

# The Ark



Margot Benary-Isbert

*by the same author*

ROWAN FARM  
THE SHOOTING STAR  
THE WICKED ENCHANTMENT  
CASTLE ON THE BORDER  
BLUE MYSTERY  
LONG WAY HOME  
DANGEROUS SPRING  
A TIME TO LOVE  
UNDER A CHANGING MOON  
THESE VINTAGE YEARS

# The Ark

BY MARGOT BENARY-ISBERT

TRANSLATED BY CLARA AND RICHARD WINSTON

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## CONTENTS

1. The House in Parsley Street	3
2. The Chronicles of Parsley Street	19
3. New Roots	33
4. A Sunday and Two Birthdays	43
5. Hark, the Herald Angels	53
6. Fear Not	73
7. Mrs. Almut Comes	92
8. Young People and Young Animals	115
9. Spring	136
10. Big Things from a Small Suitcase	148
11. A Happy Whitsun Visit	159
12. Death Knocks	174
13. Building the Ark	195
14. And They All Went in unto the Ark	208
15. Merry Christmas	228
About the Author	247

## *The House in Parsley Street*

THE WIND swept around the corners and chased clouds of dust out of the ruins of bombed houses. The cold, clinging darkness of the October evening dropped down upon the strange city from a leaden sky. The streets were deserted. Nobody was out who could possibly help it.

Nevertheless, the little band of people who were walking toward the center of the town was in high spirits. The two girls, Margret and Andrea, walked ahead, chatting gaily with one another. Behind them came their small, dark-haired mother, holding Joey's hand and trying to answer his endless questions. "Will we have a stove, too, Mummy? Will there be other kids there to play with? And if I have to begin school, can I just stay out if I don't like it?"

"You'll like it well enough," his mother said. "It's about time a big boy like you learned to read and write, now you're going on seven. You want to, don't you?"

"I'm not sure," Joey said dubiously. "After all, Tom

Thumb never went to school, and he was smarter than the man-eater.”

Margret, who was holding the slip of paper from the Housing Office, crossed the street and the others followed her. “‘Down the street by the station,’ the man said, ‘as far as the square with the trees.’ You see, there are the trees. ‘Then the first street to the right and the second to the left.’”

“Parsley Street Number 13,” Andrea cried, dancing a little jig, as though the address alone contained wonderful and mysterious possibilities.

“Parsley Street sounds nice, doesn’t it, Joey,” Mother said.

“It sounds green and good to eat. Tell me a story about it.”

“Wait a while, we’ll be there soon.”

Since noon they had stood around in the big, cold gymnasium where the refugees were being assigned quarters. The mothers with little babies had to be taken care of first, of course. But finally their turn had come. After nine months of moving from place to place, from refugee camp to refugee camp, they would now be getting something that could be called a home. Not their own apartment, of course; the cities of West Germany were so crowded that they could not hope for anything like that. But at least they would have their own room. In fact two! Two rooms all to themselves—it was almost too good to be true. Rooms without a crowd of other people, of squabbling women and crying children. How wonderful it will be to be by ourselves, Margret thought, sighing to herself. What would Parsley Street and the house itself be like? The various barracks where they had stayed had always been full of such bad smells. There had been only a small space for each family, and people had to keep potatoes and their supply of firewood under the cots, and

hang what few clothes they had on a string above the tattered straw mattress.

“Where are we going now?” the children had asked each time they and their belongings were loaded into a cattle car. No one had known. “Somewhere,” had always been the answer.

At home, in Father’s book case, there had been a book about the wanderings of Ulysses. Ulysses, too, had wandered about the world for many years after a war before he finally found his way back home. The *Odyssey* had been one of Margret’s favorite books. She used to read it over and over with her brother Christian, and they had acted out the parts. Then they had wanted to have wonderful adventures like Ulysses. But now Margret herself had become almost a Ulysses, traveling homeless through the world, and it was not nearly so marvelous as she had imagined. “In fact it has been horrible,” she said with a shudder, speaking more to herself than to her sister Andrea who trudged cheerfully along at her side—a slender little girl with her mother’s dark hair and her father’s blue eyes. She wasn’t ten yet—ages younger than Margret, who would soon be all of fourteen.

