobody had followed him. If they had, all they would see was the very ordinary-looking British Passport Control Officer heading for his place of work. He glanced at the headline. GERMAN-AUSTRIA SAVED FROM CHAOS! the *Völkischer Beobachter* proclaimed. That was one way of describing Hitler's audacious and chilling march into Austria earlier that week, ripping up a dozen treaties, with ramifications Frank feared his government hadn't even begun to grasp.

The cab took him across the Spree and along Unter den Linden before turning down towards Tiergartenstrasse and the Passport Control Office. From this pink former hunting palace overlooking the beautiful Tiergarten, Berlin's premier park, the British authorities issued visas and passports, controlling who from Germany could enter not just the United Kingdom but all British territories across the world.

Frank had taken on the role of Passport Control Officer in 1921, in a very different Germany crushed not just by the devastating impact of war but under the brutal terms imposed by the Versailles Treaty. Through the inflation crisis, when it was cheaper to burn paper money than logs or coal, followed all too soon by the crippling effects of the Wall Street crash, Frank had admired the resilience of Berliners, as they fought not merely to survive but to seize pleasure from the wasteland of their hopes in the clubs and bars of the most hedonistic city in Europe.

How distant those days now seemed!

The parcel secure under his arm, Frank crossed the courtyard to the main entrance, relieved to see that the queue of those desperate to flee Germany did not extend down the stairs today. At least not yet. He hurried up two at a time to the first floor, and into the main office, busy with the clatter of typewriters, the hum of voices and the insistent trill of a telephone. In most capital

cities Passport Control was based in the British Embassy, but a prescient arrangement put in place by Frank's predecessor meant that his workplace lay a twenty-minute walk from the crumbling grandeur of the Embassy building. The new ambassador, Sir Nevile Henderson, was desperate to draw the PCO into his domain, but Frank remained politely resistant. He had a hard enough job keeping this ambassador's beaky nose out of his business as it was.

Normally Frank lingered on his way between the desks, chatting with his staff and checking any difficulties, but today he was conscious of the bundle he carried and did no more than nod briefly, brushing off enquiries. Kay had asked him to hand the parcel to his secretary, Miss St Clair, but she was not at her desk. Frank entered his private office and locked the door.

Undoing the brown paper, he found blue felt for Ursula's coat, along with some stockings and underclothes, and a small leather purse. He laid the other items aside and unrolled the material slowly, revealing a tightly fastened bundle of Reichsmarks buried deep in the folds. 'God bless you, Wilfrid,' he murmured, picturing again the elegant man watching from the balcony.

If the Nazis intended to seize his firm, Wilfrid Israel would make damn sure the profits – and his own private fortune – were put to good use first, no matter the danger.

Frank had his own personal safe in this room, separate to the one used to store official documents in the larger office, and he stowed the money in there for now. He would use some of it to pay exit fees for those who couldn't otherwise afford to leave Germany, and pass the rest on to Wilfrid's friend and colleague Hubert Pollack for his own shadowy purposes. Returning to his desk, he opened the newspaper.

Hitler had made no secret of his desire to annexe his own birthplace as part of his dream of a Greater Germany, but events

had moved with frightening speed these last few days. The ground had been prepared with lurid newspaper stories describing vicious attacks on ethnic Germans in Vienna, supposedly carried out by communists and leftists, and German troops had amassed on the Austrian border. In today's fantastical account, concocted by Minister of Propaganda Josef Goebbels, Frank read that the Austrian government had invited Hitler to send in German troops to restore order. Now the people were out on the streets in gratitude, while Hitler stood in the Heldenplatz, glorying in their praise. *Ein Volk, ein Reich, ein Führer!*

Frank scanned the columns and leant his forehead on his hand. Uppermost in his mind was his colleague Thomas Kendrick, whose role as Passport Control Officer in Vienna was, like Frank's here in Berlin, far more than it appeared. What would this mean for Kendrick and his agents – several of whom operated in Germany? Deeply troubled, he folded the newspaper. What he needed was to hear directly from someone on the ground, but to contact any of his sources right now would place them in even greater danger.

When Frank returned to the flat that evening, he found Kay wrapped in a shawl on the sofa looking much brighter, while fourteen-year-old Ursula was curled in an armchair with a book. 'There's some ham and a salad in the kitchen,' Kay said.

'Have you eaten?' he asked, bending down to stroke Scamp the spaniel who was greeting him enthusiastically.

'A boiled egg. I feel much better. A good sleep and I'll be right as rain.' She paused. 'How did you get on this morning? Did you get my parcel?'

'I did, and everything was just as you ordered.' He produced the material. 'This will make you a splendid coat, don't you think, Ursula?'

She barely lifted her eyes from her book. 'Well, I should hope so. I chose it.'

'There's that purse you wanted too, Kay.'

A look of puzzlement passed across Kay's face. 'Ursula, there are some other bits and pieces for you,' she said a little sharply. 'Go and put them away in your room.'

With an exaggerated sigh, the girl closed her book and got to her feet. When Ursula was gone, Kay took the purse and examined it. 'Did you show this to Miss St Clair?'

'She wasn't in,' Frank said, beginning to feel foolish. 'I take it there's more to this?'

'Must be. I never asked for a purse. Bring me my nail scissors from the dressing table, would you? There's something beneath the lining.'

Frank walked along the hall to their bedroom, annoyed with himself. Johanna had even drawn his attention to the purse, saying as much as she could in the presence of her watchful colleague. He looked on the dressing table but there was no sign of the nail scissors. There they were, on the bedside cabinet, on top of the novel she had been reading this morning. He lifted the book and glanced at the cover. The latest detective novel by Corran Rutherford, sent to Kay by her sister no doubt. Now there was a nice coincidence.

Back in the sitting room, Frank watched as she drew out a slip of paper. 'Call yourself a spy?' She laughed, a laugh which quickly turned into a coughing fit.

'I try not to,' he said mildly, and fetched her a glass of water, exchanging it for the note.

'What is it?'

'The name of a café and a date and time. Tomorrow. Wilfrid wants to meet.'

Kay looked up at him, all laughter gone. 'Isn't that dangerous? The Gestapo may be watching him.'

'We're two friends meeting for a drink, that's all.' He kissed her. 'Although without you I would have missed the appointment altogether.'

'I rather wish you had.'