Anna & Dr Helmy
How an Arab Doctor Saved a Jewish Girl in Hitler’s Berlin
Ronen Steinke
ANNA AND DR HELMY
For Hannah
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Two of Anna’s children—Carla Gutman Greenspan and Charles Gutman—received me in New York, spent days sharing family memories with me, and showed me an imitation crocodile leather suitcase that had lain in the attic for decades. Inside were letters, photos, and diaries in Yiddish, Hungarian, and German.

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When the Gestapo barged into an Egyptian doctor's practice in Berlin in autumn 1943, they found a young Muslim woman sorting blood and urine samples behind the reception desk. She was fair-skinned, with a round face and intelligent eyes. Her dark hair was tied back beneath a sheer headscarf. When she smiled, her cheeks dimpled. And she smiled a lot—even during these encounters with the Gestapo.

People remembered her as tall and pretty. Full of energy—a picture of health, some said. Others found her hard to describe. Oriental. Mediterranean. Wore a headscarf. What else was there to say about Dr Mohamed Helmy's Muslim assistant? A well assimilated young woman, certainly, one person commented. Few would have guessed at the time just how apt this compliment was.

The Gestapo officers barked their orders, demanding to see the boss—at once! Of course, the young woman assured them, the doctor would be with them presently. Would the gentlemen like to take a seat in the meantime?

Like Dr Helmy, she spoke with no trace of an accent, and her Arabic name, Nadia, was easy for Germans to pronounce. When asked where she came from, she explained that she was a relative of the doctor: his niece.
The Gestapo officers rummaged through drawers and flung open cabinet doors. They burst into the waiting room, suspiciously pulling back curtains, and no doubt ordering some of the patients to show their papers. Standing back at a discreet distance of a few metres, yet visible to all, Nadia dutifully assisted the officers.

Trains had been rolling into the extermination camps for two years now. It had begun with a march of shame through Berlin, on a bitingly cold day in autumn. On 18 October 1941, hundreds of Jewish men had been herded through the districts of Moabit, Charlottenburg, and Halensee. They had traipsed in the pouring rain though streets, across market squares, and down the Kurfürstendamm on their way to Grunewald station.

Now the Gestapo were hunting down those who had escaped the round-up. Thousands of Jews had gone to ground in Berlin. Many were homeless, sleeping under bridges or in woods. Others spent their days riding the U-Bahn, hiding in waiting rooms and toilets after the trains stopped running at night.

This wasn’t the first time the Gestapo had shown up at the practice demanding to speak to the Muslim doctor. Nor was it the first time they had come asking about the whereabouts of one particular Jewish girl who had vanished. A girl named Anna.

Dr Helmy will be happy to help you however he can, the veiled assistant said. Just then, creaking floorboards announced that the doctor was about to take the Gestapo off her hands. A dark, gangling Egyptian came out of his surgery and approached the officers with his hand outstretched.

Heil Hitler, gentlemen.

‘Some ladies keep miniature bulldogs. Some ladies wear monocles. Some ladies frequent gambling dens. And some ladies take
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up exotic religions.’ Thus wrote ‘Rumpelstiltskin’—otherwise known as Adolf Stein, a well-known national columnist for the *Berliner Lokalanzeiger*—in 1928. Berliners had tired of the Buddhists who came to worship at their temple in the wealthy suburb of Frohnau, he observed, and Krishnamurti was no longer in vogue among the capital’s bohemians. ‘Right now’, he concluded, ‘the most modern and fashionable thing in West Berlin is Islam.’

In fact, a fascination with the Middle East had been evident in Berlin since at least the late nineteenth century. ‘The Orient lives and breathes here,’ the famous theatre critic Alfred Kerr wrote in his account of the Colonial Exhibition in Berlin in the summer of 1896. ‘Bedouins, dervishes, Cairenes, Turks, Greeks, and their womenfolk are all present in undeniably authentic condition’. The scent of Middle Eastern cardamom coffee mingled with the smell of two-pfennig Berlin cigarettes. Rumpelstiltskin, too, reported on the ‘Mussulmen in gold-embroidered silk’ who stood smoking outside their mud hut. But, he lamented, ‘the large troupe we have been observing in the Zoological Garden this summer is of course no longer quite so primitive’. The human beings on show, he complained, had by now received ‘a considerable lick of civilization’.

Berliners were completely captivated by the Orient, but they preferred to observe its people through the bars of a cage. Arabs were exhibited in Berlin like exotic animals. In 1896, they had been put on show as part of a ‘Tunisian Harem’; in 1927, they formed part of a ‘Tripoli Exhibition’. Cairo and Palestine were other popular themes for human zoos. Cries of ‘Excuse me!’ and ‘Stop pushing!’ could be heard amid the jostling crowd of Berliners, as one journalist noted. But a correspondent for the Jewish-German weekly *Allgemeine Zeitung des Judenthums* grew somewhat wistful at the sight of the miniature Cairo. The ‘Oriental scene’, he
wrote, ‘brings to mind so many biblical images’, recalling ‘the glorious past and sad present of my own people’.6

Jews and Muslims enjoyed a close relationship in Berlin, especially during the turbulent 1920s and 1930s, when the two groups discovered common ground and got along well with one another. Historians have long known that such a closeness existed. But the lengths to which it could go is a story hitherto untold.