“Why do you call it horrible?” Andrea asked. “It’s been lots of fun—going to so many different places and having so many train rides and so many other children to play with. Joey has always loved it.”

Margret nodded. Of course, the younger children had enjoyed it. They hardly remembered what a decent, orderly life was like. They didn’t even notice how terribly thin Mother had become, or how much grey there was in her hair. What would Father say about the way Mummy looked when he came back from Russia? “Take good care of your



Mummy for me," he had told the three older children when he had had to leave them. That was three years ago now. Margret's thoughts kept returning to this, and she gave her mother a look of deep concern. "You've gotten so terribly thin," she said. "There's hardly anything left of you."

"There's still plenty of me here, don't worry," Mother said, and for a moment little sparks of gold danced in her eyes—the way they used to whenever Father teased her. "I can keep going for quite a while yet, my big girl. I have to, until you learn to sew on the buttons for your brother and sister. Look, there's another one coming off Joey's jacket."

Margret's forehead wrinkled in a frown. "I'd just like to know one time when something isn't coming off Joey," she said. Being a big sister was just about the worst thing that could happen to a person. As if it weren't hard enough already being a girl. Nobody asked Matthias to sew on buttons. On the other hand, of course, he had to split wood and pull the little cart which held the family's baggage—and sometimes even Joey on top of the baggage.

"See if you can read that street sign across the street, Margret," Mother said. "There's just enough light from that window. It can't be much further."

"If it is much further I'm going to cry," Joey threatened. "I'm hungry and I'm cold."

"Cry!" Andrea exclaimed. "What a baby!"

"This is Capuchin Street," Margret called from across the way. "The man at the gym said it's one block after Capuchin Street."

"Look at the slip again."

"Number Thirteen Parsley Street. Mrs. Verduz, the widow

of Chief Municipal Secretary Verduz. He must have been something very important, Mother.”

“Now you must make a good impression, children,” Mother said, and she examined her flock with a worried expression. Her family looked rather wild and ill-kempt, and the wildest looking of them all, big Matthias, was not here yet. It was impossible to take care of clothes that were being worn all the time. During their brief stay with relatives in Hamburg there had been a chance for all of them to rest up and get clean—but all traces of that visit had long since vanished. Hamburg had been full of occupation troops and it had been impossible to get a permit to stay there. Mother had worn out the precious soles of her shoes going from one official to the next, but in vain. They had been assigned to Hesse and to Hesse they had to go; there was no help for it.

Mother sighed. “It’s a good thing Matthias won’t be coming with the cart for a while,” she said reflectively. “I’m glad I won’t have to introduce our whole horde at once to the poor landlady. We’ll go down better a spoonful at a time. I feel sorry for her already.”

“I don’t,” Andrea said firmly. “She ought to be glad. We’re a very nice family, I think.”

“I wish you wouldn’t tell her so right off, Andrea,” Mother said. “Perhaps she’ll notice it herself.”

And then they were in it—Parsley Street, a little lane like something out of a picture book. Almost all the houses were undamaged. They were pressed right up against one another as if they had given each other support through the perils of war. Most of them were half-timber houses, with wide flat surfaces of mortar between the dark old beams. In the

yellow lamplight from the many windows the family saw that a large number of the beams were carved or painted in bright colors. Beneath the steep gables the attic windows looked out like peering eyes. The doors were painted brown or green, and the hardware on them was shiny brass.

“It must be that one,” Margret said. “The skinny little one that looks sort of crooked. Yes, see, there it is: Number Thirteen.”

The little house really looked as if it were hunchbacked. It leaned its left shoulder against the house next to it as though it were tottering and feeble from old age. On the great beam that supported the first floor was painted the date 1683, and in intricate lettering was a motto which could not be read in the dim light.

