



TRACY D. SMITH

THREADS  
*of*  
FAITH

Based on the true story of friendship  
and faith across two world wars

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*Dedicated to my grandfathers, Donald Matheson and Donald Ramlow,  
and great-grandfather Henry Matheson, as well as to those who so bravely  
fought for the freedom of others.*

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# PART ONE

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GERMANY

# CHAPTER 1

## Joseph

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*Munich, Germany*  
*November 9, 1938*

EXCEPT FOR THE TRICKLING OF RAIN AGAINST THE METAL ROOFTOP ABOVE THE instrument shop, the day seemed as quiet and uneventful as one could hope for. The Nuremberg laws were instituted three years ago, stripping Jews of their German citizenship, and business had been slow. Joseph could count the number of customers he'd had that day on one hand; in fact, he could count the number of customers he'd had all week on one hand. Since the inhumane laws were enacted, more than half of his clientele had stopped coming. Either people didn't value musical instruments anymore or the giant word *Jude* painted on the front window scared them away.

Rumors circulated that retaliation would come to the Jews due to the murder of Sturmabteilung (SA) officer Ernst Vom Rath by the hand of Herschel Grynszpan in revenge for expelling his parents to Poland, where they were left homeless and without a country.

Joseph had seen anger rising in the people; the change and hostility terrified him.

He sighed, took another sip of his tea, and nibbled on a hard cookie. Crumbs stuck to his well-kept brown mustache, so he dabbed them away with a silk handkerchief. A glance at the empty floral chair next to the cash register sent off a wave of loneliness that washed over him like it had the day he'd lost his mother. It had been over a year, and even though he was well into his thirties, he still couldn't part with her belongings.

He pulled his father's gold Baume and Mercier watch, which he had inherited decades earlier, from his vest pocket and checked the time. "Hmm, nearly four o'clock," he said to himself because no one else was in the shop. "Might as well close early."

On Wednesday evenings, he usually walked to the diner a few blocks down the road and ordered sauerbraten for dinner. At the very least, he would be surrounded by familiar faces. His mouth watered with the anticipation of tender meat and potato dumplings, and his stomach growled in agreement that closing the shop early was indeed a good idea.

He grabbed his hat and gray suit coat, slipped it over his white dress shirt, and then walked toward the front door. But just as he reached forward and grabbed the bronze handle, a blood-curdling scream split the air.

Slowly, he shifted his gaze out the storefront window as a barefoot woman ran frantically past his shop with two men in form-fitting brown button-up shirts following quickly behind her, the black and white swastika symbol razor-sharp against their red armbands.

Within minutes, the same men walked back the way they'd come, dragging the kicking and screaming woman by her long, dark hair. Then several more men pressed behind, jeering and shouting at the flailing woman.

Everything happened so quickly that by the time Joseph registered what was transpiring before him, it was too late. He swung open the door and shouted for them to stop, but they were no longer there; they must have turned. He went to follow, but more men in brown shirts appeared around the corner, and Joseph rushed back to his shop, locked the latch, and stumbled backward, nearly tripping over his own feet. What if they were after him too?

More shouts and blurs of armed men running past made his head spin. Terrified, he carefully and deliberately walked to the back of his store. With shaking hands, he bumped into his mahogany desk. His fingers grazed over the sleek wood, and he shoved the black leather chair out of the way and pushed himself underneath the temporary shelter. With knees to his chest, he hid from the view of the street. His limbs seemed to have a mind of their own and shook uncontrollably.

A myriad of thoughts and questions raced through his mind. What had just happened? What were they going to do to that woman? He should have followed them. He wished he had done something, anything, but when they dragged the woman past, he'd frozen instead, like he always had when he was

scared. What he wouldn't give to turn back time and help the poor woman. His sister, Johanna, would have done something if she were here. She was always faster than he was to respond. She would have opened the door and demanded they release the woman immediately, like she had when Joseph had gotten bullied for being too quiet. Why hadn't he been brave enough to leave Germany with Johanna and her husband? "I'm a coward," he whimpered to himself as he grasped his legs tighter into the fetal position. *If only I had acted sooner.*

More voices, shouts, and the crackling of fire came from outside. Even from under the desk, Joseph could still hear faint screams.

*Crack!* A loud smashing sound came from the front of the store, jolting his body alert. He sprang up, smacked his head against the hard desk, and rubbed it with his palm to dull the pain. His heart rate quickened as the noises grew louder, followed by a succession of shattering glass and shouts. "Try selling now, Jew!" a man yelled.

The commotion of heavy footsteps and voices rose inside Joseph's shop just feet from where he huddled. His body stiffened as a group of young men laughed and threw what he assumed were his beloved instruments against the wall and floor like they were toys. His hands curled into fists as he pulled his legs tighter to his chest and prayed the vandals would leave. Every moment felt like an eternity.

When the voices faded, Joseph sighed in relief. His hands and legs continued to shake, but he allowed himself a moment to breathe. He slowly unfolded his arms from his chest and placed a hand on the hardwood floor. His body ached from the awkward position, and he pressed his weight against the floor to crawl out of the nook.

