

PHOENIX BOUND

by

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

Kaethe- 16 year old German girl
Josef- 18 year old German Jew
Elke- 40 years old, Kaethe's mother
Klaus- 45 years old, Kaethe's father
Carl- 14 years old, Kaethe's brother
Fritz- 65 years old, Elke's father
Harriet- 16 year old German girl, classmate of Kaethe
Liesel- 15 year old German girl, classmate of Kaethe

TIME

Fall, 1933.

PLACE

Nurnberg, Germany.

The stage is set into three different sections. KAETHE's grandfather's house, represented by a kitchen on stage left, has a table with four chairs around it and a counter upstage. There is a doorframe that leads to another part of the house and a door that leads to the outside upstage. On stage left there are three chairs that can be reassembled into a classroom and a park bench or set to the side. In the center of the stage, or perhaps above the stage somewhere, lights rise on KLAUS wearing a tweed jacket and pants, with a pile of books in his arms. The lights and the projections evoke a bonfire of books. He is speaking to the students burning books at Humboldt University in Berlin.

KLAUS

Heinrich Heine said, in 1820 “Where books are burned, in the end people will burn.” The destruction of books by these authors represents the blindness and the hatred of the Nazi Party and their tactics for silencing us. Do not allow yourselves to be silenced. Do not allow our writers to be silenced. They are not subversive, they are brilliant, they are exceptional. If you allow them to be burned, you are allowing the destruction of the kind of discourse that this country needs right now. Thomas Mann, Ernest Hemingway, Franz Kafka, Sigmund Freud, Rainer Maria Rilke. These men are not degenerate, they are geniuses. Consider what you're doing. Read the books; find out why they want to burn them.

KLAUS is interrupted by the sound of an iron gate slamming. The lights go out on him and come up on stage right. KAETHE walks onstage with her book satchel, her head is down as she tries to walk with a purpose and avoid having to talk to anyone. JOSEF sees her and walks towards her, hoping that she'll look up to make eye contact with him. She doesn't speak, so he has to.

JOSEF

Excuse me.

KAETHE

Yes.

I heard you're the new girl. JOSEF

Who'd you hear that from? KAETHE

Everyone knows about you and your brother. JOSEF

What? What have you heard? KAETHE

That you're both new to the school. JOSEF

Of course. KAETHE

And you came from Berlin? JOSEF

Yes. KAETHE

I've always wanted to go to Berlin. JOSEF

It's a beautiful city, full of energy and culture. KAETHE

It sounds fascinating. JOSEF

How long have you lived here? KAETHE

All my life. JOSEF

Oh. And you aren't tired of it? KAETHE

Of Nurnberg? JOSEF

Yes. KAETHE

JOSEF

It's my hometown. I've never left this area, really.

KAETHE

It's not very interesting.

JOSEF

Interesting? Do you know the history?

KAETHE

I hope you aren't going to bore me with the history of Nurnberg.

JOSEF

I wasn't planning to. But you might appreciate the city more if you knew something about it.

KAETHE

My mother grew up here.

JOSEF

She did?

KAETHE

We're taking care of my grandfather. My grandmother died in January. That's why we're back.

JOSEF

Oh. I'm sorry.

KAETHE

He hasn't taken it very well.

JOSEF

I imagine. Does that make it harder for you to be here?

KAETHE

I suppose. But, we'll move back to Berlin when my father returns.

JOSEF

Returns?

A pause.

KAETHE

He went away for a short while.

JOSEF

Where is he?

KAETHE

He's in Bavaria.

JOSEF

Really? I've heard wonderful things about Bavaria. Does he like it?

KAETHE

Oh, yes. He's working there temporarily. But he's looking forward to coming back to the family and moving to Berlin with us. I think we all miss Berlin.

JOSEF

Your mother too?

KAETHE

I don't know. She misses my father, certainly. Though I think she likes being with her father and being where she grew up. Seems like the city has changed though.

JOSEF

Yes. In just the past year.

KAETHE

The whole country, really. My father says the same thing about Bavaria. Berlin was beginning to...

She trails off.

JOSEF

It feels less safe, doesn't it?

KAETHE

So much less safe.