“An historical house,” Andrea exclaimed, her eyes sparkling. “Just think of how many things must have happened in it in almost three hundred years. Maybe even a murder,” she added hopefully. “Probably there’s a ghost. I’d like to see a real ghost.”

“I don’t like ghosts,” Joey said perversely.

“Anyway, Andrea will find out about everything that has ever happened in the house before we’ve been here three days,” Margret said knowingly.

“Let me ring,” Joey cried when he saw the gleaming brass bell pull. He pulled it. Inside a little bell tinkled. Then for a while nothing happened. What if nobody were home and they had to stand out in the street and wait? Joey was so overtired he would certainly start to cry. Even the older girls were shivering with cold, and all of them were hungry. The icy wind seemed to reach through their clothes right into their bones.

“Ring again, Joey,” Mother said.

Maybe it’s an enchanted house and you have to do everything three times, Margret thought. Three was her number, her own secret, magic number; it banished the bad and brought all good things. She had three stars of her own, the stars of Orion’s belt. Those stars had stood above the Polish camp where her mother had had to work when she was separated from the children. Matthias had been sent elsewhere, to a men’s camp, and for a long time they did not know what was happening to him. Joey and the two girls had been sent to live with a peasant family near the Polish camp. There the girls had had to work hard, but otherwise conditions were pretty decent. And on winter nights the three stars had shone down upon Margret steadfastly. After three months Mother had finally come back to them. Not all those in the camp returned. Many had been buried on the heath. Mother’s face was grey and her hair had turned grey, and the gloss had gone out of it. But she was alive, she was back with them, and as if by a miracle Matthias, too, found his way back to them—because the good stars had watched over them.

But where had the stars been before that on the May night when Margret’s twin brother Christian was shot, and with him their Great Dane who had leaped at the first of the men who came rushing into the house? Those two, Christian and the dog, Cosi, had been closer to Margret than anyone else, her companions from babyhood. And now she was alone. She never mentioned their names, never spoke of the days when all of them had been together.

“Three times!” she thought, and she rang the bell again.

Immediately they heard a door creaking and footsteps

coming downstairs. Margret's heart pounded. If only Mrs. Verduz would be friendly. "Be nice," she murmured as if she were saying a spell. "Please be nice, be nice."

"What's that, Margret?" her mother asked.

"Nothing. You see, someone is opening the door."

The door opened just a tiny crack, hardly big enough for a mouse to slip through. "What do you want?" asked a voice which was just as thin as the crack of the door.

"Good evening," Mother said.

"Good evening," the children's three voices echoed.

"We were sent here, we're to live in your house," Mother explained.

The door opened a few inches more. A tall thin woman stuck her head out and stared at the group. "Is that so?" she said. "You are to live here? Is it possible?"

The light from the hallway fell upon her thin figure. She was wearing a grey dress with a ruche of black lace down the front. She seemed to have stepped right out of great-grandmother's photograph album. An odd-looking pair of glasses hung from a silk ribbon pinned to her dress. These glasses, their mother later explained, were called pince-nez, meaning pinch-the-nose. The lady set them on her nose so that she could see better.

"Good Heavens!" she exclaimed. "Four persons! What are those people at the Housing Office thinking of. I was promised a childless couple. It must be an error."

"No, here it is written down," Margret said, showing her slip of paper. "Here, you see, is the name: Mrs. Verduz. You are Mrs. Verduz, aren't you? And the rooms have been under requisition for a long time."

"No, no, no," the lady cried, raising her hands imploringly.

"This is impossible. Four persons! Why, I have only two beds."

"Five persons," Mother said. The grey old lady might as well be told all the dreadful truth at once. "My oldest boy is coming along later on. I'm very sorry we have to invade you at night this way, but there's nothing to be done about it now. The children have been standing around all day; they're tired and frozen, and where else could we go for the night? There's no one left in the gymnasium by this time, and the barracks are already filled up with new people."

"Well, since that's how things stand I suppose you can come in for the night," Mrs. Verduz said unwillingly. "Tomorrow I shall have to go down to the Housing Office right away and explain the mistake."

