The oldest son in a Christian German family, Ernst struggles to understand the changes brought by Hitler’s rise to power. After watching a young woman being arrested for no apparent reason, he and his best friend try to name a threat they feel but cannot discuss with adults. On Kristallnacht, when the synagogue across the street from their church burns, he overhears adults talk about how the fire was set to punish the Jews. But by whom? And why were the Jews so hated? Why must his father go to war?

Life in Arnswalde was as angular and sharp as the letters I learned to write in school. Any first alphabet is difficult, but I began my formal education with the hope of perfection I believed God required of me in all that I undertook. After much friction between my bit of chalk and the slate on my desk, rough approximations of the jagged Sütterlin letters, now identified with Nazism, spread across my board like insect legs across the small dark pool of what I knew. Day after day the teacher corrected my attempts so frequently my hand froze and my face grew hot even as his footsteps neared along the rows of boys seated at wooden desks. Those beside me learned to watch my face turn red. Although they didn’t dare laugh in class, they added “stupid” to their taunts about my freckles in the schoolyard. Not from our church, my classmates remained strangers for the most part. My only friend was the minister’s son, Gustav Buch, who sat too far forward in the class to give me much assistance. In order to meet my eye, he had to turn fully around, a move that would have resulted in a sharp smack across the shoulders from the wooden cane our teacher carried.

One night I dreamed I formed my letters perfectly. I waited to show the teacher, imagining how surprised the boys next to me would be when they heard his praise. But while he was still a half-row away, the letters quivered free of my slate, marched across the floor and out the door to join the ranks of Storm Troopers, or SA, who were marching through the halls of our school, singing their ballads. While I had never seen the SA at school, I often watched them march through the streets of Arnswalde at night carrying torches and singing. What was I doing at school so late? Looking around, I saw that, except for me, the classroom was suddenly empty. And dark. Why hadn’t anyone told me to go home?

Frightened, I woke to find myself in bed. Outside, the real SA paraded by our house, singing. To my sleepy, childish ears, their lyrics, which worshipped the German “race,” the Führer and Fatherland as if the three were one, sounded like righteous hymns, and I was comforted. Nazis considered the SA, short for Sturm Abteilung, to be heroes. These “storm troopers,” Hitler’s private army, had waged the street battles against anti-fascists, communists, and intellectuals in the early years of the Nazi party. By 1934, the SA grew so large the regular German Army, the Wehrmacht, which was limited in size by the Versailles Treaty, began to distrust them. Hitler himself was suspicious of their power and had ordered the creation of the SS, or Schutzstaffel, a “defense force” responsible only to him, to protect him from enemies within his own movement.

I rose in my bed to watch their ranks pass below our bedroom window, careful not to wake my family. My brother Franz slept beside me in our parents’ bed, while our
sisters Margret, now two, and Karla, still under a year, shared another bed. When no one else woke, I lay back down and watched my breath rise upward in the cold moonlight.

As an old man, I have asked myself if my parents failed to hear the violence in Hitler’s words and the songs of his followers, or, if they did hear them, why they never spoke openly against Nazism. I doubt they heard Hitler himself speak before we moved to Arnswalde from the estate where my father was a apprentice to his own father, a wheelwright. Opa, as we called Grandfather, didn’t have a radio, or electricity, for that matter. Nor was there a newspaper available on the estate in Deutch-Buckow, although the Nazis undoubtedly posted their newspaper and distributed their campaign literature in town, where Father or Mother might have read them. The Nazis also published pamphlets, known as *Kampfschriften*, on various topics that were sold on the street or on trains by unemployed men for a small price, a portion of which the seller could keep for himself. I doubt my parents would have had the money to spare even if they had been interested. We first heard Hitler on the radio in 1934 in Arnswalde, around the time old President Hindenburg died and Hitler declared himself both Chancellor and President, thereby taking over the government.