Carefully, he inched out on his knees until a whizzing sound drifted in an arch overhead. Instantly, he pulled himself back under the desk and glanced up in time to see a burning cloth-wrapped brick land on the floor a few feet away.

The smell of smoke caused a rush of adrenaline to pulse through his veins. Even if the Nazis destroyed his instruments, he couldn't let his family shop burn to the ground. Instinctively, he scrambled out, grabbed the teacup off his desk, and threw it onto the flame. The porcelain cup immediately shattered against the hardwood floor planks, but the tea only seemed to enrage the fire more. He quickly ripped off his coat and threw it over the fire, leaving puffs of smoke in its place.

He searched the room for more bricks and luckily found none, nor did he find any assailants who'd stayed behind. His mouth went dry as he noticed the amount of glass and debris that littered the floor, but fortunately, there were no more flames.

*My shop!*

Every step he took caused a ripple of cracks and snaps. The green walls spun as he assessed the damage. He grabbed his head to stop the sensation. A few violas and violins remained intact, but most were beyond repair. The precious cello he had been fixing all fall was shattered into pieces and piled on the floor in a heap. He fell to his knees and scrambled to put the pieces together.

Chaos ensued outside, and another group of men ran past the now-shattered window along the same wall as the door.

*I need to get out of here!*

Joseph hurried through the front door that hung off its damaged frame, and into the brisk twilight.

Clouds of smoke billowed from shops and homes, causing an unsettling false night sky. White and gray ash rained down from above, and a bright light flashed before him.

*The synagogue!*

Even though he hadn't attended for years, his sense of duty and loyalty to protect it did not waver. Twenty-three years earlier, he had read the Torah aloud for the first time there and become a man at his bar mitzvah. His heart raced even faster—the synagogue was a part of him, a part of his past.

He took several deep breaths, talking himself into being brave. More shouts and smashing sounds, reminders of the horrors he'd read about and seen in the faces of men who'd returned from the Great War. Something ignited inside him. Anger and instinct took over his fear as he ran toward the burning building, frantically looking for someone to help. *I have to put it out!*

Town square was unrecognizable. Joseph had to squint through the smoke and chaos. He put a hand over his eyebrows to shield his face from the ash and to get a better view. A few firefighters stood around the fire with hoses in hand, but the hoses weren't on. His shoulders slumped. What were they waiting for?

He blinked several times to soothe the burning sensation from the smoke, then spotted someone he knew. "Otto!"

A tall man with striking blond hair sticking out from under a bowler cap briefly turned in Joseph's direction, then momentarily froze.

A memory of playing tag with Otto decades ago on the street where they now stood flashed through Joseph's mind. He yearned for his old friend and innocence. This wasn't the first time in the last few months and years a friend or acquaintance had tried to pretend they didn't know him, but it stung every time. He was tired of being treated like he carried some type of contagious disease.

As a firefighter, Otto's job was extinguishing fires, but he wasn't putting out the fire. A roiling heat filled Joseph's belly, and the muscles around his neck and jaw went still.

"Otto!" Joseph yelled again. This time, Joseph didn't wait; he sprinted toward his old friend.

Otto's brilliant blue eyes appeared bloodshot and tired. His face twisted into a grimace, and he quickly looked away.

Panting, Joseph braced his hands on his knees and caught his breath. "Otto, why aren't you putting out the fire?"

The veins on Otto's forearms bulged, but he kept silent, darting his gaze back and forth to the men around them.

A sharp pain pricked at Joseph's chest. He turned his head left and right, gauging whether the other firefighters were watching. They fixed their eyes on the blaze, all except one, who shot a condescending glare toward Otto and Joseph. Joseph let out a forceful breath, then turned to Otto. Their gazes met, and Otto's wet, dull eyes reflected the flames. He bit his lower lip and kept his voice low. "You need to get out of here, Joseph! I can't put out the fire."

"But you're a firefighter," Joseph said louder than he should have.

Otto shifted his weight and readjusted the hose. He tilted his head and cast his eyes downward. "I won't be able to see my family again if I do."

A sudden chill filled Joseph's body. He hadn't thought of that before. "Otto. I . . . I didn't realize they would go after you too."

Gripping the hose tighter, Otto took a few steps closer to the fire and nodded. "Go home, Joseph."

"I . . .," Joseph petitioned.

Otto shook his head. "Don't let them see you. They're arresting Jewish men tonight by the thousands, even some women and children. I was told to

let the Jewish homes and synagogues burn. We were only to put out the fires if they touch German homes or buildings.”

*“But I am German, and they’re all German buildings!”*

With a shake of his head, Otto pursed his lips. “I’m sorry, Joseph. Leave Germany as soon as possible. It will only get worse here for you and your people.”

Joseph wanted to say more but clamped his jaw shut dejectedly. A single tear slipped down his cheek, and he wiped it away, leaving his finger wet and spotted with soot.

He swallowed the lump that formed in his throat and nodded. “Thank you, old friend. Goodbye.”

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