They climbed the steep staircase. Along the walls hung pictures and devout mottoes in handsome carved frames. On the landing stood two large tubs in which green plants were growing. A big black cat slipped silently between them.

"What a beautiful cat," Margret cried softly. "Andrea, look at the wonderful cat."

She crouched down on a step and coaxed the cat to come to her. Its amber eyes blinked at her; then, with head stretched forward, it cautiously approached and graciously permitted Margret to scratch it behind the ears.

"That's Caliph," the lady said without turning. "He never lets strangers touch him."

"All animals let Margret touch them," Andrea said. Mrs. Verduz turned her head and her eyebrows shot up, half in surprise, half in pleasure. For a moment she looked quite human.

On the ground floor there were two doors, on the second

floor three. The third floor was the attic, and here also there were three doors. Mrs. Verduz opened the one opposite the stairs and silently pointed to a spacious room filled with an odd assortment of furniture. It had two windows overlooking Parsley Street, and Andrea rushed over to look out. There was real glass in them, and each had a pair of faded curtains. In one corner stood a drum stove. In the brass lamp, which had once been a kerosene lamp, there was actually an electric bulb! Mrs. Verduz switched on this lamp as they entered. On both sides of the room the wall sloped sharply down, following the line of the roof.

"How lovely," Andrea said impulsively. Margret glanced reprovingly at her. But what was wrong with saying that the room was attractive, with its big, grey-and-red figured sofa, carved chairs and other old-fashioned things?

Mrs. Verduz raised her glasses to her nose again and studied Andrea with a pleased air. "The bedroom adjoins," she said in an almost kindly tone. "Yes, it is a very fine apartment, but there are only two beds; it won't do for five persons."

The bedroom was narrow. Two beds stood against the long wall, and beneath the small window was a stand which held an enamel washbasin. In one corner were a small table and two chairs.

"We could put one of the beds in the living room," Mother said—and Margret realized that Mother hoped to be able to stay here. "The sofa can be moved in here for Matthias, one bed for the two girls, and the other in the big room for Joey and me. That would do it."

"But I want to sleep with Matthias," Joey said.

"You can later, but this winter I want you sleeping in the

warm room so that you won't get any more sore throats."

Downstairs the bell rang. "That's Matthias," Andrea cried, and went clattering down the steps. She could have done it less noisily, because the banisters were perfect for sliding down without a sound. But Andrea had not quite dared to slide because Mother had said they must make a good impression.

"Quiet, Andrea!" Margret called after her—but the warning was already too late. Andrea did not see Mrs. Verduz's face or she would have realized why her sister had called out.

"I'm so sensitive about noise after all the bombings," Mrs. Verduz said. "That is one reason I cannot endure children in the house. I suppose you have your linen with you, Mrs. ...what was your name again?"

"Lechow," Mother said. "No, no linen, unfortunately..."

Mrs. Verduz shook her head in silent disapproval. Not only was her house being filled up with strangers to whom she had to entrust all this good furniture, but on top of it all she would have to let them use her bed linen too.

"We have one wool blanket each," Margret said hastily. "We can get along without sheets. We did in camp."

"Sleep without sheets!" Mrs. Verduz said with a frown. "Not in my house. What would happen to my good mattresses?" With a sigh she went across to the spare attic room. She could be heard rattling keys. Margret winked at her mother and whispered, "Sheets, Mummy! And featherbeds, too—see them all folded up? We won't leave here, no matter how disagreeable she is. And besides the cat is so nice." She bent down and stroked Caliph, who purred and rubbed against her ankles. Obviously it was a case of mutual love at first sight.



Mrs. Verduz returned with a bundle of linen in her arms—snowy white sheets and bright-colored coverlets. The linen smelled rather musty, as though it had not been used for many years.

Matthias was coming up the stairs with Andrea. Between the two of them they were carrying one of the two sacks which contained the family's precious possessions—the wool blankets, some underwear and the one spare set of clothing each owned. