

**In 1938 Irmgard Keun describes the emigration experiences of Jews
from a child's perspective¹**

Excerpt from the exile novel *Kind aller Länder*² by Irmgard Keun³

A telegram from my father has arrived. He has almost reached Holland, and is now in Belgium.

The Dutch won't let him in because he can't show them lots of money. They also refuse to admit any more refugees.

My mother and I aren't allowed to stay here any longer. But we can't join my father in Belgium either, because we don't have a Belgian visa.

My father brought a whole horde of people with him from Prague and Poland, because the people there are living in fear. But everyone here is living in fear too.

I wish my father were back with us. If my father were to travel to the Belgian border, and we to the Dutch border, then perhaps we could see each other and wave. Mr Krabbe says if a war breaks out now, we'll all be locked up and shot. But the people are all so nice and friendly and the weather is so lovely too. Yet my mother no longer has any desire to go for walks.

A lot of people come to visit us in the hotel lobby. We met them in Austria, in Prague, and in Poland. Suddenly almost all of them are here in Amsterdam. They sometimes cry and say: 'You are so fortunate.'

At that my mother often starts crying as well.

In front of the hotel is the big café, where people sit under the open sky on straw-coloured chairs and drink coffee. The lawn is so green and everything glistens.

The shimmering trams chat with the cars in toots and trills. The days have turned so warm that we don't need blankets and coats. Everyone perspires so that when you shake hands with someone your hands stick together. It will soon grow cold again, though.

My father telephones us from Brussels every so often, and says: 'Calm yourself, child, calm yourself.' My father never cries.

The weather is warm, but we are hungry. We can't leave because we can neither pay the hotel nor get into any other country. But we can't stay here any longer either.

Perhaps we'll be thrown in prison, and then we'll be fed.

1 Irmgard Keun, *Kind aller Länder* (Amsterdam: Querido, 1938), pp. 108–113. A published English translation exists as *Child of All Nations*, trans. Michael Hoffmann (London: Penguin, 2009). This document has been retranslated from the original German.

2 The novel describes the pre-war world (1936–1938) from the perspective of the child Kully, a Jewish immigrant from the Rhineland. The young girl is living with her mother in Belgian and Dutch hotels, while her father, a writer, is travelling through Europe in order to raise money and secure an entry visa for the United States.

3 Irmgard Keun (1905–1982), writer, actress, and journalist; her books were banned in 1933–1934; refused admission to the Reich Chamber of Literature, 1936; in exile in Belgium and the Netherlands, 1936–1940; resided illegally in Germany, 1940–1945; after 1945 worked as a journalist; author of *Gilgi*, *One of Us* (2013 [1931]) and *The Artificial Silk Girl* (1933 [1932]), among other works.

Uncle Kranich is in prison too. We met Uncle Kranich in Vienna, and then suddenly he showed up here. He is old and round-bellied, and wears a gold ring. My mother had a gold ring once, which we sold in Nice because we ran out of soap and toothbrushes.

I don't really mind not having soap. In big cities, though, you get dirty in no time, from doing almost nothing.

Uncle Kranich would sit in the sunshine with us at the café. His necktie was as bright and lovely as the sunshine itself. He was forced to leave Austria because of prayers he had offered against the German government. He crept like an Indian across the border to Holland – and that was against the law.

Now he's kept safe in prison.

When he's let out, he can't stay in Holland. But he can't enter any other country either.

People tremble when they buy newspapers and special editions – what's gone wrong in the world?

I would so much like to play with another child again.

At night my mother clutches me so tightly that it hurts and keeps me from sleeping. Car after car rushes past our window. 'Kully, I can't take it any more,' my mother cries out, and jumps out of bed to place a call to Cologne. She wants to talk to my grandmother.

'Oh, mother,' she says, 'how are you doing? Everything is so dreadful, mother.'

I always thought my grandmother was just my grandmother, but she's also the mother of my mother.

My mother has made lots of acquaintances her own age. She orders huge breakfasts up to our room, so we no longer go hungry – breakfast in Holland also suffices for lunch and dinner.

My mother says: 'It doesn't matter any more.' She holds me tight, but her thoughts are somewhere else. She murmurs strange things and doesn't answer my questions. Is it because of the war?

My mother didn't even look at the last hotel bill. But she put lovely curls in her hair with a curling iron.

Sometimes she sits in the corner of the lobby, beside the large glass aquarium in which small fish swim silently in graceful movements. Some look as if they are capped with golden crests, and sometimes they stare at me with their round, still eyes. Every now and then two fish swim towards one another and kiss each other. That's the nicest of all.

Often sitting next to my mother is a man with dark eyes, who holds her hand tightly and kisses it. My mother's hand quivers ever so slightly like the fins of the small fish. Her eyes have grown impossibly large and blue, and also quiver.

She no longer wants to be alone, and it doesn't help any if I'm with her. Because I can't discuss Mussolini and Hitler and Chamberlain – they are what you call statesmen.

She couldn't explain it any better to me.

It has something to do with the war, though. I'll understand it all when I get older.

But what's the point in growing up when it only makes you sad?

My mother once said that grown-ups become saddled with guilt, and that nothing in the world makes one sadder than feeling guilty.

I believe, however, that my mother is saddest of all when my father is not with her. When my father kisses her and strokes his hand across her hair, she is always in a good mood. Now she sometimes wants my father to disappear so that she can start a new life. Often she is incredibly frantic and despondent. The only time she is lively and vivacious is when my father comes to visit. But it's never been like this before.