



**WOLF
CHILDREN**

Also by Paul Dowsell

Ausländer

Eleven Eleven

Red Shadow

Sektion 20

Bomber

The Adventures of Sam Witchall

Powder Monkey

Prison Ship

Battle Fleet



WOLF CHILDREN

PAUL DOWSWELL



BLOOMSBURY

LONDON OXFORD NEW YORK NEW DELHI SYDNEY

Bloomsbury Publishing, London, Oxford, New York, New Delhi and Sydney
First published in Great Britain in August 2017 by Bloomsbury Publishing Plc
50 Bedford Square, London WC1B 3DP

www.bloomsbury.com

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 1 4088 5851 6



Typeset by RefineCatch Limited, Bungay, Suffolk
Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

To DLD, with a big hug

CHAPTER 1

Late Spring, 1945

It was a chilly night for the end of May. As he crouched, hidden behind the rubble, Otto could see his breath glow in the moonlight as it curled towards the starry night sky. Helene had noticed too and tapped him gently on the shoulder, then pointed to his ragged black scarf. The scarf was full of holes, from moths, from wear and tear, but he couldn't bring himself to throw it away. It was the only one he had, and his mother had given it to him. Now everything she had given him was precious, and it was just the thing to stop your breath giving you away on a bright moonlit night.

Helene was peering over the perimeter of a large crater a stone's throw from a Soviet supply depot in Kreuzberg, a district south-east of the centre of Berlin. Otto took a look too, despite the fact that he had been taught that only one person should look out from a hiding position at any one time. All the Hitler Youth boys had been told that - it was basic military fieldcraft. Helene knew it too. He had told her himself. She tugged on his collar to pull his head down.

It was vital that they were not seen. At this time of night, breaking the curfew, they could be shot on sight. But neither

of them, nor the rest of their little gang, had eaten that day. And ahead of them was a treasure trove. Otto's stomach turned over at the thought of it. Piled up by the depot perimeter were tins of juicy spam: succulent, spicy processed pork from America, and a mainstay of Soviet military rations. He had a small rucksack on his back and if he could fill that up, none of them would be hungry for several days.

His empty stomach let out a loud gurgle and as the sound of it drifted across the night air a couple of the Soviet guard dogs began to bark. They set off the Siberian ponies and camels, and a strange braying echoed across the Berlin ruins. The Russians used the camels as pack animals. 'Kuznechiks' he'd heard they called them. They were Bactrians, shaggy two-humped beasts; Otto remembered that from school. It was bizarre, seeing them out there in the street, rather than in Berlin Zoo, and Otto had quickly learned they were not as friendly as they looked. Their minders were even worse. When he had approached a camel to pat it, in the days after the Russians had arrived, a soldier had cuffed him so hard he had knocked him to the ground.

They heard footsteps in the distance. This, almost certainly, was the perimeter guard. Helene lay still, her face pressed against the rubble. Otto did too, trying to breathe as slowly and quietly as he could.

The footsteps were almost upon them now, and this was the awful moment when you never knew whether the guard could see you or not. He might be pointing his rifle at them at this very moment.

But the sound of footsteps continued, even though the guard had been close enough for them to smell harsh tobacco smoke as he passed. Otto stretched out his arm to look at his watch. It was one his father had given him as a fourteenth birthday present, two years ago. He had been careful to keep it well hidden whenever he had been anywhere near the Russians. Those soldiers were fascinated by anything mechanical, especially something as small and delicate as a wristwatch. In the first few weeks of the occupation it had been common to see Russian soldiers, of all ranks, with three or four wristwatches glinting on each arm. They just took them at gunpoint from any German civilian foolish enough to still be wearing one.

