**Lebensborn**

By Aimee Shenton

**Chapter 1**

It was night-time when they came. The repetitive slapping of numerous feet onto the wet earth matched that of the perpetual rain, the only dim source of light being provided by recurring lightning flashes, met by viscous roars of thunder. The wind whistled ominously, unforgiving, as it enveloped our little village. I should have seen it coming. Should have known that they were coming. A woman’s scream pierced the night air, followed by a heavy thud as the sound abruptly cut off. No sooner had that noise ended than another began – a gradual wailing sound that rapidly built up to a screech – a child’s screech. Gunshots rang through the night, as ferocious as the men who fired them.

 Father, awoken by the noise, roused me and mother and ordered us to dress Karolek and escape. There was a look in his eyes that I had never witnessed before - fear. The Church bells started ringing, fast and continuous, competing to be heard over the malevolent racket of the weather: a warning.

“My baby! My baby!”. A heart-breaking sob, emitted from just a few feet away from our little house, barely audible yet full of pain. The marching was becoming increasingly louder now – becoming closer. More gunshots. More cries. More misery. My heart started pounding in my chest like the thundering hooves of a wild stallion, struggling, fighting to escape from my rib cage. I felt a pull at my arm and turned to look – Mother, passing me Karolek as she was frantically trying to wrap her shawl around her skeleton – thin body. Father was busy packing what little possessions we had into a small leather satchel, which he then thrust at me, before nervously motioning for us to follow. Pushing my way past the mangle and clothes horse I threw the back door open, onto the blackness beyond, devoid of either moonlight or streetlights. No streetlights lit the way – purposefully done so to avoid any attention that we may face from German aircraft – just last week Warsaw faced the worst attack that Father swears our country has seen since the Great War. He says that over 80% of the city was destroyed, and he fears that we will be next. The darkness watched as we made our escape.

I leapt back in surprise as, without warning, something lunged at me out of the undergrowth. Father threw himself in front of me, unceremoniously knocking me to the ground in a bid to protect me from whatever awaited us. ‘Anzelm!’ – my name, forced out of the trembling mouth of my mother. ‘Run!’ – An order, not a request. I dove to the side just as a bullet whizzed past my temple, narrowly avoiding a certain lethal connection. Scrambling desperately to my feet, I whipped around just as my mother’s scream pierced the gloom; ‘Karolek!’ A tall, narrow-faced man had wrenched my screaming brother from the arms of my mother, before striking her to the ground. His eyes were black as coal he was clad in a green military-style jacket with a red armband stretching across the arm. The last thing I remember acknowledging was the fact that the red arm-band held a peculiar symbol – a sort of cross with its arms bent at right angles – before I too was plunged into darkness with a blow to the back of my head, and the ground came up too meet me.

**Chapter 2**

Wiping my eyes on the rough sleeve of my shirt, I sniffled, and held back a sob. Can’t cry no more. Not since what happened to Aleksy. Aleksy was my friend, and he looked like me a bit. Had the same blonde hair and blue eyes like me anyway – mother always said that I was the best looking boy in the village, but loads of the boys on this train look exactly the same as me. Aleksy wouldn’t stop crying, and screaming out for his mother, so one of those men came and grabbed him. Tall man he was, with a moustache like father only his was more thick and bushy, and he told Aleksy that if he didn’t be quiet then he’d throw him off the train, and that’s exactly what he did. I wet myself a bit then. I was scared, more scared than I’d ever been before in my whole life, and although my life so far has been short there’s been a lot of scary moments in it. Like when the men, the same men who grabbed me – well, they looked the same anyway – came to the village last week and told all of the grown-ups that if they had any children between the ages of 0-12 then they would have to take them away to get a real education, and to be ‘germanised’ or something, and that if they tried to hide them then they would just be taken by force. I asked mother what ‘germanised’ meant because it’s a funny sounding word, but she just sat there crying and Anzelm told me to go away because she needed to rest. I wondered if they’d take Anzelm, because he’s 15, and I told mother that I’d try and look after him – she laughed a bit at that. I think it’s because she thinks I’m too young to look after anyone. I’m only nine. And then I asked Anzelm if they would take me too, but he just walked out then, and I heard him whispering to Father in the woodshed, about a man called Heinrich Himmler, but they stopped talking when I walked in.

