

ROWING HOME



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CHAPTER 1

George Grossinger turned from his position in the number two seat to catch the eye of his friend, Arthur Schwartz, in the number four seat of the wooden eight that had just glided toward the far end of the dock, leaving precisely enough room to tilt starboard oars perfectly in place. Both young men knew there would be an acknowledgment of friendship and trust—it had been that way ever since they first met as freshmen at Berlin University and found their way as two German Jews who enthusiastically rowed with fellow university students at the Germania Club. Coming in from practice early evening, the eight rowers stood up in the boat, planting a left leg on the dock, then at the command of the coxswain, pulling the port oar in with a motion that settled four long oars nearly simultaneously on the dock. George turned to see the last vestiges of sunlight glint off the slight waves of the Spree River as he grabbed his shoes.

"Don't linger," shouted Henry, the nineteen-year-old coxswain, who spoke with authority despite his slight 5'6" frame and weight of 120 pounds. George returned quickly to the boat, ready to join the others to hoist it on his shoulder, knowing full well that Henry, although diminutive, could use his role as coxswain and newfound Aryan ideology to make life difficult for both him and Arthur. The coxswain wasn't the coach, but still, he had eyes on the crew at all times and seemed to want to let people know that although small in stature, he held power. He was also responsible for getting boats deftly in and out of the water.

"Hands on!" cried Henry, as tall and spare young men spread out among eight aluminum riggers, kneeled slightly, and each placed a left hand on starboard and right on port.

"Overhead," came the following command, and eight young men, each at least six feet tall, stood from kneeling position and raised the boat overhead with a deftness that indicated ease and authority despite the grueling hour-workout just completed on the water. Although their coach, Conrad Messinger, philosophized that more challenging drills paid off at races, sometimes he would have the rowers complete a steady-state row at a lower

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This time Ben Leicester came down to the warehouse with his rifle slung over his shoulder and an extra round of ammunition in his pouch. Rowing was important, but so was his life. He thought about a hand grenade, but if he were in his single scull, would he be able to hold on to the oars with one hand and throw the grenade with the other—and how far would it reach? He would have to be stable and spectacularly close to his target.

An order had recently come down from British high command that soldiers could take a harsher tone with the Arabs now that the Mufti was supporting Hitler's Third Reich—and a historic transfer agreement had gone into effect. Palestine would receive 60,000 German Jews who could come but with limited assets. Germany was keeping some of the emigrant's holdings through a complicated agreement that involved assets and a substantial reduction of their unwanted population. Zionists and Nazis had agreed to the initiative proposed by Sam Cohen, owner of the Hanotea citrus-export company in Netanya. Probably the Arabs were left out of the agreement, which would mean god-knows-what, Leicester thought. It could go from rock-throwing to bold assassinations. Guns and ammunition were rife in the area—especially around the port of Haifa.

His commander had warned him. "You are not to do anything that will start a flare-up between Arabs and Jews. The race riots we had in 1929 were hard enough to contain. Such stupidity started by people who are convinced they won't be able to pray at their special wall."

Leicester hadn't commented, deciding that it was not the time to argue that much of religion was about holy places. After all, didn't people make pilgrimages to walk along Jesus' route, the Via Dolorosa in Jerusalem, and what about trips to Mecca and Camino de Santiago in Spain?

"So, you have a boat for us?" It was Ethan with Nurit at his side, grinning. He was not surprised that they showed up again on his watch.

He had noted a restlessness in them that he thought just being a pioneer in this god-forsaken land would satisfy. No. These kids wanted more. This was not the time to explain that learning to row here would be difficult and,

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The two men sat close together, hunched over the kitchen table, looking at a yellow writing tablet trying to decipher the scribbled writing of what was clearly a draft. One's age was evident by sprinkles of gray in his hair and softness around the belly. On closer look, the younger one had the same shape head, the same wavy hair, albeit a rich brown, and broader shoulders. Any observer would have easily guessed that they were father and son.