JOSEF

As if everyone is watching you?

KAETHE

Yes.

JOSEF

What about the girls in your class?

KAETHE

What of them?

JOSEF

What do you think of them?

KAETHE

I don't know them very well, but they seem nice. They are nothing like the friends I had in Berlin though. My friends there are irreplaceable.

JOSEF

I'm sorry.

KAETHE

I am too.

Brief pause.

KAETHE

What do you think of the girls in my class?

JOSEF

Why do you ask?

KAETHE

Why did you ask?

JOSEF

Just curious.

KAETHE

Well, you asked my opinion, I can ask yours.

JOSEF

They can be irritating. But I suppose they're fine.

KAETHE

Yes, that's the way I feel about them. I don't think I would spend time with them voluntarily.

JOSEF

No. Probably not. Have you met anyone here you would spend time with voluntarily?

KAETHE

You seem nice enough.

JOSEF

Oh, thank you.

KAETHE

I could maybe spend more time with you.

JOSEF

I'm flattered.

KAETHE

I'm serious. You are the first person I have met in this entire city that I could spend time with.

JOSEF

And how long have you been here?

KAETHE

A few weeks.

JOSEF

You must have very high standards.

KAETHE

Oh, I do. I got them from my father.

A pause.

JOSEF

Where are you living?

KAETHE

In my grandfather's house.

JOSEF

Where does he live?

KAETHE

Bergstrasse.

JOSEF

Are you walking back there now?

KAETHE

Yes, I was planning to.

JOSEF

Mind if I join you? It's on the way back to my house.

KAETHE

That would be nice.

*JOSEF takes her arm and guides her down the street.
The lights fade on them and come up on the kitchen.
ELKE and FRITZ are sitting at the table.*

FRITZ

The children seem to be doing well.

ELKE

They've only been in school for a few days.

FRITZ

It will be easier for them now.

ELKE

It's so hard to be new, though.

FRITZ

You raised strong children, Elke. I am certain they will thrive here.

ELKE

I want to believe you.

FRITZ

Would you rather they were in Berlin? It is no longer safe for you to be there.

ELKE

It's just so hard for them.

A pause.

ELKE

How are you? Are you happy we're here?

FRITZ

It is wonderful. I haven't been this happy for some time.

ELKE

Good. At least we can bring some joy to you.

FRITZ

I only wish that as a family we had been able to spend more time together before your mother passed.

ELKE

Yes, that's one of my greatest regrets.

FRITZ

She was a wonderful woman. She would have been a terrific grandmother to them if you had given her the opportunity.

ELKE

Klaus' salary made it difficult to travel. And he was always teaching. Or the children were in school.

FRITZ

Work should not come before family. You know that, dear.

ELKE

He didn't put work before family.

FRITZ

Then why are you here?

ELKE

To take care of you since Mother's death.

FRITZ

You wouldn't have come if Klaus had still been employed in Berlin.

ELKE

Klaus stood up against the Nazis, Father, when no one else did. Do you want to see our country fall apart? Do you want to see our countryside overrun with madmen and robots? If we all stay quiet, that is our fate.

FRITZ

But at what cost, Elke? Tearing families apart? Blood comes before politics in my family. The Engels must not have raised Klaus to believe that.

ELKE

Even though Klaus no longer lives with us, it doesn't mean that he does not care about us. In fact, I believe that he cares more about us than those who did not stand up.

FRITZ

But at least they are providing for their families. True men take care of their children.

ELKE

Perhaps. But true men also stand up for what they believe in.

FRITZ

It depends on what they believe in.

ELKE

I'd rather not have this argument with you, Father.

FRITZ

Well, I am going to retire to my room. Give the children my love when they return from school. Be sure to call for me when dinner is ready.

ELKE

Yes, Father. Get some rest.

The lights fade on ELKE and come back up on KAETHE and JOSEF. They are standing in front of the door.

KAETHE

This is his house.

JOSEF

It is lovely.

KAETHE

It's fine. Well, thank you for walking back with me.

JOSEF

It was my pleasure.

KAETHE

Oh, thank you.

JOSEF

I'm Josef, by the way.

KAETHE

Oh, yes. I'm Kaethe, Kaethe Engel.

JOSEF

It was very nice to meet you.

KAETHE

Likewise.

JOSEF

Goodbye. I'll see you in school tomorrow.

KAETHE enters the kitchen, ELKE is sitting at the table, drinking coffee and reading the newspaper. KAETHE gives her mother a kiss on the cheek.

Good afternoon, Mama. KAETHE

Hello dear. How was school? ELKE

Fine. KAETHE

Just fine? ELKE

Yes. KAETHE

Did you learn anything interesting? ELKE

I suppose. KAETHE

That's good. ELKE

A pause.

Why didn't Carl come home with you? ELKE

He said he had a meeting to go to after school. He should be home soon though. KAETHE

See. Your brother is trying to meet new people and integrate himself into the community. Why can't you do that? ELKE

I'm not ready to. KAETHE

What do you mean? ELKE

KAETHE

It doesn't feel right.

ELKE

You don't want to make new friends?

KAETHE

I don't want to force myself to make friends just to avoid being alone. I can spend time in the house and be perfectly content.

ELKE

With your grandfather and me? I want you to meet people your own age here.

KAETHE

I met a boy today.

ELKE

Oh?

KAETHE

Quite shocking, isn't it?

ELKE

Is he in your class?

KAETHE

No, he's older.

ELKE

How much older?

KAETHE

I don't know. I just know he's not in my class.

ELKE

Then how did you meet him?

KAETHE

He goes to my school.

ELKE

And you just met?

KAETHE

Yes. What does it matter?

ELKE

You're my daughter. I'm interested in your new life here.

KAETHE

Well, that's about it.

ELKE

You remember what I told you about making new friends here, don't you?

KAETHE

Of course.

ELKE

And no boyfriends. You're far too young for that.

KAETHE

Yes, Mama.

ELKE

Good.

KAETHE

Do you mind if I work on my homework in here?

ELKE

No. Do you need any help?

KAETHE

I don't think so, but I'll let you know if I do.

KAETHE sits down at the table with her mother and opens a book. ELKE returns to her newspaper and her coffee. The lights go down on the two of them and come up on KLAUS who is standing in the center of the stage, wearing the white flannel uniform of concentration camp prisoners. A photograph of the gate at Dachau that says "Arbeit Macht Frei" is projected upstage.

KLAUS

My dearest family. I am sorry that I have not been able to reach you in the months that I have been gone. Life here is not easy. There are many men here like me, but that does not make it unburdened. We wake up early, around 5 am, for roll call and work in the surrounding area. We are worked hard and not given much food. But that is to be expected in prison, I suppose. They are beginning to establish workshops for the prisoners with trades, but those of us who have spent our lives with our noses in books are left to manual labor. When I first arrived, I felt invigorated by the work. By the second week, my muscles were tired and could not throw themselves into the work with the same energy that I first had.

The first months the Bavarian police oversaw our labor, but recently more severe and sinister SS officers have taken over their responsibilities. They are harsher and their agenda seems more pronounced. There are many men here more radical than I am, but I have come to respect their opinions and we have all discussed the frightening implications of the Nazi regime that has flooded society in the past eight months. I hope you all are safe and that Kaethe and Carl have settled well. I hope to see you soon. I do not know how they determine who is released, but I am doing whatever I can to ensure that I will return to you by Christmas so we can celebrate the holiday together. Your loving father, Klaus.

The lights come up on Kaethe doing her work at the table and her mother hands her the letter from her father.

ELKE

This came in the mail from your father today.

KAETHE

“Dearest Elke, Here’s hoping that the family is faring well in your new environment. Are the children doing well in their new school? Are you taking good care of your father? I am good. The work is good for me. I will see you soon. Much love, Klaus”

That’s good. I wonder how accurate it is.

ELKE

I don’t know. I only hope he’s doing this well. But we’ll be fine, Kaethe. I’ll make sure that we’re fine.

KAETHE

I miss him.

ELKE

I know, so do I. What are you studying?

KAETHE

History.

ELKE

Do you like your teacher?

KAETHE

She’s fine.

ELKE

What are you learning about?

