

**Karl's War**  
**By Neil Spark**

## Chapter 1

Karl stands shirtless at the punishment place: behind the shed at the end of the garden. The eighteen-year-old's trousers and underpants are at his feet. His hands, above his head, press against the shed's wall. He hears the slow crisp sound of his father's steel-capped boots on the concrete garden path. He hears the whooshing of the cane in the still Berlin early morning. He shivers with fear.

His father stops. The cane is still. Distant sounds of the start of a day: a car going past; a neighbour's door closing. Karl shakes and swallows the bile rising in his throat.

The first strike lands without warning across his buttocks. He cries out. Three more blows, in quick succession, to the buttocks then two to the top of the legs. Each strike is a knife slash that inflicts more pain than the last.

Blood trickles down his shaking leg. He hears his father walks away. When the footsteps fade, he collapses.

His mother lets the curtain fall and wipes away a tear.

Karl lies face down on the ground for several minutes. He gingerly raises himself, leans forward to pull up his underpants, and cries out as the skin on his legs and buttocks stretches and the cuts open. He takes a deep breath and tries again. He buttons his fly and the waistband of his trousers and waits a few more moments before walking to the house. He takes small pain-ridden tentative steps, hoping not see his father or Günter, his older brother.

\* \* \* \* \*

His mother, Liesel, offered her son her right arm. Karl leaned heavily on it; the relief was immediate. He put his arm around her slim waist and together they walked gingerly towards the house as they had many times before. Once she could put her arm around his shoulders but no longer, he was four centimetres taller than her.

Karl was pleased his younger siblings were still in bed. He slowly ascended the stairs one by one, his mother beside him as he staggered and panted. They reached the top and a bead of sweat fell to the floor. He felt dizzy and grabbed the railing. He caught his breath

before taking the last few steps to his bedroom. He undid the waistband and flaps of his trousers that fell to the floor; he stepped out of them and slowly raised himself to the bed.

Liesel recoiled when she saw the deep red cuts at the top of her boy's legs. Bruises were starting to form around them. She discretely removed his underpants and gasped when she saw the six slashes; two had broken the skin. She covered him with a soft cotton sheet and went to the medicine cupboard in the bathroom.

She wanted to ring Jeremiah Rosenberg, the family's doctor since she and Wilhelm married twenty-two years ago. He had eased her father's pain at the end of his life, cared for her through five pregnancies and healed the family's various ailments. And the physical wounds inflicted by Wilhelm. But she didn't ring him because it would trigger an outburst from Wilhelm who, since becoming a Nazi sympathiser, had taken a dislike to the Jewish doctor.

Liesel knew what to do, she had watched Dr Rosenberg often enough. She returned with a tray laden with iodine, ointment, dressings and a glass of water and aspirin. She gently dabbed the cuts with iodine. Karl flinched with each touch. Each cut was punishment for the transgression of the Prussian values of obedience and subordination. The violence in her home had become more frequent, as were the battles in the streets between the National Socialist Workers Party's *Sturmabteilung* – the storm troopers – and the Communists. Liesel longed for the pre-Great War days of security and safety inside her home and beyond.

The Reichstag election was just over a week away and politics could not be avoided. The city's many newspapers were full of stories about the election, the innumerable political parties' flags festooned the streets and the National Socialist swastika was ubiquitous.

Liesel had become increasingly alarmed in recent months as Wilhelm's passing interest in politics developed into a fervent passion for the National Socialists. He often quoted the leader, read the party's newspapers the *People's Observer* and *The Attack*. He even went with work colleagues to Sonderhausen, three-hundred kilometres away to hear the leader speak at a Nazi Party rally. Liesel believed the party's *Sturmabteilung* caused the mayhem on the streets; that's what others in her social circle said, including her sister Marina.

She dabbed the last cut, kissed the top of Karl's head and told him to try to rest.

When she walked into the kitchen Günter was eating a slice of bread topped with ham and cheese. His younger siblings – Lothar, Frieda, and Annegret – sat at the table with empty plates in front of them.

