

ALL  
GOD'S  
CHILDREN



ANNA  
SCHMIDT

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THE PEACEMAKERS BOOK I



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“This is a call to the living,  
To those who refuse to make peace with evil,  
With the suffering and the waste of the world.”  
*Algernon D. Black, former senior leader,  
New York Society for Ethical Culture*



PART I

MUNICH

OCTOBER—DECEMBER 1942



 CHAPTER I 

Beth Bridgewater rushed into the cramped foyer of her uncle's third-floor apartment. Her uncle was a professor of natural sciences at the Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München, and his collection of files and notebooks for his research projects cluttered every available space. Beth moved a stack of books so that she could shove her feet into the slippers tradition required her to put on the minute she entered the house. "I'm home," she called.

Of course, this wasn't home. Not really. This was Germany—Munich, the capital of Bavaria and headquarters of the Third Reich. Home was half a world away in Wisconsin. Home was a farm where her parents lived just outside of Madison. Home was the Quaker meetinghouse where she and her friends and family gathered for all of the important and mundane events of their lives. Home was certainty and safety where at any time day or night she would not have to scurry for the protection of the cellar beneath the ground-floor bakery should the air-raid sirens sound.

Home was where she should be—should have been ever since Germany had declared war on the United States. But Germany might as well be the Land of Oz for all the good it did her to think of returning to the United States. She would never forget the day she arrived in

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Munich and stepped off the train. Everything she saw or smelled or heard was as foreign to her as the language. But at the same time it was all so exciting. She truly began to believe that living in Germany could turn out to be a grand adventure. Little did she imagine that a few months of summer would stretch into eight long years.

As an American still living in Munich in 1942 after America had joined the war against Germany, she kept a low profile. She helped her aunt with the cooking and cleaning as she cared for her eight-year-old cousin, Liesl. She chose her associates with care. She could not afford to come to the attention of the authorities, although more than likely they already were well aware of her presence in their midst.

As if being American were not enough, she and Uncle Franz and Aunt Ilse—who, like Beth’s mother, were also natives of Bavaria—were members of the Religious Society of Friends, or *Freunde* as they were known in Germany.

“I’m home,” Beth called out again as she unpinned her hat and fluffed her wispy blond bangs. She heard movement in the room just off the foyer that served as her uncle’s study and assumed that Uncle Franz was within earshot. “Such an incredibly lovely day,” she gushed as she set her shoes aside. “It reminds me so much of autumn in Wisconsin, and I have to admit that on days like this I find it impossible to believe that. . .”

She had been about to say that surely on such a day there could be no place for war and discord, but the door to the study opened, and a stranger stepped into the hall. In the early days after she’d first arrived from America to live with Uncle Franz and Aunt Ilse, she might have finished her statement without a thought. But that was before.

She was so very weary of the need to always measure everything in terms of *before*. . .

*Before* a friend had been interrogated and then fired from his job and evicted from his apartment because he had dared to make some derisive comment about the Third Reich.

*Before* Ilse had begun taking to her bed, a pillow clutched over her

ears whenever the jackboots of the soldiers pounded out their ominous rhythm on the street below their apartment or passed by in perfect lockstep while the citizens of Munich cheered.

*Before* an apartment in the building two doors down the block had been raided in the night and the occupants taken away.

Year by year—sometimes month by month—things had changed but oddly had also stayed the same. Other than the matter of people being roused from their homes and simply disappearing in the dead of night, Munich was little different than it had been the summer she arrived. Neighbors went about their daily shopping and errands, chatting and joking with one another as if those people who had vanished from one of the shops or apartments on the block had never existed. Children who had once attended school and played together with no thought for ethnic heritage now flaunted that heritage by wearing the brown shirts of the Hitler Youth or, in some cases, forcing others to wear the crude yellow star that marked them as Jew.

Beth's first reaction on seeing this stranger in their apartment—this stranger in uniform—was alarm. Was he here to question them? Uncle Franz had been called in for questioning several times—mostly because he had refused on religious grounds to sign the required oath of allegiance to the government. He was also under scrutiny because he taught in one of the more outspoken departments at the university. Every time he was summoned for an interrogation, Beth's aunt suffered. The debilitating nervous anxiety that Ilse Schneider had developed shortly after giving birth had not improved with time and was only exacerbated by the uncertainty they lived with day in and week out.

Had this man come to deport her? The Nazis had a well-deserved reputation for being sticklers for detail—people who left nothing to chance. Even with the war raging, it was not unthinkable that the presence of an American in their midst might draw their attention. Or perhaps something else had happened. Were they all to be arrested? In these times such thoughts were natural—even automatic.