And now I’m stuck on this train without Aleksy, and it keeps rattling and it feels like it’s been going forever. I’ve never been on a train before, but I don’t like it – it makes me feel dizzy and sick and all I can think about is mother and father - and Anzelm. He’d know what to do. At least he’s still alive. Aleksy said that those men killed his family when they came last night, because his mother wouldn’t stop shouting and his father tried to shoot one of them. I closed my eyes and tried to picture my mother’s face, and felt the hot trickle of a tear slide down my cheek. I’m not really scared anymore. It’s tiring being scared, and by the time I’d opened my eyes it had slowly worn off, only to be replaced with boredom, and a dull, numb feeling that seemed to gradually creep over my body.

I turned to stare as the door of the carriage slid across, and there was that man again. I shuffled backwards nearer the window, and thought about calling him one of the bad words that I had heard father say, but decided not to. I didn’t want him to kick me off the train. He crouched down in front of me and glared at me with those tiny little beady eyes that he’s got. Anzelm would have probably said that he looked like a mole. “What is your name, boy” he spat. I stuck my chin out a bit then like Anzelm always does, and said; “Karolek Kaminski” He nodded his head slightly then, and wrote something down on a chart he was holding. “Birthplace?” he asked in that irritating drawling voice he’s got.

“Danzig” I told him, as again he jotted something down on the paper.

“Age?”

“I’m 9” I replied, looking as tough as I could, keeping my eyes level with his. He roughly took hold of my hand and stamped it with a blue print that said; ‘Medical’ on it. “When we reach the station show your stamp to one of the guards on the platform, and he will instruct you as to where to go.”

And then he slammed the door shut and left me all alone.

**Chapter 3**

*Thud. Thud. Thud.* My head pounded along to the rhythm of every heartbeat. *What?* My palms were sweaty and hot, yet my face was pressed against something cold – something hard. Struggling to my knees, I allowed my vision to clear and tried to focus on where I was, and what I was doing there. *Thud. Thud. Thud.* My head continued to pound, and I slowly raised my hand to touch it – felt something hot, sticky – blood. My own blood, by the looks of it. Recoiling in shock, I soon came to realise that I was outside. Dry earth, that’s what I was lying on. And what was lying next to me? *No.* It wasn’t. *No. No. No. No. No. No. No.* It just couldn’t be. I scrambled away in horror as I realized what I was looking at. **Who** I was looking at. My mother. Straight into her eyes. Her open, lifeless, dead eyes. A strong, metallic smell filled my nostrils, causing me to wrinkle them in disgust. Dried blood. My breathing started to become laboured, as I was lamenting on the wetness of tears, inconsolably wracked with the pain of what I was facing.

*Karolek.* The mere thought of my brother’s name brought reality crashing down around me. No time for mourning. *Where was he?* Then I remembered. Staggering to my feet, I put my hand to my head – the whole side was hot and my ear was blocked and throbbing. I ground my teeth together, let my eyelids fall shut, and tried to concentrate.

It didn’t help.

*Where to now?* Glancing briefly around, I noticed something. A small movement that seemed out of place. A child, hiding behind a round metal bin. Quivering. He stuck his head out, emitted a rather guttural sound when he saw me and lunged back to safety, out of sight. “It’s alright, I’m not going to hurt you.” I crept cautiously forward, like I would do whilst hunting a pig, or a deer, until I reached the side of the bin that was facing me. “Cześć!” I softly said, whilst raising my open hand upwards. Again, the boy stuck his head carefully out, a safe distance from me so he could easily escape if I attacked him. His wide eyes were open, and he greeted me in a similar fashion. “Ah, so you are Polish” The boy nodded his head ever so slightly, timidly, curious. “Were you here last night?” A violent shiver ran through him, as he remembered the events that took place. “The soldiers, you saw them, didn’t you?” Another nod. “Where did they go?”

“They took the children. All of them. Except me, of course. They grabbed them – they got my brother. I tried to follow, but they saw me just as they were boarding a train, so I ran away before they could catch me as well”

“A train? At the station, on the outskirts of town?”

Yet another incline of the head confirmed my worst fears.

