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## Child in a Horror House

By Gina Cariño



In German, *See* is sea, but also lake. The Wannsee is a lake area where Berliners go to be beachgoers and do water sports, or just to hang out on nice days. Great for kids.

Berlin's social, economic, and cultural *crème de la crème*, old rich and newer rich alike, also Gentiles and Jews alike, built villas here and partied together in harmony. The idyllic atmosphere of the place was captured in paintings by the impressionist Max Liebermann, who lived there until he could no longer.

The Nazis came to power and some of them took a liking to the place, too. They confiscated the villas owned by Jews for their own use.

One of the lakeside villas appropriated by the Nazis is truly notorious. As you walk through the gate, you think "oh what a lovely mansion." When you walk out later, you no longer think of loveliness.

The house we know as *the Wannsee Villa* was the venue of the Wannsee Conference. Here, fifteen men, SS man Heydrich the highest-ranking among them, ever so neatly outlined the "final solution" to the "Jewish question." Today it is a memorial and education center.

The matter-of-fact, businesslike character of the minutes and documents that can be viewed there is chilling to the bone. What is worse, the spontaneous pogrom of a stupid mob, or planned, systematic mass abuse and murder by educated people who love Goethe, Schiller, Beethoven, and Wagner?

The plasticized pages of a thick black folder tell what ultimately happened to The Fifteen. Not all got their rightful comeuppance. I also took time, while staring at the garden and the lake beyond, to listen to translated recordings of interviews, interrogations, and trials. I forgot about my son and his playmate.

Eventually they got rowdy and I found myself chasing them up one of the twin marble staircases and into a library. Instead of a librarian's scolding, I got an invitation to leave the boys safe in her hands "so that they don't see the pictures downstairs." I said, "Oh, they've already seen everything." Still she insisted on babysitting and took out what I saw were illustrated children's books that taught anti-racist values in cute, euphemistic terms.

But I was going to explain things to my 8-year-old anyway. I wasn't going to just leave him there staring at close-up photographs of hanged Jews, developing ghoulish instincts. He had visited the Anne Frank House in Amsterdam the year before, so this was part 2 of his Holocaust lesson.

Back downstairs, another parent debated with the guard, who, like the librarian, spoke out for the protection of the innocence of children. My co-parent clearly shared my ideas in this respect, ideas held in view of unavoidable contradictions in the larger scheme of things.

As far as I'm concerned, my son's innocence is intact.

Why show them only the pretty lake? Give them history, give them truth. It's never too soon.