“Hello,” the man said in accented English. He wore a medic's

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insignia on his military jacket and held his military cap loosely in one hand. Although he was several inches taller than she was, he seemed to be looking up at her from beneath a fan of lowered lashes. She was pretty sure that he wasn't more than a year or so older than she was.

"Elizabeth, this is Josef—Dr. Josef Buch," Uncle Franz explained as he came to the door and stood next to the soldier. "I found the citation we were looking for, Josef." He held a book, his forefinger marking a page, his wire-rimmed reading glasses balanced on his forehead. His hairline had receded a little more every year since Beth had first arrived to answer his plea for help with his sickly wife and overactive daughter. His shoulders were a bit more stooped, and he looked a good deal older than his fifty years. He hid his worrying about his family, his job, the future as well as he could, but it was taking a toll. Although Beth had offered repeatedly to return to America, her uncle would not hear of it. "I need you here," he always said as he cupped her cheek with his palm. "We all do."

As she waited for him to explain the doctor's presence, she studied him closely for warning signs that she should be concerned or remain silent. But he looked more relaxed than Beth had seen him in weeks. Clearly something about this stranger had put her uncle completely at ease—had even lifted his spirits. Once again Beth turned her attention to their guest.

"*Grüß Gott, Herr Doktor*," she said. She kept her curiosity about why the man spoke such flawless English to herself, having been admonished repeatedly by Ilse to say as little as possible in the presence of others and never to ask questions. Instead she took a moment to examine him while her uncle read aloud a passage from the book he carried.

The doctor's hair was close-cropped and the color of real coffee laced with real cream—neither of which Beth had enjoyed since her last visit to America five years earlier. His eyes, spotlighted by the sunlight pouring across the polished wooden floor of the cramped study, reflected the green of a Northern Wisconsin pine forest. But there was something more than the startling color. An underlying and indefinable

intensity belied his polite reserve.

And as she studied his features, she realized that although Josef Buch was listening politely to her uncle, he was also studying her in return.

"Josef was one of my students, Beth," her uncle explained when he'd finished reading aloud the passage. "I'm afraid whenever he's around he challenges me to prove my point in any discussion."

"My uncle has so many former students stopping by these days," she said, speaking in German as she always did in the presence of visitors, especially ones in uniform. "Former and current. Our home is a regular café for his students. We are always pleased to welcome someone new." She wondered if the man had come because word had gotten out about the meetings for worship held here for the small group of Quakers still living in Munich or perhaps about the literary soirees her uncle held for students and fellow faculty members from time to time. In spite of the need to maintain a low profile, Uncle Franz insisted that some things could not—should not—be changed.

She gave up trying to guess why this man in uniform had come. She had worked hard to fight the natural paranoia that came with all the changes and uncertainties they'd had to endure over the years. Why not consider that perhaps the man had simply stopped by for a visit or to bid a favorite teacher farewell before leaving to take up his military duties? "Are you on leave, Herr Doktor?" She blurted the first thought that came to mind.

"Josef has served on the western front in France and has now been given permission to return to the university to complete his medical training," Uncle Franz explained. "You two should have much in common, Beth. Josef studied in Boston. I expect that explains his command of English. You were there, what, Josef? Two years?"

"Three."

"And now here you are back home again in Munich, albeit after a small detour to perform your military duty."

"I'm afraid that I was asked to leave your country, *Fräulein*. But I

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did enjoy my time there.” His tone revealed no anger or disapproval regarding his deportation.

“Will you stay for dinner, Josef?” Franz invited. “Afterward we can get you properly settled.”

“I don’t wish to intrude, and I do not expect *Frau* Schneider to prepare meals for me as part of our agreement,” Josef replied.

They were all speaking German, but somewhere along the way Beth felt as if she had missed some key piece of information. *What agreement?*

“Josef is going to board with us for the time being, Beth,” her uncle explained as if he’d recognized her confusion. “We’re going to set him up in the attic.”

It was not uncommon for people to make room in their home for a *Studentenbude*. Franz and Ilse were fortunate to have the top-floor apartment and the extra space of the attic above, but there had been no discussion of such an arrangement in their home. “I see,” Beth said when in fact she did not understand at all.

“These are hard times for everyone, and Josef has agreed to pay rent and share his rations with us.”

“That would. . .”

Her uncle turned to the doctor. “Beth moved here to stay with us several years ago after my wife took ill following the birth of our daughter. A nervous condition that is chronic, I’m afraid. I don’t know how we would have managed had she not agreed to come and stay. Our daughter, Liesl, would be lost without her.”

Beth studied her uncle closely. He was talking more than he usually did, interrupting her before she could speak. Perhaps he was nervous after all.

“You live here then?” the doctor asked, his intense gaze still focused on her.

“She shares a room with our daughter.” Uncle Franz’s laugh was a little forced. “And I may as well tell you right now, young man, Frau Schneider will not tolerate anything less than strict chaperoned visits

between you young people.”