George had been apprehensive about showing his draft to Werner, whose standards for writing were high: clarity, strong verbs, honesty. "Leave the propaganda to the politicians," his father would say.

The glow and thrill of coming in third in the Henley race still lingered. The bronze medal with its white and blue ribbon now hung over the knob of a closet door as a reminder of what had been and what might yet be possible. George thought the embedded sculler on the bronze medallion looked like someone from an Eakins painting. When George brought it home, he laid the prize alongside a copy of an Eakins sculler painting in his art history book. While admiring the art, he would often conjecture what it would be like to row in the distant places depicted in the artist's paintings. Novels brought other worlds to readers but art, even more so. The depictions were already there to ponder and expand one's imagination.

"Needs some rewriting, but we'll print it," said his father. "It might bring some happiness to people here to know that two German Jews helped to bring a bronze to Germany. That could be the focus—the theme, you know. We need something in this country to lift the spirits." He decided to wait before telling him what had happened to his grandfather.

"No," George said, pushing the writing tablet aside. "There's nothing there about Arthur and me being Jewish, and it's not going to bring any glory to Germany if that information is included. Instead, we print a description of the race, how close it was . . . and the setting. I'm sure the readers here would like a bit of description of the English . . . how they behave at a race and how they dress. Women spectators wore fancy hats with big brims often adorned with flowers, and some of the men even had top hats." He paused. "Dare I

CHAPTER 17

Leicester awoke slowly on the narrow bed set against a wall of his one-room stucco house. His looked like every other home built quickly to house newly arrived immigrants. The only thing that distinguished it was a British Austin army jeep to the right of the Lebanese cedar wooden front door with steel-gated windows on either side.

The two-burner stove supplied by a gas cylinder served him well—even though he wasn't much of a cook. And army life had accustomed him to an outhouse. A reader of Middle East adventure stories, he eagerly embraced the climate. Desert-dry air suited him.

He pictured himself as a sort of Lawrence of Arabia, able to connect with the populace, whoever it might be at the moment, so he was not surprised at a knock at his door with shouts of "Captain Leicester, Captain Leicester" in clipped Arabic between the pounding. He had learned to recognize the difference almost immediately between an Arab and a Jew when they spoke his mother tongue. A Jew's English speech was always more languid, almost musical, with the voice rising at the end—an Arab usually spoke with clipped diction. Voice gave it away more than appearance because Leicester had discovered that, yes, dark-skinned Jews lived in Palestine—they were not all pale from Germany and Poland. They could be as light-skinned as Disraeli, the only prominent English Jew he had learned about in history. In that same history class, he had also learned that there were Ethiopian Jews; they would undoubtedly be dark-skinned and fast runners.

He peered through the window to see Ahmad standing outside the door, sweat pouring down his brow. He had probably been wearing the same clothes for the last three days, Leicester thought.

"They're coming," Ahmad shouted as soon as Leicester opened the door. Leicester smiled, thinking that those words were close to the supposed words of Paul Revere at the time of the American colonies, trying to remove the shackles of Great Britain. And I suspect, he thought, they will want to do that here. Who likes strangers in their land? Meantime, I've moved into their neighborhood to promote peace. We'll see.

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The quiet was unnerving. George was used to waking up in the morning, hearing his mother practicing musical phrases. He marveled at her ability to play the same measure repeatedly on her precious violin. To him, each measure sounded faultless, but he knew his mother's combined talent and perfectionism would insist on practice making the music virtually flawless. She would tell her students that "practice may not always make it perfect, but it will always make the music reach new heights."

He had decided he would wait until she gave some indication she was ready for a serious discussion. He was beginning to understand that not every anxious thought needed to be brought to the fore immediately. Some moments were more appropriate than others to bring up worries. The critical topic, again, would have to be about leaving Germany with his parents. The encounter with the SA kid gangsters at the theater had unnerved him. George headed downstairs with his rowing clothing tossed into his briefcase since practice required that he be at the boat club every day after school; workouts were critical in taking seconds off his 2,000-meter sprint. He also needed to see if enlisting the aid of the club to get to Palestine was possible—boats, yes, but people—actual human beings, was another story. Germany would undoubtedly be imposing restrictions on products and human emigration.