"They will be late for school," Günter said, "and it's Karl's fault."

"Why?" asked Lothar.

“If he hadn’t done the wrong thing, he wouldn’t have been punished. And mother would be here to get your breakfast instead of upstairs looking after him.”

“Take no notice,” Liesel said. She glared at Günter, “You will have to go now or you will be late.”

After getting the children ready for school, Liesel gave them a note for the teacher apologising and explaining that unforeseen family circumstances had delayed them.

She went to the market for fruit and vegetables and, as always, bargained with the stallholders. The butcher chided her for driving a hard bargain; she reminded him she gave him a lot of custom. When she got home she put the proceeds of her bargaining in an old biscuit tin at the back of the cupboard under the kitchen sink and covered it with cleaning cloths.

She went upstairs to check on Karl, still in bed lying on his stomach, and gave him more aspirin. She took him broth and he slept most of the afternoon. At 6pm she told him he should come down to dinner.

“You know it’s expected.”

Slowly, he moved towards the edge of the bed and manoeuvred his legs to the floor; every move caused stinging bolts of pain. He stood up and gathered his energy. He lent on his mother as he walked to the stairs. He rested at the top before slowly descending one step at a time.

He stood at the table, in front of his usual place. It was too painful to sit. Lothar, Frieda and Annegret stood when their father walked in and sat at the head of the table.

“Father,” they said together, heads turned in his direction as though greeting a teacher who had just come into the classroom.

“Children,” said Wilhelm.

Karl avoided eye contact. Liesel brought large-lidded china bowls of chicken, cabbage and carrot to the table. Günter appeared at the dining room door wearing the brown storm troopers’ uniform.

Liesel shivered. First Karl’s father, then Günter had become Nazi supporters. They said it was the only party that could save Germany from the ruin the Jews had caused. Karl didn’t understand why Jewish bankers and other business people, many of whom had fought for the Fatherland in the Great War, would want to destroy their country, as the Nazis claimed.

Wilhelm complemented Günter on the uniform and addressed his family: “He is going to his first meeting this evening. We all should be proud of him.”

“What is the meeting about?” asked eight-year-old Lothar.

“To become fit and strong and to learn how to be a better German, like you will when you are grown up. To keep order on the streets that are no longer safe. The election is not far away and the streets are going to be even more dangerous as the Communists and Jews become more desperate and violent because they know they are going to lose.” He looked at Karl. “We all have to contribute to the New Germany Hitler will create when he is in power.”

Günter said he was looking forward to helping make Berlin a safer place by keeping the dreaded Jews, Communists, homosexuals and other threats to the Fatherland in line.

“What’s homosexual?” asked Lothar.

“Isn’t it safe now?” asked twelve-year-old Annegret.

“No,” said Wilhelm. “It’s not. Communists and Jews are making trouble, but people like your brother are going to stop them. We must be thankful for what he will do.”

Karl excused himself after dinner, went to his room and lay face down on his bed. Liesel ministered more iodine and aspirin. He wondered how long it would be this time before he would be able to go back to university and horse riding in the Tiergarten.

\* \* \* \* \*

Karl didn’t hear his bedroom door open or the slow footsteps approaching his bed. He was woken when his blond hair was roughly grabbed, pulling his head off the pillow.

“You shouldn’t have confessed little brother,” Günter whispered. “It’s your own fault.” He pushed Karl’s head back into the pillow and closed the door, leaving the smell of beer behind.

Karl clenched his fists and bit the pillow as he pounded the bed. The pain from his legs and buttocks was sharp and strong.

## Chapter 2

Karl tried to get out of bed and gasped. He knew he wouldn't be able to go to his law lectures at Friedrich Wilhelm University for the next two days. It was ironic that he would miss at least four lectures because the punishment his father had inflicted for missing one.