Beth blushed and wished that her uncle would just stop trying to explain everything. There had to be more to the story of why Josef Buch had suddenly appeared in their house than her uncle was admitting. She cast about for some way she might learn more without appearing too inquisitive. But before she could come up with some offer to help, a door slammed at the far end of the corridor, and her always-boisterous cousin Liesl came running down the hall.

“You’re finally back,” she cried as if Beth had been gone for days instead of an hour. “Can we go to the park?” She hopped up and down. “*Bitte, bitte, bitte!*”

Liesl had been born when Beth’s aunt and uncle had given up any hope of ever having children. To complicate matters, Liesl had always been an unusually high-strung and active child whose mood swings and short attention span were more than Aunt Ilse could manage. As Aunt Ilse’s struggles to cope with her child and the world around her had increased, so had the scope of the responsibilities Beth now shouldered in the household.

She placed a calming hand on Liesl’s shoulder. “I am here, and we will go to the park tomorrow after the meeting for worship.”

Again Uncle Franz was quick to explain. “Our family regularly holds meetings for worship here on First Day—what you refer to as Sunday. We are members of the local Religious Society of Friends—Quakers, Freunde.” Beth was stunned to hear her uncle offer such information so freely. For so many reasons they had become increasingly cautious about revealing anything related to their personal lives or religious beliefs to those they did not know. And student of her uncle’s or not, this man was certainly not someone they knew well.

“We have a guest, Liesl,” Franz continued, nodding toward Josef. Beth was glad for the diversion, knowing that the stranger in uniform would claim Liesl’s full attention.

“My name is Liesl, and I am eight,” the girl announced as she took a step closer and gazed up at the doctor.

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Beth was moved to see how Josef immediately seemed to grasp that Liesl was not a typical eight-year-old. He crouched down so that he was more on a level with her and offered her his hand. "And I am Josef Buch. I am twenty-six. I am pleased to meet you, Fräulein Liesl Schneider."

Liesl frowned as she studied his outstretched hand. "You are a soldier," she reminded him. She snapped her heels together and offered him the salute of the Third Reich. "*Heil*, Hitler," she bellowed, her right arm stiff and raised to the prescribed level.

In the stunned silence that followed, Beth heard a glass shatter in the kitchen and realized that her aunt was no doubt listening to everything they were saying. Beth took hold of her cousin's outstretched arm and guided her through the sitting room across from the study toward the closed door that led to the kitchen. "Come. Your mother needs our help."

The one thing about life in a German home that Beth thought she would never become accustomed to was the way doors between rooms remained closed at all times. She understood such vigilance at this time of year when the days turned cool and the nights could be quite chilly, but closed doors regardless of the season only added to the atmosphere of isolation and a certain undercurrent of fear that these days permeated every facet of their lives. Once inside the kitchen, she realized that Josef Buch had not returned Liesl's salute—a detail that only added to her confusion about the true purpose of his presence in their home.

She swept up the broken glass while Ilse settled Liesl at the kitchen table with a saucer of apple slices. All the while, Beth's aunt whispered warnings that Beth should say and do nothing in the presence of this man that might give him information he could use against them.

"Why is he here?" Beth asked.

"How should I know? The point is—"

"Beth, tell me a story," Liesl begged as she popped the last of the apple slices into her mouth.

"Not right now," Beth replied. She was determined to return to the

study and learn more about this sudden change of events. She handed Liesl a piece of paper and the stub of a pencil. "Draw me a picture," Beth said, "and I'll tell you a story about it before bedtime." Liesl loved to paint and color and draw, and the activity always calmed her. The little girl bent to her work.

"Perhaps I should take them some tea," Beth suggested.

"I suppose. He might think it odd if we aren't hospitable in the usual way," Ilse replied, casting furtive glances toward the closed door beyond which they both could hear the murmur of male voices. "Use the good tea cups," she added.

Beth made the tea and placed the pot on the tray with the cups and saucers. Ilse poured a little milk into the cream pitcher and got spoons for stirring and the sugar bowl. Then she opened the door and watched as Beth carried the tray back to the study and tapped on the closed door.

"I brought you tea," she said when Uncle Franz opened the door and stood aside to let her pass. The doctor was sorting through a stack of books, setting aside one or two that seemed of interest to him. He placed the rest in the limited space available on the already-overcrowded floor-to-ceiling shelves.

"May I help?" She avoided looking directly at her uncle's former student. While Beth had been preparing the tea, Aunt Ilse, through whispered comments, had made clear her view that the man was surely a government spy. Her aunt's litany of fears and anxieties—for her child, herself, and most especially for her husband's career as a professor at the university under this new regime—was ceaseless these days.