Nonsense. KAETHE

I'm sure it isn't nonsense, Kaethe. ELKE

The Awakening of the Nation? KAETHE

What nation? ELKE

Ours. KAETHE

Oh, when was this? ELKE

From 1914 to the present. KAETHE

They're teaching you that in school? ELKE

Yes, it's preposterous. KAETHE

What do your classmates think? ELKE

Well, no one is talking back, really. And I can't mess with the authority of our teacher, I'm new and I don't want people to think I am strange. KAETHE

A silence.

Where do you think your brother is? ELKE

I told you he has a meeting after school. KAETHE

Quite a long meeting, isn't it? ELKE

He wouldn't tell me what it was about. KAETHE

ELKE

Well, at least he's meeting people.

The door slams and CARL walks in wearing his new Hitler Youth uniform. KAETHE and ELKE stare at him and he salutes. CARL is defiant and sure of himself. He knows that what he has done will offend his family, but he doesn't want to show that he knows this.

CARL

Good afternoon, Mother, Kaethe.

ELKE

What are you wearing?

CARL

It's my new uniform. Do you like it?

ELKE

Uniform for what?

CARL

I joined the Hitlerjugend.

ELKE

No.

KAETHE

Carl!

CARL

Mother, you said you wanted me to meet new people.

ELKE

Not by glorifying our Fuhrer.

CARL

All the boys in my class are in it. I can't be friends with them if I don't join too.

KAETHE

You want to be friends with them?

CARL

Yes.

ELKE

Carl.

CARL

Mother. I am the best marksman in my class. Herr Swartz said that my talents would be wasted without joining.

ELKE

Who is Herr Swartz?

CARL

He is my physical education teacher. And he's the group leader.

ELKE

What would your father say?

CARL

I don't care. He's not here.

A silence.

KAETHE

You're right. He's not.

CARL thinks that he has won this argument.

KAETHE

Do you know where he is, Carl? He's in a work camp. He didn't give in to the pressures of the party because he wanted to fit in. He's risking his life because he believes that our country deserves better than this. He refused to stand by when everyone else fell in line. Is that what you want to do? Just fall in line with the rest of them. I would hope that an Engel wouldn't do that, just because he's a good marksman.

KAETHE stands up and leaves to go into the rest of the house.

ELKE

What makes you want to do this, Carl?

CARL goes out the door without responding, and ELKE sits back down at the kitchen table, rereading the letter from KLAUS.

ELKE

(plaintive but not desperate)

Help.

Lights come up on stage right, there are a few chairs and a moveable chalkboard to represent the school. KAETHE is in her seat, reading. The other girls HARRIET and LIESEL in the class are standing.

Are you excited for this weekend?
HARRIET

Oh yes.
LIESEL

It will be your first rally, right?
HARRIET

It will. I was a late joiner.
LIESEL

Silly Liesel. I knew you would come around eventually.
HARRIET

How could I not?
LIESEL

I was one of the first members of the Bund in Nurnberg.
HARRIET

I know.
LIESEL

That's why I will get to march in the front.
HARRIET

Is that right?
LIESEL

And I will shake hands with our Fuhrer when he arrives.
HARRIET

Oh that is exciting.
LIESEL

I know. I can't believe that they are giving us schoolwork despite the rally.
HARRIET

It really is unfair.
LIESEL

We should talk to Frau Weiss.

HARRIET

I think you should do it.

LIESEL

After class I will.

HARRIET

Why hasn't the new girl joined?

LIESEL

I don't know.

HARRIET

You should ask her.

LIESEL

Me?

HARRIET

Why not?

LIESEL

It's not weird to ask her?

HARRIET

Well, why hasn't she joined?

LIESEL

Maybe she doesn't want to.

HARRIET

That's silly.

LIESEL

Kaethe?

HARRIET

KAETHE, who hasn't been paying attention to the conversation so far, looks up at them.

Hmm?

KAETHE

HARRIET

We were wondering why you haven't joined the Bund Deutscher Madel yet.

KAETHE

It isn't required here, is it?

HARRIET

Well, no, but most of us are in it.

KAETHE

Most of my friends in Berlin were not members.

HARRIET

Well, that's Berlin.

KAETHE

Yes?