Liesel gave him more aspirin and told him she would be back with breakfast. Turning was not as hard as yesterday; he might be able to sit in a chair later. Despite missing lectures, and the pain and humiliation, Karl was pleased with himself. For the first time in his life he had defied his elder brother, despite the cost.

A couple of months earlier, a friend of Günter's had seen Karl and his friend Gratia at the moving picture house. They saw *Berlin: Symphony of a Metropolis*. Karl was a conscientious student but so wanted to see the motion picture that for once he risked doing something his father would strongly disapprove.

Günter gave Karl an ultimatum: obey his order or their father would hear about his visit to the picture theatre when he should've been at university for a lecture.

Karl polished Günter's boots until they shone, cleaned Günter's room to perfection and surprised their parents by washing and drying dishes or chopping wood, when it was Günter's turn to do the chores. Not too often, Günter warned, otherwise their parents would be suspicious.

For two months Karl was his elder brother's slave until one evening Günter waved his dirty boots in Karl's face, demanding to know why they had not been cleaned. Karl summoned the courage to say he would no longer clean the boots or do any more of Günter's chores. He confessed to his father that he had skipped a lecture. Wilhelm denied him the opportunity to explain further. He had missed lectures, for which his father had reluctantly paid, and so he must be punished.

Karl heard his mother's soft knock. She brought ham rolls and coffee. He got out of bed like an old man. Liesel handed him a glass of water and aspirin. He exchanged the glass for a roll.

After eating he went back to bed. He was able to read for short periods while supporting himself on his elbows. He was missing classes but he could catch up on his reading.

He heard his mother washing dishes and then sweeping the floor. The maid, Hilde, came two afternoons a week to clean but Liesel was always busy doing something around the house.

Her sister, Marina, visited later that morning and was horrified by Karl's wounds and that he was not safe in his home.

As his mother closed his bedroom door, he put the book aside and pondered. His father's brutality had confined him to bed for several days. Even when the cuts had healed enough for him to venture into the outside world again, he would still not be able to leave home for good and live independently. He was financially dependent on his father. It was pointless thinking about getting away.

Liesel checked on him before going out and he asked if she had considered life without his father. She shook her head sadly. She wouldn't be able to support herself and the children – and she couldn't leave them behind.

“There are a lot of other people worse off than us my son. Life doesn't always give you what you want, so you must make the most of what you have.”

But surely you have some control over what you have, Karl thought.

## Chapter 3

On his first day as the Bank of Berlin's General Manager Loans (Berlin), Wilhelm Bauer lent back in his high-backed chair, put his feet on his desk and surveyed his surroundings. His office was not as big as he would have liked but it was bigger than the last and that was the most important thing.

He patted his dark blue waistcoat, pleased his girth was not as large as some of his colleagues'. He had been genetically fortunate: a slim waist accentuated his broad shoulders and wide chest; his bright blue eyes and fair hair made him handsome. His thin lips were the only imperfection. He looked younger than his forty-two years despite a few grey hairs at his temples. His secretary had told him they made him look distinguished. The bank's female staff sometimes sighed as he walked past. Unlike some colleagues, he was never tempted – not for any moral reason – but because the risk of scandal could destroy his chances of promotion.

His secretary told him the general manager wanted to see him. Werner Richter was ostensibly a friend, but Wilhelm always felt uneasy when summoned to an unscheduled meeting. Werner's office suite was at the end of a long dark mahogany-lined corridor. The manager was standing in front of the window, holding a wad of papers behind his back when Wilhelm appeared. Werner told his secretary, Clara, to make coffee and Wilhelm to have a seat.

Wilhelm sank into a large luxurious chair. He was pleased about the coffee because if the news was bad there would have been none. His relief dissipated when he saw the papers. Werner didn't speak for several minutes. Wilhelm knew from experience that Werner was thinking about what he was going to say. And that meant it would be something Wilhelm didn't want to hear.

Werner turned, put the papers on the table, and sat opposite Wilhelm in a smaller but matching chair that dwarfed his short rotund body. Wilhelm, adept at reading upside down, leant forward and saw the heading *Audit Report Summary*, and skim-read: "exceeding authority", "procedure not followed", and "irregularity". Wilhelm knew immediately what the document was. He remembered the day he had made a decision based on family and not business.