Through his speeches, Hitler tried to convince Germans that we lived in dangerous times, so dangerous he was forced to arrest, imprison and even execute people without trials to protect us. In 1934, he claimed that even members of his own party like Ernst Rhöm, who had led the SA, had to be killed along with hundreds of others. They threatened our well being, Hitler said, and he had to burn "down to the flesh the ulcers poisoning our domestic life." He couched his messages about fear and the necessary violence in language we associated with worship, using words like "providence" and "honor." He spoke about the importance of "returning the family to its proper place." "Every mother," he said on June 30, 1934, "can give her son to the SA, to the party, to the Hitler Youth without fear that he might be morally injured there."

How much of the political situation did my parents understand? Were they sophisticated enough to imagine the type of “moral” injury I might suffer in the Hitler Youth?

My parents never discouraged me from admiring the columns of smartly uniformed Hitler Youth marching through the streets in the afternoon. Nor did they sign me up for the Deutche Jungvolk, or German Youth, the junior branch of the Hitler Youth when I turned six, as many parents did. But how I longed to join them. There is a family photograph of me at five carrying a Nazi flag leading my brother Franz and my sisters Karla and Margret, still in diapers, around the inner courtyard of our house. Couldn’t my parents hear the message of death in the anthems sung under our windows?

But these are questions an old man asks of the past, of memory, not the questions of a small boy just learning to ride a bike. Still, I believe I had the seeds of these questions even then. I knew something was not right with all I saw and heard. During our first years at school my best friend Gustav and I came up with a saying of our own for situations that looked wrong to us but weren’t discussed by adults. We didn’t come up with it all at once, or even consciously, but several events shaped our code and gave it meaning.
Our secret language’s source was our first year primer, which I loved. I can still recite poems from it, like the one about the circus:

Seht nur an die tollen Reiter,
Look at the wild riders,
Tiger, Affen und so weiter,
Tigers, monkeys and so on,
Bären, die auf Tonnen tanzen,
Bears that dance on barrels,
Neger mit den Riesenlanzen,
Negroes with their large lances,
Zebra mit dem Zebrakinde,
Zebras with their zebra children,
Auf dem Seil die Rosalinde,
On the rope is Rosalind,
August mit dem Riesenschwein
August with the giant pig,
Und noch viele Zauberein.
And many other magical things.

As we walked home, Gustav and I would repeat our favorite rhymes over and over, reveling in the blending of our voices, laughing as the poems’ words balanced us on the high wire beside the fair Rosalind. Despite the apparent stability of the ground we treaded, we placed one foot carefully in front of the other, our arms out to the side to lend us balance. Perhaps the drama of losing and regaining our equilibrium distracted us from our real fear: the two older boys who often chased us home from school, yelling at us and threatening to beat us up. No sooner had I been relieved of Edith’s torments than these boys came on the scene. They hated me because of my freckles, or so they shouted at me as I ran. Without fail the boys would continue to chase me after Gustav turned right and ran up our street to the safety of his house behind the Pentecostal meeting hall’s iron fence. I would run as fast as I could up the alley behind Father’s shop, banging the gate shut behind me. Once or twice Father stepped into the alley to confront my pursuers, but they always managed to disappear, leaving me looking as if I were sweating and out of breath over some imaginary danger. I had to wait until I saw Gustav to talk about the close call. Only once did one of the boys catch me. He held me against a wall, telling me he would bite off my nose if it weren’t so freckled. All I remember is the smell of onions on his breath before I was saved by a man in a baker’s apron who turned the corner just in time to tell the boy to leave me alone.

Sometimes while our class read aloud, Gustav and I would try to read louder than the rest, driven by the pleasure of hearing each other’s voices. Other times, I would recognize Gustav’s voice holding on just a bit longer than the others to the rhyme at the end of each line of poetry, and I would try to begin reading the next line just that much sooner so he might hear me. One day as we read a short poem, a word so shocked us both that I saw Gustav’s head turn towards me until our eyes met.

A swear word in our primer! Not the worst of swear words as it called on the name of the Germanic god of thunder, Donner, and not the Lord’s, but a swear word nonetheless…one which either of us would have gotten a beating for using at home. The poem was short, about a man who has lost his hat in a sudden gust of wind. He asks first for his cousin and then for heaven itself to help him:

Donnerwetter! Halt ihn Vetter.
Himmel hilf! Mein neuer Hut.