"*Danke, Liebchen, aber* I think perhaps there is something you might rather do," her uncle said with a twinkle in his eyes. "If you check under that stack of books there, I believe you will discover a letter from home."

Beth gave a yelp of delight as she set the tray on the library table that also served as her uncle's desk and foraged through the mail, all thought of their new boarder cast aside. "It's been weeks," she said, hugging the envelope to her chest. "Please excuse me." She stepped into the hall, and as she turned to close the door, she added, "It was nice to

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meet you, Herr Doktor.”

“Josef,” her uncle corrected. “He’s part of the family now, and there’s no need to stand on ceremony, right Josef?”

“I don’t wish to make anyone uncomfortable,” the doctor replied.

“Josef then,” Beth said. “And I am Beth.” She gave him a polite smile. Her uncle’s insistence on the informal use of the man’s given name was odd in a society where a bit of reserve between new acquaintances was more the tradition.

“Now don’t get all caught up in replying to that letter,” Uncle Franz called out to her. “You’ll need to set an extra place for supper and help your aunt. Josef has agreed to join us, although he insists that there be no special attention given to him.”

Beth understood the underlying message. Any slight change in their routine could upset Ilse to the point where she would take to her bed for the remainder of the evening. It had happened before. And having the doctor share their meager evening meal was just the sort of thing that could send Ilse over the edge.

“I’ll just go read this. I can answer it after Liesl is in bed,” she promised.

In the small bedroom that she shared with her cousin, Beth kicked off her slippers and slid her thumbnail under the flap of the envelope. Using her toes, she pulled the straight-backed rocking chair closer to the late-afternoon light streaming through the single window that overlooked the small courtyard in back of the apartment building. She smiled as she settled into the creaky old chair for a long-anticipated taste of home.

The letter had already been opened and crudely resealed. When she removed the thin pages, she saw several places where her mother’s words had been blacked out—censored. Was nothing sacred to these people? Not even an innocent letter from mother to daughter?

She held the pages up to the daylight streaming through the window, trying to recover the words some government person had decided were threatening or seditious.

*Dearest Beth,*

*Your father and I hope this finds you well and \_\_\_\_\_. Your letters are always so full of \_\_\_\_\_ and good cheer, \_\_\_\_\_ we read \_\_\_\_\_. We are quite certain that circumstances \_\_\_\_\_ here. \_\_\_\_\_ your father and I \_\_\_\_\_ to leave as soon as possible. \_\_\_\_\_*

*\_\_\_\_\_ Franz and Ilse to \_\_\_\_\_ as well. After all there is Liesl to \_\_\_\_\_. If only. . .*

*\_\_\_\_\_ we must constantly seek God's guidance \_\_\_\_\_. And who knows whether coming back here is the answer? Here in America there is growing animosity toward people like us—people of German heritage. Even those of your generation are not immune to the taunts and snubs of some.*

*\_\_\_\_\_ back home with us, but \_\_\_\_\_ leaving Munich \_\_\_\_\_. I know that my brother is well-respected \_\_\_\_\_ . . . .*

Beth let the letter dangle from her fingers as she stood and stared out the window. The sun reflecting off the autumn leaves that had seemed so glorious earlier was blighted now by gathering clouds. She had so longed for news of life at home—of her father raking leaves and her grown brothers leaping into the pile, then helping him to repair the mess they had made. She had longed for images of the neighborhood—Bertha Dobins walking her poodle down the country lane that connected their farms, old Mr. Remington leaning out the window of his rusty pickup truck as he offered Beth's mother advice on putting up the last of the tomatoes. She wanted to hear of the pot roast

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her mother had prepared and of friends from her high school days who had stopped by to ask how she was faring and when she might return. She wanted gossip and news of what had been said at the meetinghouse that week. She was desperate for that taste of home.

In the years since she had come to live with her aunt and uncle, she had gone back to Wisconsin only once, and that had been barely two years after she had first arrived. These days Beth had to wonder if she would ever be able to leave. More than just the need to stay and care for Liesl—and her aunt—kept her from leaving. A year or so earlier in a moment of impulsive reaction to the unfairness of life for many of her neighbors, Beth had given her visa to a friend who was frantically trying to leave the country. At the time, she had naively thought that as an American it would be easy to say she had lost her papers and get the precious document replaced. But that had been before the American consulate had been closed and the consul—a friend of her parents from Wisconsin—had been reassigned to Berlin. She had had no choice but to tell her uncle what she had done. She knew that he had tried everything he could to get the visa replaced—even making a trip to Berlin—with no success.

So if Beth wanted to leave Munich—and she did more than anything—without the proper papers, how could she? Her eyes widened in shock as she considered that perhaps this was why Dr. Josef Buch had come. He knew.