Now Otto and Helene waited. Two minutes passed, then the footsteps began again, echoing faintly in the distance. After they passed by, Otto mouthed, 'Two minutes and thirty-five seconds,' to Helene. She nodded and held up three fingers of her hand. This was a familiar routine. Give the guard three circuits. The first time they tried this, at a supply depot on the far side of Görlitzer Park, they had timed the guard there at three minutes and then nearly got themselves shot when he returned in under two. When they talked about it afterwards they guessed he must have stopped somewhere for a chat or a piss that first circuit. Anything could delay a guard on his path, so it was always best to time several circuits to be sure.

This one was almost as regular as clockwork. Each time around, two minutes twenty or thirty seconds. That gave

them plenty of time to nip across the perimeter and grab a few tins of spam.

As the footsteps receded for the third time, Otto's heart began to beat faster. This was it. No time for hesitation. They both stood, crouching low, and gingerly crept across the small area cleared of rubble by the camp perimeter. Lit by intense arc lights, their shadows trailed stark behind them. If anyone was awake and watching they would be shot in an instant. This was the most terrifying moment: when you first stood up. It was even worse than being in the middle of a battle. There you went from one horrendous scene to another - the whole thing like the blur of a bad dream where you were watching something happening to you rather than making rational decisions. Here you were completely calm and safe one second, in mortal danger the next.

They reached the depot perimeter in a few moments. Now they hugged the shadows of tents and makeshift corrugated-iron huts. A thin barbed-wire fence surrounded the depot, but it was easy enough to squeeze between the strands. The tins were piled untidily in an old canvas tent, easy enough to see through a tear that flapped lazily in the thin wind.

Helene carefully placed a hand through the gap and quickly picked out tins, one at a time, handing them to Otto to put in his rucksack. They were chilled by the wind and it almost felt like she was taking them out of a refrigerator. Every little clink of metal on metal made them flinch. When he had filled his sack she rolled hers off her shoulder

and gave it to him, along with two more tins. Otto glanced at his watch. 'One minute, at the most,' he whispered.

They heard a voice, drowsy but full of indignation. Someone was inside that tent, most likely a guard who had fallen asleep.

Instinctively they both fled back to the rubble, Otto ripping his shirt on the wire and dropping two of the tins Helene had just given him. The tins clattered to the ground and set off the dogs and camels. Harsh voices shouted across the depot. Otto hugged his rucksack close to his chest as he ran to try to stop the tins rattling together. As they dashed past the crater they had previously been hiding in, a shot whistled past, splintering a concrete wall in front of them.

Further ahead were more derelict buildings. If they could reach them they might be able to hide there. Several more shots rang out. Otto heard a cry as Helene fell to the ground. His legs went weak. A jet of bile lodged at the back of his throat. He looked around, expecting to see her with blood seeping from a wound. But there she was, rolling over and crawling forward, obviously uninjured. There were no more shots. The Russians must have seen her fall and now they would be coming out there to retrieve her body. They were not out of danger yet. He kept running.

Just to the south a flash lit up the sky. A moment later the sound of an explosion rolled over, followed by a cascade of falling masonry. Otto recognised the sound from the scores of air raids Berlin had endured. Another bomb had gone off - probably one with a faulty fuse. Maybe it had

been lying there since the last air raid in March. But there was no time to think about that now.

They scrambled on, keeping to the shadows, until they reached a shattered apartment block, burned out with not a single windowpane still in place. Helene and Otto peered back over the wasteland, trying to keep their breathless gasping from giving them away. The depot was settling now. The animals were quiet. No Russians were coming out to investigate further. It was as if they had shot at a dog and thought no more about it. Otto and Helene stood in the darkest part of the building and waited until their breathing returned to normal and their hearts stopped thumping in their chests.

Otto was desperately relieved to see that Helene was safe. She had lived with his family for a while because her mother had been the Roths' housekeeper in the last year of the war. It had been a phenomenal stroke of luck finding her queuing at the same water pump in the week after the Russians arrived. The moment they realised they had both survived the final catastrophe was one he would remember for the rest of his life. He hadn't recognised her at first. She had come up to him, plainly delighted to see him still alive. When she'd heard the stories about the Russian soldiers molesting every woman they could lay their hands on, she had cut her hair short and looked instead like a beautiful boy.