A rough translation of Donnerwetter might be “dammit.” We were shocked. Here we were in school, with our teacher looking on, reading aloud with the other boys,
Dammit! Catch it, cousin.
Heaven, help! My new hat.

Just as Gustav turned toward the front again, the teacher’s wooden pointer hit his shoulder. Gustav didn’t make a sound in pain or protest, but on our way home, we talked about how odd the day had been.

“If we swore all the time, we wouldn’t have been shocked by having to read *Donnerwetter* out of the book, and you wouldn’t have turned around to look at me. You wouldn’t have been hit at all,” I pointed out, still feeling a bit guilty for using the word.

“That’s true. If my father said *Donnerwetter* every time he dropped something…”

“…or my mother said *Donnerwetter* when the bread won’t rise…” I had to stop from laughing so hard at the idea of my mother cursing in the kitchen.

Gustav continued, “We wouldn’t have blinked if our people said *Donnerwetter* all day long.”

“So you didn’t get in trouble for swearing today, but for *not* swearing.”

“*Donnerwetter!*”

“*Donnerwetter, Vetter!*”

From then on, we called ourselves “cousins.” No more related by blood than we had been the day before, we felt another kind of bond resound between us in the rhyme between this kinship term and the school sanctioned but parentally forbidden swear word. Something about our lives that we could not explain, as we could not explain so much about our lives, became a bit more understandable between us, although we couldn’t have said how.

And our confusion deepened on March 7, 1936. We watched Mr. Kunze, our math teacher, explain a problem on the board. Mr. Kunze was a carefully organized teacher. One wouldn’t call him a kind teacher, but in my school days kindness was not expected of teachers, only professionalism. No boy dared to make a noise, even when Mr. Kunze’s back was turned, but this afternoon we heard voices in the hall. As they grew louder and nearer, feet shuffled in our class and a few boys stood to look out the window. Before Mr. Kunze could tell them to sit, the door was thrown open. Older boys, two of whom Gustav and I knew only too well, burst into the room shouting, “We’ve marched into the Rhineland!”

The room exploded with cheers. I barely understood what they meant; I had heard Father and Grandfather discussing whether or not the Rhineland was worth starting a war over. France had re-occupied this industrial area to try to force Germany to make the reparations we owed them according to the Treaty of Versailles. While the treaty also forbade Germany to have an army, Hitler had rebuilt the *Wehrmacht* anyway, in violation of the treaty, and now German troops had taken the Rhineland back! But I doubt my classmates who now shouted and waved their arms in triumph understood the situation any more than I. Did this mean war? Mr. Kunze shouted for everyone to sit down, but so many of his students now stood on their chairs the room showed no signs of coming to order. The older boys led them in chanting, *Ein Volk, ein Reich, ein Führer.* One people, One country, One Fuehrer. I could see Gustav across the room, his feet still on the floor, looking at me, as unable as I to believe the class could disrespect Mr. Kunze. Although I couldn’t hear Gustav over the shouts, his lips formed, “*Donnerwetter.*”
Yes, I nodded, seeing he was afraid, too. What was happening? I wanted to shout into the chaos, too, but all I could think to yell was the only nonsense that made sense of what I saw: “Seht nur an die tollen Reiter (Look at the wild riders!)”

From where he stood, Gustav answered, “Bären, die auf Tonnen tanzen, Vetter (Bears that dance on barrels, cousin).”

I had so many questions that went unanswered, about the news on the radio, about the boys who hated me enough to want to hurt me just because I had freckles, about Grandfather’s death. Franz, my sisters and I had seen less and less of Grandfather in the past months. In fact, the only time anyone spoke of him was to tell us we were disturbing him. We had to tiptoe upstairs at night, and even during the day had to be very quiet playing in the yard or in the street under his window. Since he had always been sick, nothing seemed out of the ordinary until one morning Mother told us at breakfast that he had died in the night and that the funeral would be the next day.

What had he died of? Had he suffered? What was death like? But my parents were so busy no one had time to answer, and I finally learned not to ask. Not all of my questions were about death, either. I couldn’t help thinking about birth, too. We had a new baby sister, Anna, born at home as were my brother and my two other sisters, but no one gave me any more information about that process than they had about Grandfather’s death.