HARRIET

I mean, Berlin is so different.

KAETHE

Different how?

HARRIET

I don't know. I haven't heard good things about Berlin. It is so ...

KAETHE

Cultured?

HARRIET

No, that's not what I was thinking of.

KAETHE

I didn't think so.

LIESEL
(to HARRIET)

So, is she going to join?

HARRIET

I don't think she will.

LIESEL

How? Everyone is in it!

KAETHE

Everyone?

HARRIET

It is the best way to meet the other girls our age in the city. At least, the ones worth meeting.

KAETHE

I'm not sure I want to commit myself to something so time-consuming when I have to take care of my mother and grandfather at home.

HARRIET

Well, we would love to have you. Especially with the rally coming up. It's the only way to march along with everyone else. And sometimes we get to spend time with the Hitler Youth boys.

KAETHE

Are they worth spending time with?

HARRIET

Of course, they are all of the most athletic and attractive boys in Nurnberg.

KAETHE

Must be why my brother decided to join.

LIESEL

How old is he?

KAETHE

Too young for you, I'm afraid.

LIESEL

Harriet, did you do the reading for class?

HARRIET

I skimmed through it. Did you?

LIESEL

No, I thought you would have done it.

HARRIET

I didn't really have time. Kaethe, do you know what it was about?

KAETHE

I read it years ago. It's about Mary, Queen of Scots. She was the Scottish Queen when Elizabeth was Queen of England. Eventually Elizabeth executed her because she was threatened by her.

HARRIET

Oh, that's not very nice.

KAETHE

It happens all the time.

HARRIET

What do you mean?

KAETHE

Politicians use their power to get rid of their opponents.

HARRIET

Maybe back then. They don't do it anymore.

KAETHE

What do you think is happening right now?

HARRIET

Excuse me?

KAETHE

Nothing.

HARRIET

What are you talking about?

KAETHE

It doesn't matter.

Lights down on the classroom and come up on the kitchen, FRITZ and ELKE are sitting at the table.

ELKE

I'm worried about Carl.

FRITZ

Carl?

ELKE

Yes.

FRITZ

He seems to be doing very well. Meeting new friends, going to meetings.

ELKE

Do you know what the meetings are for?

No, you didn't tell me. FRITZ

He joined the Hitler Youth. ELKE

He did? FRITZ

I'm very surprised by him. ELKE

He wasn't a member back in Berlin? FRITZ

No, Klaus never would have allowed it. ELKE

Of course not. FRITZ

I don't know what to do about it. ELKE

Let him take care of himself. FRITZ

He isn't old enough for me to do that. ELKE

He's the man of your family now. FRITZ

Is he? ELKE

Now that his father is gone, he is. FRITZ

Would you talk to him? ELKE

About what? FRITZ

ELKE

I don't know. Impart your fatherly wisdom on him. I want him to have a strong male figure in his life with Klaus away.

FRITZ

I will do my best. It's been awhile since I've spent time with a boy his age.

ELKE

He's your grandson, all you have to do is love him.

FRITZ

I can do that.

ELKE

He just needs some direction, I think. Let him know that he doesn't need to rely on those boys for companionship here.

FRITZ

Even I would rather spend time with those young men than someone my age.

ELKE

I know. But for his sake, will you do it?

FRITZ

For my only daughter? Anything.

ELKE

Thank you for understanding.

FRITZ

And you aren't worried about *your* only daughter?

ELKE

Kaethe?

FRITZ

Yes.

ELKE

No.

FRITZ

You aren't worried that she isn't making any friends here?

ELKE

I'm not.

FRITZ

It would be nice for her to have some close friends.

ELKE

Yes, but I don't know if she'll find any here. We aren't going to be here forever.

FRITZ

You never know.

ELKE

We don't want to be here forever.

FRITZ

Of course not, that's why you left in the first place.

ELKE

Father, you know that had nothing to do with my leaving.

FRITZ

Choosing love over family didn't serve you well, Elke. It landed you right back in this house.

ELKE

It was my choice to come back here, Father. I wish you didn't think otherwise.

FRITZ

I suppose it's too late now to change any of that.

ELKE

I suppose it is.