

An inspiring tale just right for our times!



**RICK
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AS I WAS SAYING

I just read a wonderfully adventurous novel ... made doubly wonderful because I knew the protagonist ... sort of! Let me explain.

Quite a few years ago a Toronto couple, Heinz Avigdor and his wife Nancy McDonald, after long and successful careers in the Canadian television industry, decided to move to Stratford. Toronto's loss was our gain! Mutual friends introduced us and before long we became fast friends.

We spent many a Saturday evening together, swapping war stories, enjoying their inspired cuisine and just roaring with laughter at life's twists and turns. Heinz adored Cathy's singing and he often would request a few bars of *When You and I Were Young* toward the end of the evening.

Sadly, a few years ago Heinz became ill and died in February 2015. Because he didn't speak very often of his personal history, I never realized (until I read his obituary) what a perilous beginning he had.

He was born in Berlin, Germany during the early years of Hitler's ascendancy. Heinz's father, Rifat, a Sephardic Jew originally from Istanbul, was a successful aeronautical engineer. His mother was a German Jew. The Avigdors sensed the increasing stain of anti-Semitism in Hitler's Germany and they fled that country, arriving in the Netherlands in 1938. No doubt to shield their children from the ugly realities of hate, the Avigdors also abandoned their religion and in fact Heinz didn't learn of his true Jewish heritage until he was 50 years old.

When the Germans invaded the Netherlands, Heinz and his family once again left everything behind and made an "unscheduled" cruise to England in a small fishing boat.

Perhaps fearing that the Germans would eventually invade England as well (which thankfully never happened), the family once again threw caution to the wind and immigrated to Canada in 1941.

Heinz's widow Nancy (I suspect as a way to deal with her loss) set out over the last three years following Heinz's death to flesh out her late husband's miraculous flight to safety. She very cleverly used Heinz's story as a framework in shaping her first young adult novel, *Boy From Berlin*. Several weeks ago I attended the debut of her novel at Fanfare Books and all assembled were treated to a reading by McDonald herself!

In an author's note, she terms her novel "... a work of fiction ... based on historical fact." She

skillfully chronicles the journey of a rather shy, self-doubting eight-year-old boy named Heinz (whose nickname is "Käfer – short for the Maikäfers, the German word for May bugs, since Heinz was a May baby.)

In the novel, Käfer's father Rifat, a brilliant engineer, is portrayed as a rather stern taskmaster. Rifat seems at first to favour Käfer's older brother Peter, who has inherited his father's gift for math and science. So underlying Käfer's apprehension over his family's rather peripatetic and uneasy existence, this young boy also struggles with every child's dilemma of gaining the respect of a beloved parent.

We gradually learn how Käfer succeeds gloriously in this task, with acts of bravery that make Rifat a very proud papa – first with a series of quick-thinking ploys to save the family from certain calamity at the hands of the Nazis, to his final act of courage and quick thinking in helping to capture a group of Nazi spies who were trying to infiltrate England in preparation for Hitler's planned assault.

Boy From Berlin is a personal memoir wrapped in a history lesson encased in a rousing coming-of-age tale!

After I finished reading this gripping tale, I turned on the evening news. Young children at the U.S. border with Mexico were being ripped from their mothers' arms and put behind bars, pending a bureaucratic nightmare that carried no assurance that parent would soon be reunited with child.

Has humanity learned nothing from its long and sad history of heartless endeavours?

Then this old adage came to mind: "Those who forget history are condemned to repeat it." I can't think of a more apt tale than *Boy From Berlin* to remind us of how fine the line is between heartfelt compassion and careless cruelty.

At this moment there are doubtless thousands of little "Käfers" in cages in Texas living the same nightmare that my friend Heinz experienced 80 years ago. McDonald is a gifted writer and in her debut novel she has rendered this harrowing tale of escape with imagination and the compelling craft of storytelling.

And the best news for me personally is ... she's planning a sequel!