His younger brother, Bernd, the owner of Leipziger Platz Tailoring, had come to see him three months earlier. The Wall Street crash three years before had caused an economic depression in Germany and the Bank of Berlin, amid the failure of many businesses, imposed lending restrictions. Wilhelm's authority to lend was reduced from three thousand

marks to fifteen hundred marks. Anything above fifteen hundred marks would require the approval of Werner and two other senior managers. Werner said that with bank closures becoming increasingly common, it was Wilhelm's responsibility to help ensure the Bank of Berlin was not one of them. Wilhelm took his responsibilities seriously. He also took his family seriously and he knew his brother's business was in trouble. Just last month Bernd had sacked four of his twelve staff. Wilhelm doubted his brother could present a convincing case for a loan but the bonds of blood were strong – stronger than the requirements of his workplace.

Their father used to say that family was everything and more. Wilhelm could hear the words as if they were spoken yesterday. The blood that coursed through his veins was the same as Bernd's – the blood of farmers from the south.

Family was the reason Wilhelm had the opportunity to work at the bank. His uncle Gustav had moved to Berlin from Bavaria in the 'nineties and was employed by the government. A friend of Gustav's worked at the bank and, when he said there was vacancy for a messenger, Gustav had encouraged Wilhelm's father to allow his promising son to come to the city. Wilhelm had not looked back. Family had given him his start; he had to help his brother's business survive so he approved the two-thousand-five-hundred-mark loan.

"This is an act of dishonesty," Werner said, "not to mention defiance. You disregarded my instruction. You needed my approval for loans of more than fifteen-hundred marks."

"I know I shouldn't have done it. In normal circumstances I wouldn't have, but the loan was for my brother and he was desperate. I'm sure his business will recover when times get better, when Hitler is in power, and my brother will repay it."

"Are you saying you don't think you exposed the bank to unacceptable risk?"

Wilhelm squirmed.

"No, because I –"

"It doesn't matter why. You disregarded my clear instruction."

Werner rubbed his chin, went to the door and asked Clara to bring in the coffee.

"I will have to write a report for the Executive Committee about this irregularity."

Clara poured coffee and served them each a slice of Streuselkuchen on crisp white china plates.

Wilhelm started to relax. Werner wouldn't offer him coffee if he was to be disciplined. He added an extra dollop of cream before taking his first satisfying bite.

"The circumstances – I understand," said Werner. "I know how important family is but I believe you understand the seriousness of disobeying an executive instruction."

“I do and I’m sorry.”

“You and I both know these things can be managed. You have always understood that. You were motivated by the right reasons. You have the right values – and they will be even more important when the National Socialists win the election.”

Werner sliced his Streuselkuchen with a fork and asked Wilhelm about his family. Nothing much had changed since Werner’s last visit to the house several months ago, Wilhelm said. Eighteen-year-old Karl was getting satisfactory results at university and would be a fine lawyer; the younger children were achieving well at school and the eldest, nineteen-year-old Günter was working as a clerk and was a part-time member of the Sturmabteilung – the SA.

Werner finished chewing, sipped his coffee and said, “Karl has a lot of potential, Wilhelm, as I’m sure you know, but there’s also potential you might not have recognised. Sometimes, someone from outside the family can see things the family cannot.”

I hope not, thought Wilhelm, thinking of all the things he wouldn’t want Werner to see.

“Karl is a handsome young man, a fine Aryan specimen and a credit to you and Liesel. I’m sure girls fall over themselves to be with him.”

Werner had been talking to the director of the Trensfranklin Photographic Studios who said they were looking for new models for Nazi Party advertising. It could be an opportunity for Karl.

“It will be good for both of us to help the Party. The Party looks after those who look after it.”

“Of course. I will give it some thought.”