*They’ve gone. And they’ve taken Karolek.*

*Right.*

**Chapter 4**

My mouth was stretched open wide as the doctor examined my teeth and stuck his fingers down my throat. He had these little mirrors on sticks that I think he used to look at my teeth, and every now and again he would write something down in his little notepad, like the one that the scary man on the train had. He’d already measured my face from all different angles, and had held a piece of paper of different colours of blue next to my eyes, and wrote some stuff about that down as well. He kept prodding my nose, and said that I should be proud of it because it ‘was narrow and had a very high root’ whatever that means. Next he looked at my chin, and said that it was ‘well defined’ – I told him that was because I stuck it out a lot, and he laughed at me and said something in German to his assistant which I couldn’t quite catch.

Then he stuck a needle in my arm and it hurt - I didn’t like it and thought I was going to faint, so I asked him why he did it but he said that all the other boys and girls have to take these tests. I haven’t seen many other children since my arrival this morning, so I think he’s lying. The Doctor said that that was because lots of the other boys and girls weren’t good enough and held some ‘Jewish characteristics’ so they had to go to special places with other people like them. I’m not sure what a ‘Jewish Characteristics’ is but I’m glad I don’t have it.

After he had poked and prodded all the private places on my body, he told me that I had been ‘deemed suitable for Germanisation’ and that I had ‘achieved the typical features of a qualified Aryan’ – I asked him what that meant and he told me that from now on I must start speaking German, and would be beaten if I used Polish, my native tongue. I started to feel angry then and told him that I was Polish, and that I couldn’t speak German well enough. He then said that from now on I would be called Klaus because that was a good German name, because I was a good German boy and therefore would speak good German. “My name’s not Klaus - my name’s Karolek!! And I’m not German!” He shook me forcefully by the shoulders then and shouted; ‘The only reason you are here is because your parents didn’t want you! They were going to kill you – you weren’t good enough for them, and they hated you. They don’t *want* you. We saved you. Do you understand?” That hit me with a great force, almost like I’d been punched hard in the stomach and I felt dazed and frozen.

*Was that true? Did they really not want me?*

**Chapter 5**

*Uhhhh.* I retched into the dirt, cradling my head in my hands, whilst attempting to conceal myself behind the crates that were ready to be loaded onto a forthcoming train. ‘Lebensmittel’ read the numerous stamps that covered the crates in blood-red ink – my German was just good enough to understand the meaning. ‘Food’ – no doubt supplies for the thousands of soldiers that murdered hundreds of innocent people and stole their children. All for an experiment. A project. That was why they took my brother away from me. To be used as part of a *program* – I spat the word. Not many know of this – it’s a well hidden secret by the Germans – the Nazis. The SS. But Father knew. He told me, one night in the woodshed – the very same night that they had the nerve to come to our village and announce it. The very same night that mother wouldn’t stop crying. *Mother.* My eyes misted up, but only for a second – no time for tears. I promised her that I’d look after Karolek – protect him, be there for him.

I’ve failed her.

Hearing the heavy sound of approaching footsteps, I ducked down behind the crates and tried to ensure that I was well covered, so any passers-by would not be able to see me. Peering through a crack in the wooden panels, my eyes caught a glimpse of red – the armband that symbolised the Nazi uniform. The smell of smoke invaded my nostrils – one of them must have a pipe. Hatred boiled up inside me, fighting to come out, yet I bit my lip, and although my head was pounding I had enough sense to know that revealing myself now would be suicide, and waste the effort that I had faced to even get here. I strained my ears and squinted to try and make out what I was observing, and tried to pick out as many words as I could, which, coupled with the fact that my German was lacking, was extremely difficult.

“Last night…”

“….train….all of them…”

“…where…children go….”

“Childrens home……Munich…..”

My breath caught in my throat. Munich. That’s where they took my brother?

“Train….tomorrow at 9:30….Himmler…”

Heinrich Himmler. The head of the SS. He was the man that launched the program that was to be known as ‘fountain of life’. What a joke – only death, have I met in my experience with it.

With the *Lebensborn* Project.