His mother sat at the kitchen table with a music score on the table, absent-mindedly eating a piece of toast.

"Preparing for tonight's rehearsal?" George popped two slices of bread into the toaster, taking out a jar of gooseberry jam from the cupboard. His grandparents had helped him cultivate a taste for this extraordinary fruit. They frequently reminded him it had traveled well from England to Germany to suggest that one's horizons could always expand.

She didn't look up until she had turned the page. George knew she was looking at a piece of music, trying to hear the precise notes in her head. It was a regular part of her practicing schedule—to listen carefully. She did it to maintain this particular skill of being able to read and hear exact notes in the music simultaneously. Frieda had explained to him that most musicians

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Fortunately, in the early dawn, with the sun barely peeking over the horizon, Ein Or was lit intermittently by a circling tower light. George and Arthur stood outside the barbed wire fencing of the kibbutz, thumbs out, hitchhiking. Aloni had told them that this is what everyone did there—try to hitch a ride with one of the passing cars or even on the back of a motorcycle at any hour of the day. George thought back to the streets of Berlin, his encounter after the movies with Clara, and the near brawl with street thugs. He had been grateful the SA thugs had not touched their bikes because the last thing he would have tried was to hitch a ride with a stranger to get home.

"I think someone is stopping for us," said Arthur, and he stepped out into the road as a car slowed down. When the driver rolled down the window, Arthur showed him a piece of paper on which Leicester had drawn directions to the warehouse near the Kishon River.

George and Arthur knew that Leicester could have picked them up but understood that he wanted to test their initiative. Living in this land without the infrastructure that usually supported a civilized society, one's ability to fend for oneself and make things happen appeared to be a litmus test to acceptance—and maybe survival. For George and Arthur, it was not too different from racing at strange venues and finding ways of setting a pace to push themselves beyond everyday personal endurance. "Exceeding" and "overcoming" were two words imprinted on their cell structure.

The rowers were determined to find a way to get to the boathouse by themselves. They would not bother the people of the kibbutz, who all seemed busy with chores. George also had heard that Leicester admired people who thrived in this milieu. George wondered about Leicester's background since he noted the captain seemed so happy here.

"Ah, the warehouse," said the driver in English with an inflection they did not recognize, "Gabriel Rossi," he said. "With relatives in Italy, just in case, you wondered about my accent." George took him to be about his age and attributed his somewhat wrinkled skin to sun.

"Have you been here long?" asked George, taking out his notepad. He

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As Harry Markham sat at his desk observing the brief, unusual morning rain, his momentary thought was, "Thank goodness, maybe it will cool down the rage that has created so much destruction."

Markham, a proud descendant of a military father who had served in India, often told stories about how the British civilized nations, and brought the people not only plumbing but culture—and tea. Markham was beginning to realize he had never heard stories from Indians and how they felt about the British as occupiers. This newly discovered insight undergirded his reporting back to the home office in England that a peaceful solution between Arabs and Jews was impossible, and the Balfour Declaration had done nothing to help. Despite his thinking, the framed copy of a letter from Balfour to Lord Rothschild that gave hope to Zionists hung on a wall facing him. Therefore, it was at the forefront of his thinking every day. He understood that the great politicians didn't know that "national home" had never existed in international law when they promised Jews a homeland. The Balfour Declaration's deliberate vagueness had only further complicated the situation.

The telephone ring startled him. A young man's voice spoke in cryptic sentences. "Leicester's been shot. Stabilized for now. Needs medical care. Where shall we take him?" Somehow, the ragtag group of rowing novices had managed to locate another British soldier.