In the Hitler Youth they had taught them that girls were meek creatures fit only for motherhood and homemaking.

He knew now that was nonsense. She was a wiry girl, and the bravest person he knew. Before the Russians came, when Helene had a shock of blonde curly hair, he had thought she had something of a young lion about her. Now she had hands with cuts all over them, a dirty face and a few curls at the back of her neck. But she was the same Helene. Always thinking of others, and often smiling, despite everything.

‘I thought they’d got you back then, when you fell over,’ he said. He wanted to reach out for her and hug her close, and was surprised to feel his throat tightening up as he spoke. She didn’t notice.

‘That was nasty,’ she said. Then, briskly, ‘How much have we got?’

Otto laid out his stash carefully on the floor. There were twelve. Not bad for a night’s work. The gaudy blue tins, with their American words, seemed like objects from an unimaginable other world of plenty. A world where people were safe to go about their everyday lives and always had enough to eat. For a moment he was struck with a deep longing to be somewhere as safe as that in the world. To wake up in the morning and know his life was not in danger and he would have enough to eat for the day. Where was like that? America, certainly. Canada, Australia? He had been born in the wrong place and at the wrong time.

As he carefully placed them back in his sack he noticed the Cyrillic lettering stamped to the bottom of the tins in red ink, identifying them as Russian property. Those letters would condemn them to death if they were caught

carrying them. The Russians would know at once they had been stolen.

‘Let’s go home,’ Otto said.

‘Home’ was on Skalitzer Strasse in an abandoned derelict hospital with a basement room where the rain only came through in manageable drops rather than a deluge. Back there they would keep their stolen supplies in a stash far enough away from that room to make it plausible they knew nothing about it. Some Russian soldiers had been there once before, but that time all of the gang had been surprised by their kindness. The officer had given them two tins of corned beef, and left with a smile. Otto shook his head at the memory. That was the problem with the Russians: they were completely unpredictable.

‘You’re right,’ said Helene. ‘We need to get back. I’ll carry the food.’

‘No, let me. It’s OK.’

She looked at him fondly. ‘Come on, we said we’d take it in turns. We’ve been through this!’

‘Honestly, I don’t mind.’

She took the bag off him. ‘No further discussion,’ she said in that prim voice she used when she pretended to be a strict school teacher. Then she softened. ‘I’m not having you take any risk I’m not prepared to share.’

They had agreed to take it in turns. If they were caught, one of them could deny all knowledge and only the other would be shot. It seemed like a good idea at the time, and when they had been out earlier that week, Otto had carried

the three loaves they had seized from the field bakery at Kottbusser Strasse and carried them home.

The room grew darker as clouds blotted out the moon. That was good.

‘Let’s get this over with,’ said Helene. ‘Make the most of these clouds.’

Peering round the broken entrance and making sure no one was coming, they dashed over to the next shattered ruin. This was the way to get home. The journey would take them ten minutes in the daytime, but at night they might be home in an hour, if they were lucky.

They worked their way back south. Every building along the way was a burned-out husk. Not a single one had escaped the fighting, or else had been destroyed in the bombing campaign that had blighted the city over the last two years. Otto and his brother Ulrich had been angered by how the Yanks and the Tommies had ruined their beautiful city with their bombers, but when the Russians came they had taken something that had been pretty beaten up and completely pulverised it. In the first few days of the battle for Berlin, Otto had been angry with them for this city-wide vandalism. But now he was beginning to realise it was the Nazis who were really to blame. They had been the ones who had ordered the army to fight on stubbornly when everyone knew the war was lost. It was the Nazis who had hanged German soldiers – many of grandparent age, or boys – from lamp posts with the words ‘Traitor’ or ‘Deserter’ on a sign round their necks. When Otto saw

this, all the Nazi phrases and beliefs that he had heard since childhood began to make no sense. The spell that Hitler had cast on him since childhood began to fade. Now he wondered if that was what had happened to his father. In the week before he went missing, Dr Roth had made no secret that he saw no need to defend Berlin to the last. It had been almost a month now since Otto had seen him, working behind the front line with injured soldiers. Maybe they had done that to him, too? The thought of it made him feel sick, and instead Otto tried to imagine the moment he would be reunited with his father and he could show him the watch he had kept from the Russians.