**Chapter 6**

“So you want this one?” The nurse said as she looked down her nose at me. I shuffled uncomfortably in my seat as all of the grown-ups turned to face me. We were all sat in Nurse Susan’s office, all four of us – me, Nurse Susan, and the smiling couple that had come to visit me and all of the other children. The man was what mother would call ‘polished’ – he had a clean shaven face with a shining bald head, a clean, tidy uniform that had that same weird red cross armband on it like the scary men, and black leather boots that were also spotless. His wife was a fat woman, with crooked teeth that looked like they were going to bite me when she smiled – I don’t think she smiles that much. Both of them had the same hair and eye colour as me, and Nurse Susan told us all to greet them in German and to stand up straight when they came in because they were very important, she said. I don’t know why they were important because they don’t look it to me, but Nurse Susan said that the man was a soldier and that if we were lucky and well-behaved then he might take one of us away with him, and ‘adopt’ us or something.

That was earlier, and after the lady with the crooked teeth had looked at us all she pointed one of her fat fingers at me and told the soldier man that she wanted ‘that one’. So here I am sat in Nurse Susan’s office about to be ‘adopted’ or something. “Now Klaus” Nurse Susan said as she waggled her finger at me. “This nice man and woman here are going to become your new parents, and help teach you and educate you in the way that German boys should be” I pulled a face then, and bit my lip a bit before saying;

“But I’m not German, and my name is NOT Klaus”

“Now we’ll be having none of that!” The man said before giving me a sharp clout round the ear. “You will learn manners, and you *will* learn to behave. From now on you will address me as Father, and my wife as Mother, and we will be your new parents. We are doing you a favour, child, as your own parents didn’t want you! Forget about your past life boy, because you are *never* going back, whether you like it or not! Now Nurse, do you have Klaus’ birth certificate?”

Nurse turned around, and started rummaging around in the cupboards behind her, as I tried to focus, my ears still ringing. *Stupid man.* “Here” Nurse said, and slid a document across the table towards ‘Father’. On it were the words, in German; ‘Certificate of Birth Registration’ followed by;

‘This is to certify that the birth of Klaus Adler has been registered at the Office of the City of Berlin.’

Fathers Name Mothers Name

*Adelino Adler Ada Adler*

 Date of Birth: *13th November 1931*

I stared at it, not sure what I was reading. This was *my* birth certificate. I was born on November 13th, 1931. But my mother and father weren’t called Adler. I was Karolek, Karolek Kaminski. I thought a little then – my parents were going to kill me, that’s what that man said – they didn’t want me. Was I really their child? Who was I?

**Chapter 7**

The sun’s rays stroked my face with caressing fingers as I was gently brought out of my slumber. I don't know how long that ray of sunlight had been peeking through the gap in the wooden slits before it found its way to my face; nor do I know how long it took me to become aware of it. I was curled up in a foetal position, with my knees tucked tightly to my chest and my arms wrapped around them, as my eyelids fluttered open. I had been dreaming of my mother, of our little home in Danzig, of Karolek, and how life had been before. It felt amazing to be back there, carefree, and how all the little things mattered. I fought to ignore that errant sunbeam, to get back to my dream, but the moment had passed.

Initially I had decided to sleep last night, before the train arrived, yet with the constant presence of guards surrounding me, I had decided that sleeping then would be suicidal, and that I may miss the train if I failed to wake up early enough to sneak on board.

Hiding had proved not to be so challenging, as it turned out that the crates I was hiding behind were set to be delivered to Munich, so I simply, yet carefully, emptied the contents of one of the larger crates that turned out to only be half full, and then cautiously re-positioned the food packages so that I was sandwiched in the middle, before replacing the lid to try and replicate how it was before. I had then been loaded onto the train and piled on top of some other crates, and had spent the duration of my journey so far sleeping.

The noise of the train changed – becoming quieter – slowing down. I held my breath and peered out of a slit in the crate to check that the coast was clear before wriggling out of the rear end and jumping 5 feet to the train floor. I landed heavily on my ankle and came crashing down to the ground, my breathing laboured. I waited with bated breath for a shout, a whistle, someone to run in and point a gun to my head, but there was nothing – only a deafening silence filled my ears. Thankful that my presence had not drawn unwanted attention, I tried to stand. The pressure on my ankle caused a jolt of pain to shoot up my leg, and I winced, tears springing to my eyes. The pain in my ankle coupled with my throbbing head injury was unbearable – *Ah well. Better than being dead.* The train door was within reach now, and I glanced out to find the cause of the trains decrease in speed. Outside the window houses were in abundance, speeding past – we’d entered a city, or at least a very large town. I drew open the window and slowly stuck my head out, glancing deliberately around to ensure that no-one could see me. I could just make out the outline of a building up ahead, yet nearing fast. A station. As the train slowed closer to it, I yanked open the door and jumped, not giving my brain the opportunity to think. I hit the dirt and rolled into a tight ball, being certain that my head was tucked in so as to avoid serious injury. Dazed, I lay there a moment, trying to regain my breath. Rolling over I was sick into the dirt, and my head continued to pound along to every heartbeat. My throat felt dry and burning, and a bead of sweat trickled down my forehead and into my eye.