Thanks to recent discoveries in the State Archive of Berlin and the Political Archive of the German Foreign Office, it has now come to light how Jews were hidden by Arabs to save them from the Nazis, in the very capital of Hitler’s Reich. This is a story of hope in these times of hatred.

A perception shared by many Muslims in Western countries today is that the Holocaust had nothing to do with them, that it has no bearing on their own narrative, that Muslim migrants played no role in that dark phase of European history. This book is evidence to the contrary. The story of Mohamed Helmy and Anna Boros exemplifies the positive impact some Muslim immigrants had on Jewish lives amid the horror of the Holocaust. Drawing on historical documents, compensation claims, Gestapo correspondence, diplomatic papers, the personal records of the two protagonists and many hours of interviews with their surviving relatives, it shines a light on an all but forgotten world, the old Arabic Berlin of the Weimar period. This world was cultured, progressive, and, for the most part, anything but anti-Semitic.

A perception shared by many Jews in Western countries today is that the anti-Jewish sentiment rampant within some Muslim immigrant communities poses a grave threat. The historical events recounted in this book are not intended to provide solutions or comfort in the face of these present-day concerns. But the
story of Helmy and Anna might at least offer hope that change is possible. The history of Muslims in Europe is older and more complex than it often seems today.

I do not wish to sugar-coat. Among the Muslims living in Berlin in the 1930s, there were some who assisted the Nazis and served the regime, helping to promote its anti-Semitic policies and propaganda or translating Mein Kampf into Arabic. But a considerable number of them also played a special role in resisting the persecution of Jews in Germany. This book is about those people, their achievements, and their courage.
THE HOME VISIT

It must have been one afternoon in 1936 when Dr Mohamed Helmy and the young Anna first met. The girl had been deeply embarrassed by the grown-ups’ behaviour that day; it was a spectacle she would remember long afterwards.

The streets of Berlin’s Moabit district had been busy as Dr Helmy drove into the city centre, and he had had to keep stopping on his way to the Alexanderplatz, with its array of shop windows and advertising hoardings. In the Neue Friedrichstraße, he pulled up outside their smart town house, got out, and rang the bell. The ground floor of number 77 was almost completely occupied by a greengrocer’s, and the scent of fruit wafted across the pavement towards him: fresh peaches from Italy, four marks a kilo, and fresh tomatoes, twenty pfennigs a kilo. He had been called here by a lady unknown to him.

The two women who greeted him at the front door had put on their finery for the occasion: diamond rings and necklaces. He had barely had chance to say hello before they began fussing round him, showering him with compliments. The housekeeper was summoned and dispatched to bring the doctor a cup of tea, the Hungarian cook to prepare a bite to eat. The doctor would no doubt be wanting a little refreshment? And the doctor needn’t worry: it went without saying that no pork was served in their house.
The Home Visit

Anna was just eleven years old at the time, and lived here with the two women—her mother Julie and her grandmother Cecilie. Listening to her mother fawning over the Egyptian stranger, she could hardly believe her ears. And now both of them were plying him with invitations in an attempt—as Anna described it—‘to win over the doctor in a private capacity’.

Anna was ‘not the sort to talk about her problems’, as she later remarked. When something troubled her, she couldn’t confide in either of her relatives, who appeared to her austere and ungenerous. They were hard women—perhaps because they had to be. The men in their family had left a legacy of inconstancy, premature death, and divorce, and so it was the women who ran the business. They were sparing with compliments and courtesies, which made this display for Dr Helmy’s benefit all the more perplexing to the child. From where she stood, the women seemed to be ‘throwing themselves’ at their visitor.

Again and again they called her over, even though the doctor’s visit had nothing to do with her. It was Anni here, Panny there. ‘Pannyka!’ her grandmother exclaimed in her Hungarian nagymama voice that always sounded equally sweet whether she was being kind or spiteful, ne álljitt a doktorúrútjába, teddmagadhasznossál!—‘Don’t just stand there in the doctor’s way—make yourself useful!’

Dr Helmy, who was just taking off his coat, hadn’t dreamt of complaining that anyone was in his way. But Anna knew enough not to make a scene in front of her grandmother. ‘I was fully aware of our situation,’ she later recalled. Things had begun to go very badly for Jews, with ‘the expropriation of shops, the seizure of money, and so on’. And so she held her tongue.

Just then the housekeeper brought the tea things, winding her way past the piano and the brocade-covered sofa, through a