Well, thought Markham, Rothschild may have screwed up with overpromising in the Balfour Declaration, but he had done good by establishing hospitals in Jerusalem. An American organization, Hadassah, had come along to rehabilitate the hospitals from their neglected state. Because Jerusalem was too far, Hadassah had wisely established the B'nai Zion medical center in Haifa also.

His decision came quickly. "Take him to B'nai Zion in Haifa. It's the closest. I'll alert them. You just do the careful driving and . . . make sure you have someone with a rifle with you. If you're in a British-marked jeep, anything is possible."

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This novel was inspired by my trip to Israel in December 2019 when I rowed at the Tel Aviv Rowing Club founded in 1935 on the Yarkon River. Jewish and an avid rower myself, I thought that a rowing club that began in 1935 in what was then Palestine must have had a history. I gathered some bare facts from *Wikipedia*. From Berlin, in 1933, a Jewish rowing team seeing what was happening in Germany, was supposed to be heading to a regatta in Barcelona. Instead, they arrived in Haifa with their boats, where they founded the Haifa Rowing Club, which moved to Tel Aviv in 1935. These actual events inspired the novel—but what interested me most was not the escape itself but what led up to it.

"We continue to circle around the events of 1933 because the rise of the Nazis exposed so many conflicting motivations about political and social behavior. . . . In the flash of a moment Adolf Hitler became, and remains one of the most recognizable figures of world history." This is from Peter Fritzsche's book *Hitler's First Hundred Days*, which became the source of much of my material. The events of 1933 occurred two years before I was born, yet they remain etched in my psyche. They remind me of how vulnerable we are to despots and authoritarians.

The characters I created to explore this with me are imagined. In writing this book of historical fiction, I wanted to explore the motivations of a family deciding to leave Germany in a time of profound uncertainty to start life in a new country with a geography and a culture completely different from their usual circumstances. What allows us to know when it is time to leave everything we know and love? What allows us to leave soon enough?

I leave to the reader's imagination what happened to these intrepid German rowers after their arrival to Palestine in 1933—a life that would undoubtedly involve another set of intense challenges.

I read many books to understand this topic, including Fritzsche's. I also received crucial help from rowers Susan E. Cohen and Moshe Deutsch, who introduced me to the Tel-Aviv Rowing Club. I am grateful for the years of friendship and support from my Israeli friend, Dr. Tamar Ariav, whom I met

in graduate school at the University of Pennsylvania over forty years ago. I appreciate the support of Yad Vashem in Israel permitting me to use the photo of rowers from its archives. There's so much history in that photo alone.

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I hope for wisdom from our leaders and an effort not to repeat the mistakes of the past.

AUTHOR

Sybil Terres Gilmar is the author of two other novels of historical fiction, *The Jew and the Pope* and *Chasing Stolen Art*, both also based on the Jewish experience. Her short stories, essays, and articles have appeared in *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, *Main Line Magazine*, *Reconstructionist Journal*, and the Wising Up anthologies *Love After Seventy* and *View from the Bed: View from the Bedside*.

Rowing Home was inspired by a visit to Israel in December of 2019, when she was privileged to row on the Yarkon River in Tel Aviv with a club that had been founded in 1935. As a rower and a child of immigrants, she knew there was a story there.



Her own fascination for rowing began at the age of sixty-nine. Returning to Philadelphia after a ten-year sojourn in Costa Rica, she was so fascinated by the sculls on the Schuylkill as she walked along Boathouse Row that she decided to take lessons. At eighty-seven, she is still rowing her single Arca de Noe at Whitemarsh Boat Club in Conshohocken, PA.

Her work as an educator in public schools for thirty years—as well as her volunteering as a docent at the Weitzman National Museum of American Jewish History and as a guide at Independence Hall in Philadelphia—inspired her to be truly grateful that her parents made the decision to leave the Pale of Settlement and come to America in 1922. It informs her focus on how and when decisions to emigrate are made.