Staggering slowly to my feet, I checked for further injury, and was glad to find none. My ankle complained as I began to hobble for the cover of the trees, emerging on the other side and finding numerous houses clustered together. I was right – a town, possible even a city. Thick smog filled the air and stung my eyes, as citizens went about their daily business. I could see some children playing what looked like war games, and soldiers marching up and down the occasional streets, armed with guns, and displaying the red armbands which held the swastika.

I spotted a child playing by herself, and stumbled over, careful not to alarm her. “Hello, do you know where I am?” She looked at me with wide eyes, and then pointed to the side of my head and said something that I couldn’t understand, possibly in German. Karolek was always better at learning than me – he would have understood. “Where am I?” I repeated, stressing every syllable. The girl looked at my wounded head again and backed off, starting to cry. Worried that I was starting to attract attention to myself, I continued towards her, holding a finger to my lips, and making quiet noises, assuring her that it was ok. She gave a sound like a frightened animal, and swiped out at me with something soft – a newspaper. I caught it just as it was about to connect with my head, and spotted something out of the corner of my eye.

Swiveling around, I found myself looking down the barrel of a gun.

I turned, and ran.

Fast.

**Chapter 8**

‘He alone, who owns the youth, gains the future’

 “That class, is a quote from our great leader Hitler. Hitler is Germany, just as Germany is Hitler. Now, we are all going to practice the salute. Raise your right arm – that’s it – to at least eye level, straighten it out so that it is parallel to the arm, and repeat after me – Heil Hitler!”

“Heil Hitler” the class chorused, me included. I looked around at all the other boys around me. They all looked like me, and all stood up straight and proud in their uniforms that ‘Mother’ had forced me to wear this morning. I must say, I do look quite spectacular in my brown shirt, grey knee-length socks and black shorts – I don’t know why I made such a fuss to be honest. ‘Father’ said he was very proud of me and that by joining the Hitler Youth I would learn to grow up strong and be a fighter. He said that normally you would have to be ten to join but that our teacher was a good friend of his, so they would let me in early. We never had any groups like this for me to join back in Danzig, so I’m really excited. I can’t wait to tell Anzelm – *no. Father says I need to forget about him. Besides, he probably wouldn’t have let me join anyway. Forget him.*

“Fire!” I raised the gun to my shoulder, looked down the barrel and pulled the trigger. A loud ‘crack’ echoed around the field, as my bullet shot out and embedded itself in a target about 50 metres away. “Very good Klaus!!” my teacher said, and gave me a sharp nod. “You are an excellent shot, and will one day no doubt make a fine commander in Hitler’s army. Now stand to attention”

I did so obediently, bursting with pride. *A commander! In the army!* Father will be so proud, and I couldn’t wait to tell him. My teacher continued down the line of boys, watching each one as they held up the gun and tried to aim for the target. I was the best by far, and enjoyed watching the looks of disappointment that my teacher gave every other boy, telling them off and scolding them. One boy – I think his name is Lars – started crying then, and my teacher started shouting, and hit him round the side of the face before telling him that he would never earn his Blood and Honour dagger and was a disgrace to his country. I felt something then – a sort of sympathetic feeling – before I reminded myself that he deserved it, and I was Klaus Adler, the best of all the German boys and that it was Karolek that would be feeling sorry for him, not me.

No, Klaus Adler was a soldier. A fighter.

 German.

**Chapter 9**

Never before had I run with such purpose or speed. Each step I took incited a jolt in my ankle and a pounding in my head, but I refused to stop until the footsteps behind me had receded and I could no longer here the cries of my pursuer, or feel his breath on my neck. Every step took me further away from danger, and I was not going to slow down due to pain – it could be overcome. My fingers were curled up into fists, and I realized that I was still clutching the newspaper in my balled-up hands. Due to a sudden burst of inspiration, I unravelled it and checked the name – ‘Munich Report’. So, I had arrived. *Now all that’s left is to find Karolek and escape.* The headline read; ‘The last of the Polish army lay down their guns’ But it was not the headline that had caught my attention.