Helene pointed to a house in front of them, on the other side of the street. That would be their next hiding point. Otto stared at it through the dark. Although it remained upright, and still had a roof, the whole facade was peppered with machine-gun bullets. Those windows, too, were charred and there was black soot around the burned-out frames. Otto shook his head. He could imagine what had happened there. He guessed it would have been a strongpoint for the *Volkssturm*, the militia of youths and older men enlisted by the Nazis to defend the homeland. He could imagine frightened old men and boys his age, crouching behind that window frame with their First World War rifles, and maybe a *Panzerfaust* anti-tank rocket launcher, waiting for the Russians to appear in their street. Their lives would have ended in a hail of machine-gun bullets and flying splinters of glass, followed by the cruel jet

of a flamethrower. Even now, three weeks after the last of the fighting, there was a good chance that a house like that might still contain the remains of the fighters who had died to defend it.

So they crept instead into a shop with a smashed-in front, broken glass crackling under their feet like ice on top of snow. There was a terrible smell in there. It wasn't the smell of death – that sweet, sickly odour which hit you like a wall and made you want to throw up. This was more of a sharp excremental whiff, mixed with stale decaying fabric, like a dirty dishcloth. Almost certainly, there were people in here. Living people. Otto's first instinct was to run, but Helene held him back. In the distance, further up the street were boisterous voices. The language was Russian. They had been drinking and were braying like camels, and had that mad, deranged laughter that warned anyone who heard it that they would make extremely dangerous company.

Helene pulled Otto back into the shadows and both of them started when they saw something move in the corner of the room. Was it a rat? Or a stray dog? There were still some left that hadn't been killed for food. The shape made a grunting noise. The kind of sound someone makes when they are asleep.

The drunken voices were growing nearer. The soldiers were singing. Otto and Helene flinched when they heard the sound of breaking glass. Now the men were directly outside their shop window. There were seven or eight of them. Holding on to each other for support, they moved

down the street like a strange beast of many arms and legs. One of them stooped down to pick up a half-brick and lobbed it towards a window on the other side of the street, where a small pane of glass remained unbroken.

The noise made the creature in the corner shift some more. The men outside shouted at each other and then a fight began between them. The shape froze. Whatever it was, its instincts told it to stay still and silent. The men outside began to abuse each other angrily, then just as suddenly they were laughing and pushing each other about. One of them fell straight into the shop. Otto felt a cold shiver run through him. There he was, carrying twelve tins of Russian spam. If they found him they would shoot him on the spot. Why had he not left his bag a safe distance away?

The soldiers were so close he could smell the alcohol coming off them. Two others barged into the shop to lift the third up by his arms. As one of them bent down, a terrified Otto found himself staring straight into his face. The man made a hissing noise. The sort you would make to warn a cat off a dining table. Then they were gone. Otto could barely bring himself to move. He knew his legs would not support him. He and Helene gripped each other's arms.

Now the shape in the corner moved some more. It was stirring into life.

CHAPTER 2

‘Who are you?’ came a thin voice. Helene felt the tension ebbing out of her. The voice belonged to a terrified child. She stepped into a pool of moonlight so the child could see her.

‘Hello, my name is Helene,’ she said gently. ‘I’m here with my friend Otto. Who are you?’

A tiny shape emerged from a black bundle of woollen blanket. There before them was a spindly little girl with curly blonde hair, crouched ready to spring. She was caked in dirt and held a small kitchen knife in her shaking right hand.

Helene tensed up again when she saw the knife. Even a child could do serious damage with that. ‘Easy now,’ she said, holding her hands open to show she was no threat. ‘We won’t harm you.’