“And I will give some thought to the wording of my report. I know we will make the right decisions; and next time a loan request exceeds the new limit of your authority I know you will come to me.”

Wilhelm returned to his office. He told his secretary he was not to be disturbed. He thought about how he and Werner had ascended the Bank of Berlin career ladder together over the past ten years. They had become friends and learned each other’s secrets. Wilhelm knew about Werner’s long-standing affair with one of the director’s secretaries, which would end his career if others found out. Werner knew about Wilhelm’s questionable business practices. The secrets were never discussed; even alluded to.

Wilhelm wanted the benefits he was sure would flow when the National Socialist Workers’ Party came to power but he was uneasy about Karl becoming a photographer’s model. Many people in that industry were “warm brothers”. Although such activity was said to go on in the SA, Wilhelm had dismissed it as malicious gossip. There had been

stories in the newspapers, mostly left-wing ones of course, that the Sturmabteilung leader, Ernst Röhm, was homosexual. But when the pro-National Socialist *Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung* seemed to suggest the allegations were plausible, Wilhelm was concerned but he knew party policy was anti-homosexual and the paramilitary Sturmabteilung dealt severely with them, just as it should.

\* \* \* \* \*

After dinner that evening Wilhelm sat in his armchair, listening to the wireless and reading the *People's Observer*. Karl went into the kitchen, where Liesel was wiping the table, Lothar was complaining about drying the dishes that Annegret was washing.

Karl sat at the table and put his head in his hands.

Liesel put a comforting hand on his shoulder and asked what was wrong. Lothar and Annegret left the room and she called after them: "You need to get ready for bed soon".

"It's father," Karl said. "He has just told me I'm to be a model for the National Socialist Workers' Party propaganda."

Günter came into the kitchen.

"That's because you're not tough enough to be a real storm trooper."

Karl got up and left.

"Must you talk to him like that?" Liesel said.

She knocked softly on Karl's bedroom door. He was lying face down on the bed.

"I hate both of them," Karl said.

"My son, my son. You should not speak like that. They are your flesh and blood."

"I wish they weren't."

"Günter wishes he was good looking enough to be chosen to be a model and had the brains to go to university. He's jealous, that's all."

"And Father?" said Karl. "He only wants me to be a model for the Nazis so he will look good to them."

"You know how hard he works. He only wants the best for his family."

"People will think I'm a Nazi when they see me on posters all over the city." He looked down. "Father said if I don't do it I'd have to leave university."

"You have a wonderful future," Liesel said, "but perhaps not here".

Karl's face lit up with hope and he leant closer. "Are we going away?"

"You mustn't say anything to anyone."

"I won't say a word."

“Not even to your brothers and sisters. No one must know. I’m counting on your uncle Rudolf and the family in England to help us. He thinks Hitler will get into power and that will be bad for everyone.”

“Father says it will be good for us and Germany.”

“What? Hating people just because they are Jewish? Stopping us going to Doctor Rosenberg, or getting our bread from Schenck’s or shopping at Wertheim’s?”

“So we might all move to England?”

“No – I don’t think so. Not all of us anyway. But you, well, you might have a chance to study at Oxford or Cambridge and uncle Rudolf is there. And it’s safe, on the streets and off.”

“It’s so far away. Maybe it’s safer but I’d miss Berlin, riding in the Tiergarten, going to Wannsee in the summer –”

“But who knows what the future holds? Life was so much better before the Great War. There were no poor people – none we knew anyway – and no one worried about money or the future. Now everyone worries about those things.” She paused and took a deep breath. “No, I think it’s best my son if you are safely in England. Uncle Rudolf has sent me the application papers for university scholarships. All you have to do is sign them.”

Karl looked at his mother for a long moment.

“I don’t want to leave Berlin. I don’t want to leave you.”

She hugged him gently and he flinched from pain.

“I don’t want you to go either, but we must do what’s best for you. You might not get a scholarship to either university, but at least we must try.”

“Father won’t allow it,” said Karl.

“We will see. I’ll think of something.”