Underneath, and slightly to the side, was the caption; ‘Deutsche Jugend’. Yet again, the caption meant little to me. It was the fact that, displayed below, was a picture of a group of smiling young boys, aged around 10-14, all wearing the same uniform and the same happy expression. All holding guns and all wearing the swastika on their red armbands. All of them meant nothing to me, except one. My brother. Karolek.

Alongside the picture it stated; ‘Have you not joined these brave and honourable men yet? Then sign up TODAY, as it is COMPULSORY, and train with fellow brave men like these in Munich’s Hitler Youth group’ I scanned the paper looking for an address – *there*.

It took me almost an hour to find the place – just a simple, redbrick building on the corner of the street, overlooking some of the biggest houses I’d seen during my short stay in the city, with a sign hanging outside which read ‘*Deutsches Jungvolk’* I was finding it hard to concentrate and my mind kept wandering, as my injuries maximized my discomfort. My clothes smelt, my hair was plastered to my head with sweat, I had sick around my mouth and I still had dried blood on my head – no wonder that little girl screamed.

A few moments later I was inside the building and faced with a long corridor which stretched out in front of me, doors placed at equal distance on either side. I could hear voices coming from a door at the end of the corridor, and I moved with a purpose, all the while being wary of my surroundings, expecting at any minute to be confronted and faced with danger.

One particular voice caught my attention – German, yet there was something familiar about it. I strained my ears and tried to focus my mind to comprehend what was being said; “In the presence of this blood banner which represents our Führer, I swear to devote all my energies and my strength to the savior of our country, Adolf Hitler. I am willing and ready to give up my life for him, so help me God." Something clicked into place in my mind. I thought back to my mother, lying there, dead, the promise I had made to her – to protect him, no matter what. Karolek. My heart pumped faster, attempting to punch its way out of my ribcage, and I was pretty sure that whoever was on the other side of that door would be able to hear it. It was my brother that was speaking, swearing his allegiance to Hitler, to the Nazis. It was my brother that had just become a successful part of the Lebensborn program.

Unable to contain my anger, I burst into the room.

“Karolek!”

**Chapter 10**

“I’m Klaus.” I said coldly. *What was he thinking? How dare he turn up and ruin my fun?! Just wait until Father hears about this.* A look of confusion flickered over Anzelm’s face. “What? No you’re not – you’re Karolek. I’m here Karolek – it’s alright. I won’t let them hurt you. I’ve come to take you home.” *Take me home? To* ***them?*** *They didn’t want me. That’s what Father said. They probably would have killed me if Hitler hadn’t sent people to rescue me.* “This is my home now. And these are my brothers” I pointedly waved my arms in the air, indicating my fellow Germans. My fellow soldiers. A brief shadow came over him - hurt, but then was gone and replaced with those cold, calculating eyes that never seemed to lift off my face. “You can’t want this Karolek. Look at what you’re doing! Put down the gun, and stop talking rubbish I can’t believe you’ve even joined this stupid group. How could you?! Karolek, they’ve brainwashed you. Snap out of it! Come back to Poland”

My head snapped round to look at all the shocked faces behind me. My teacher looked extremely angry. *He’s just embarrassed me in front of everyone. I’m probably not going to be teachers favourite anymore!* “And why would I come back to Poland? We are at war with them remember! We bombed Warsaw and took down all of their troops – Poland has never been home. It’s just been an easy victory. All Poles are enemys!” I threw my head back and laughed, then turned my gaze back to weak, defenceless Anzelm, struggling to even stand, head caked in blood and a desperate expression on his face. A liability. A nuisance. “And that, Anzelm, includes **you**”

My gun was already in my hand, levelled and pointing at Anzelm. His face was now the target, his death my goal. My lips curved up at the edges slightly, knowing that I was in control.

I pulled the trigger.

What I next encountered was different from anything that I had experienced shooting targets. There was a sudden crack, an explosion, sudden pressure and then dead silence when everything moved in slow motion.

I have never before missed a target. This time was no exception.

Who was I?

I was Klaus.

**By Aimee Shenton**