Eventually, I found a hero in the Gummimann. “Gummi” means “rubber” in German, and the Gummimann, who was only seen at night, was so nicknamed by the people of Arnswalde because he was said to wear a rubber raincoat and rubber gloves. Gummimann stole from the rich, which is only logical, but gave to the poor in a rather less than logical manner by breaking into their houses, leaving money and a note that simply read, "From the Gummimann." Or so people said. His somewhat elastic legend grew nightly in the yards and kitchens of Arnswalde only to shrink back a bit in the more restrained newspaper reports. But since the 30,000 people of Arnswalde were without a cinema and had only the one state-run radio station and the state controlled press to entertain us, the Gummimann became a household treasure. Naturally, Gustav and I became obsessed with trying to see him.

One morning I reported at breakfast, "Gustav said his older sister said the Gummimann was seen climbing the Lutheran church tower last night." Supposedly the Gummimann had the ability to climb straight walls with a kind of suction device on his hands.

"I doubt that," Grandma said. "There's no reason to think he belongs to the state church. He's so generous and quiet." Everyone laughed. The Lutheran church in the square up the street from us, a branch of the recognized church of Germany, an officially Christian nation, thought that our Pentecostal Fellowship was "demonic." Father never criticized the other denomination, but Grandmother was not as circumspect.

"Well, if Gummimann is a Pentecostal," Father said, getting up to go to work, "then I don't see why he would climb the church steeple."

"Did Gustav say anyone had broken into the meeting hall last night to leave any cash? Or a bell?" Grandmother asked.

"No. Gustav just said..."
"Ernst! Don't even add to that ridiculous story," Mother interrupted, trying to get Anna, who lay on her shoulder, to burp. "I don't want you children to think that stealing under any circumstances is good. God will take care of the poor; we don't need real or imagined criminals doing His work for Him. You know I don't believe this Gummimann exists."

"But Gustav said someone saw him just last night," I protested.

Mother shook her head at Father. "You see? This nonsense has started the children misrepresenting the truth. First he said Gustav's sister said she saw him, and now it is just 'someone.'"

"Which was it, Ernst?" Father asked.

I couldn't lie to him. "Gustav said 'someone.' I'm sorry."

"The story was good even when it was 'someone,' son. There was no need to add a lie," he said.

I hung my head in shame, but heard my grandmother say quietly as she shook out her napkin, "It doesn't hurt for them to tell their stories." I could always count on her to make room for our childhoods in the crowded house.

Gustav Buch and I learned to ride my father's bike long before we were tall enough to sit in the seat. Taking turns, we held it at an angle, peddling underneath the bar and making circles in the small yard of our house. Everywhere in Arnswalde, boys learned to ride this way, stooped beneath the bar and peddling like mad, their knees sticking out like bipedal crab legs. In the fall of 1938, we circled the yard in the gathering darkness of late afternoon. From the house, we could hear Hitler’s screaming voice on the radio warn us that many enemies were readying to harm Germany. From within there was the danger of Jews and Communists, who were trying to get the world to hate and to attack us.

"I'm tired of this," Gustav stopped, leaning the bike against his leg.

"Do you want to play army?" I asked. The whole world seemed to be marching somewhere. Since the Nazi educational philosophy valued physical development over intellectual, we marched at school every morning and afternoon we didn’t play a sport. The young men in town had been drafted when Germany invaded the Rhineland and had marched to the barracks outside of town where they continued marching to perfection. The SA marched at night, singing their songs about death and honor and protecting the homeland. Germans troops had marched into Austria in March, and into Czechoslovakia in October, just a month earlier. But Gustav had a better idea for a game that afternoon.

"We have to come up with a plan to see the Gummimann. I couldn't stand it if the police caught him before we saw him."

"They can't catch him, and neither can we. He can crawl over rooftops too fast."

"How can we lure him into our houses to take anything? We don't have anything he wants." Gustav kicked the ground in disgust.

For the next month or so, as the days grew cold and the Gummimann’s reputation as a champion of the poor increased, we puzzled over how we might catch him. One cold afternoon in early November, Karl shouted with discovery, “If we have nothing the Gummimann wants to take, then we’ll have to lure him in to leave something!”

But of course! We would have to get him to take pity on us. We decided to dress like beggars and ask for bread in the market place, thereby attracting the attention of the
Gummimann, who would follow us home to find out where we lived. We would catch him that night breaking into our houses to leave us stolen treasure.

After going into my kitchen to look for rags, we quickly amended this plan to simply beg on the street. Not only did Mother assure us she needed every bit of cloth in our house for some purpose or another, she wanted to know exactly what we had planned. This interrogation was enough to make us realize neither of our mothers would tolerate seeing us dressed in torn or dirty clothes for a single minute. In fact, as we walked uphill toward the town square, our breath huffing in front of us in the cold air, I began to think the plan was a very bad one, after all.

"Gustav, if anyone sees us begging, Mother will find out a long time before the Gummimann will. Father will beat me blue…" I was saying when Gustav stopped me and pointed up the street. Everyone else on the street had turned, as well. When I caught sight of the police uniforms, I expected to see the Gummimann in his rubber coat and gloves. Some people were laughing, but one woman near us held her hand to her mouth and cried, "Oh," before walking quickly away. Two policemen marched on either side of a beautiful young woman whom they held by the arms like a dangerous criminal. Wearing nothing but her underwear and brassiere despite the cold, she seemed to be trying to tuck her head under her arm as I had seen swans do on the pond at my Opa's. But her neck couldn’t bend so far. Her short brown curls bobbed up and down on her forehead with the rough gait of the two policemen.

I will never forget my embarrassment for her. What could she have done to be paraded nearly naked through the streets? Gustav and I stepped back to let them pass. Donnerwetter, one of us said. Vetter. I remember the shape of her neck, its smooth whiteness, as she hid her face from us. Despite the police with their brutal grins, I wanted to follow and help her, but what could I do?

Gustav and I walked in silence back to our separate homes. My mind raced with questions I knew he could not answer. What could she have done? Why did the sight of her make me feel so scrambled, as if my body had reordered itself? I took a deep breath and let it out slowly, as if to make sure my lungs were all right. Gustav and I never discussed that afternoon. Nor did I tell my parents. Instead, I went to bed early, complaining of a headache, but I really just wanted to be alone. In my mind, I replayed the scene again and again, but each time, I hurled myself against the police, kicking and hitting them until they freed the girl so she and I could run up the alley to my father’s shop. The fantasy ended there at the gate of safety, only to begin again the moment I first saw her. I realize now I could not carry my dreams further, unable as I was to imagine what I might do with her once I freed her. Not only was I a nine-year-old boy with very little information about what might transpire between a girl and boy escaping authority, but perhaps I also knew that in the Germany of 1938 there were very few places to hide.

I finally fell asleep and dreamed Grandfather sat up beside me on the bed. He began to speak, awkwardly at first, as if he’d forgotten how during the year in his grave. He opened his mouth wide enough for me to see his split tongue and began to speak two languages at once, one of them right and the other true. Then the dream jumped to the town square, and Grandfather was performing a wedding ceremony between the naked woman, who now wore a beautiful veil, and the Gummimann. The Gummimann took off his gloves to kiss the bride, and the Princess of Shame bent toward his lips. Everyone in the square cheered, but I couldn’t hear them. I only saw their mouths open. My heart
began to pound in my ears, and then I woke up to hear shouts and noises echoing between
the houses on either side of our narrow street. The single panes of glass in the bedroom
windows rattled.

My parents dressed quickly. I asked if I could get up as well. I had my clothes on
in no time. I remember Father standing in front of the big wardrobe with the mirror in the
center door. I had never seen him so disturbed. Then we heard people outside speaking of
a fire. That word put even more fear into us. Hurrying down the road, Father held my
hand. We saw fire and smoke coming out of a building on the opposite side of the road,
across from our church, perhaps six houses away from ours. What if the roofs of the
neighboring houses caught fire? They were built close to each other with no space
between them. Our whole neighborhood could go up in flames.

People stood on our side of the road watching. I had never seen a fire. The
thought that our house could have been in flames filled me with fear. The fire brigade
was already working, but we saw their hoses directed only at the buildings on either side
of the burning one. Not a single hose sprayed water through its broken windows. That
puzzled me. When I later asked Father about it, he said that "they" wanted the building to
burn down. “They” had deliberately set the fire because the house belonged to the Jews. I
had actually overheard something to that effect while watching the fire, but could not
make sense of it. I did not ask who "they" were, and I would probably not have been told.

When it became clear the houses on either side of the burning building were safe,
we went home. We never saw an SA or any other Nazi uniform that night. "They" had set
the fire and had left before anyone saw them. Did they fear that there would not be
enough support in Arnswalde?

Later I heard that the code word for the destruction of the synagogues had been
Reichskristallnacht. And for the first time, I also heard my parents use the word
Reichssternennacht (Night of the Stars), supposedly the code word for the beginning of
the persecution of Christians. They were clearly aware of the Nazis' anti-Christian
ideology and their intentions. While they never spoke to me about the fate of the Jews,
they instilled in me a deep awareness that the followers of Jesus represent God's
intentions for the world and are, therefore, strangers here and will have to suffer
persecution.

The night of the fire was soon forgotten. But for some days on my way to and
from school, I went into the burned-out building. Only the outside walls still stood. The
second floor which had been a gallery had crashed down and the roof was gone as well.
Half-burned books with Hebrew writing were scattered in the ashes. If only I had known
something about the Jewish community in Arnswalde! Why didn’t anybody tell me the
building was a synagogue, a house of worship? Why didn’t they explain about the strange
language in those books and their relationship to the Bible — our Christian Bible —
the book that so completely ruled our lives — or did it really?

In the summer of 1939, Father leased a new shop further away from our house. I
dreaded the beginning of school when I would no longer be able to ditch the bullies in the
alley and run to the safety of the old shop. I spent most of that summer with Father,
helping Karl sharpen tools and sweep, or building toys out of wood scraps by myself at
the little worktable Father made me. In July, Rudi, Father’s senior journeyman, was
drafted into the army. Rudi didn’t belong to our church. Or any church, I learned one day
at breakfast as my parents discussed him. Grandmother was taking care of the girls upstairs, so Mother had a moment to sit over her coffee and talk. I felt very much like an adult who could be trusted to understand the world as she told me how Rudi’s father had died in the Great War.

“Rudi never knew him, and his mother wasn’t a Christian. If he ever believed in God, I don’t know, but whatever faith he might have had he lost as a teenager when he became a communist.”

When she said this, Father made a sound as if she were talking too much. I didn’t know what a communist was, but our geography teacher grew red in the face and shouted every time he spoke about them, pointing to the Polish border on the map and saying sub-human communist Slavs were “sneaking” across from the Soviet Union, threatening the Reich.

“Well, he’s not one now,” Mother said defensively.

“And no one needs to know more about it,” Father said. Then he leaned across the table and very quietly told her something about the two new journeymen. Father usually tried to hire men from our church, but so many men were being drafted he couldn’t always. “The Guild doesn’t need to know,” I heard, and then “children talking at school.” Her gaze flickered to me and then away, and I felt ashamed that my parents felt they couldn’t trust me.

On his last day at work, Rudi’s wife Ilsa was invited to come to the shop with their baby for coffee. There wasn’t enough room in our house for everyone even if we all stood. As Mother, Franz and I left with the cake and forks and napkins in a basket, the girls begged to go, but Mother said she had enough to worry about. “Stay home with Grandma or she’ll have to eat cake alone.”

Bouncing Anna on her hip, Grandma told them all, “And I’d give myself the biggest piece, too.”

“I want the biggest piece,” Karla cried.

“That’s not fair!” Margaret said.

Mother, Franz and I slipped out the door while the girls argued over who should get more cake.

Rudi, Eric, the two new journeymen Hans and Reinhardt, and Karl, who was still an apprentice, put down their work and tools and got ready for coffee. I couldn’t help staring at Rudi, wondering how he could not believe in God. Having heard such bad things about atheists in Sunday school, I had always expected to recognize one right off, if not by appearance, then by behavior. But Rudi didn’t drink or smoke and always spoke to Father respectfully. He never stole or lied, as I expected godless men to do. If he had done these things while he was a communist, now that he was simply godless perhaps he was able to control himself to a certain extent. Or perhaps Ilsa had reformed him. One of Father’s friends at church sometimes spoke of the journey he himself had made from a life of sin to salvation.

During the blessing, I saw Rudi bow his head like the rest of us, and I noticed he said, “Amen,” like the rest of us. He pulled his bench out a bit to offer Ilsa and Mother a place to sit and then put his infant son Willie in the crook of his arm as Father thanked him for his service.

“I would rather continue here than fight,” Rudi said.
Fight, I wondered? Who would Rudi have to fight? Of course I knew, in a general way, that armies fought wars, but who would dare fight against the Third Reich? Had Austria or Czechoslovakia fought us? All summer we had been told that communists were killing German nationals in Poland, but Father said Poland was too tiny and poor a country to attack Germany.

Father reached up to pat Rudi on the shoulder and reassure him, “Your job will be here for you when you return.”

“You mean if...if I return,” he said, then he cleared his throat and looked directly at the two new journeymen, saying, “Well, there’s no choice in it, is there? Ein Volk, ein Reich, ein Führer. Is that it, boys?”

The two new journeymen looked to Father, but before he could say anything, Ilsa stood up to take Willie from Rudi, stepping between Rudi and the other men. Fussing over the baby, she said quickly, “That cake is so rich, Mrs. Bernhard, I don’t know when I’ve tasted better.”

Father said, “My wife’s cakes can’t be topped, Ilsa, but I’ll bet your cooking isn’t the only thing Rudi is going to miss once he’s in a barracks with hundreds of other men.” Everyone laughed. Ilsa blushed and sat back down on the bench. My mother offered the journeymen another piece of cake and the men started to talk and laugh again.

Within the next few weeks everyone at the shop except Karl was drafted. Everyone except Father, that is. I believe he wanted to go into the army, but his small stature may have kept him off the list. As each man left, he spoke more often about the “honor of serving one’s country.” Of course, as his journeymen marched off one by one, he was also worried about getting the incoming orders for truck trailers and wheel repairs finished. He had to leave for work earlier and earlier, coming home long after we children were in bed.

Then, in August, Father was drafted as well. Not into the army, as he hoped, but into the Organization Todt. “To build things for Germany,” he said, proud to serve his country, too. He closed the shop doors and gave Mother the keys, saying the Lord had always taken care of us and would not abandon us now.

On the last day of August, my red-faced geography teacher’s warning came true, or so we were told: Communists snuck across the Polish border and attacked Germany, taking over a German radio station. As we would learn after the war, this was a lie. The “Polish Communists” were German troops in disguise, and the “dead” they left behind were the bodies of concentration camp victims. The “invasion” of poorly armed Poland was staged after months of propaganda to give Germany an excuse for attacking its smaller neighbor.

On September 1, 1939, the Third Reich invaded Poland, and Poland fought back. Whenever we got a letter from Father, Mother read it with shaking hands. She told our neighbors and people at church Father was “not at the front.”

“A blessing, with so many children,” they would say, even though their own husbands or sons were often not so blessed. Poland surrendered after only six weeks in what people called a Blitzkrieg, or “lightning war,” because it was so fast, although not fast enough to save Father’s business. When he came home in October the tools were hung up just where Karl had left them before going to “the front” himself. No orders had been finished for weeks. Father lost the lease on the new shop and had to sell everything.
His dreams of independence gone, we moved to Berlin. I said good-by to Gustav, unaware my world would change so much in the next few years he would be the last friend I would ever have as a child.

1. Write three things from this reading that you think are important to know.

2. What divisions in German society are revealed in the text? What different groups of people are there and how do they act and feel about one another?

3. Research the town of Arnswalde. What information can you find about its geo-political history: how did politics change the national borders of the region? When did it become part of Prussia? How did it become part of Prussia? What country is it in now? How and when did it become part of that country?