The girl stared at them with a sullen defiance.

‘How long have you been hiding here?’ asked Helene.

‘I don’t know,’ she said, in a pitifully weary voice.

‘Are you here on your own?’

The question seemed to pierce the little girl. The knife came down to her side.

'My Mutti and Papa have disappeared. They told me to wait here for them, and . . .' She began to sob.

Helene moved towards her. The girl recovered herself and held the knife in front of her. 'Don't come any nearer,' she said, trying to sound tough.

'What's your name, *mein Schatz*?' said Helene softly.

'Hanna,' came the wary reply.

'Well, my name is Helene. Hello. When did you last have something to eat, Hanna?'

'Ages.'

'Will you come back with us?' asked Helene. 'We live in a little basement not far from here. You can stay with us if you like?'

'Helene,' muttered Otto in a low voice. He sounded cross but she waved her hand for him to shut up. She could have guessed he was going to object. To tell her they had enough mouths to feed already. That was all true but she wasn't going to leave this little girl here alone.

'But then Mutti and Papa will never find me.'

'We'll leave them a note, a big note, telling them where you are,' said Helene.

The girl sank down to her knees, deep in thought. Helene sensed this was the moment she was giving up on the idea that her parents were going to come back, and that she would, in all likelihood, never see them again. She felt a sob rising in her throat. Her own father was dead and her mother had disappeared in the chaos of the final battle. She was always hoping she would see her somewhere on the streets of Berlin.

‘Go away,’ Hanna said defiantly.

Helene got down on her knees so she was nearer the same height as the girl.

‘Hanna, you can stay if you want, but you’ll be safer with us. We’ll look after you. Won’t we, Otto?’ she added, a little pointedly.

He nodded, reluctantly.

Otto would come round to it, she thought. He was a decent boy and she just knew he would be haunted with guilt if they left her there. Of course they had to bring her home. She would die here on her own. He would see that.

Helene reached out a hand and the girl shrank away from it. Helene was so weary now, but she had to be patient with the scared little girl. ‘OK, how about we sit here for a while and have a chat, so you can get to know us?’ she said.

The girl nodded.

The first glimmers of dawn were lightening the sky, and Helene could see more of her surroundings. Hanna had a stubborn, hostile expression on a face that was thick with dirt.

‘How did you end up here?’ asked Otto softly. Helene could tell by the tone of his voice he was going to let her take Hanna home. He had crouched down too, although she sensed that made the girl even more uneasy. She was still acting like a cornered animal. Helene waved a hand behind her back, urging him to back away.

She was desperate to get home to Skalitzer Strasse. It was the only place where she felt safe, although she knew there was no logical reason to think that. She was anxious too about leaving Otto's younger brother Ulrich to his own devices for too long. Ulrich needed watching, which was difficult as he often went out alone, not telling anyone what he was doing. He was always up to something that might get them killed. But they couldn't rush Hanna into trusting them.

In a flash Helene formulated a plan. 'Here's what we'll do, Hanna. Me and Otto are going to have a rest. We'll probably go to sleep for a while. Now, you can do that too, and know we're here to look after you, or you can sneak off while we're asleep. You'll know. We're both terrible snorers.'

The girl let out a little laugh. Helene sensed she was winning her round.

Helene sat back against the hard concrete wall and curled up, resting her face on her knees. 'Come on, and let me lean on you,' she said to Otto. That was often how they slept when they were away from their home - shoulder to shoulder, heads resting on heads. She liked the feel of him, warm against her.

'I just need to put this bag away from us, somewhere in a corner,' said Otto. 'If the Ivans find us . . .' He didn't need to say any more.

'Good idea,' she said. He was clever like that, was Otto. Sometimes he thought of things she didn't. They were a good team.

Within a few minutes Otto was sitting beside her, snoring softly. It was as soothing as a purring cat. She drifted away moments later. But when they woke up it was fully light, sunshine pouring into the derelict shop. Both Hanna and the bag were gone.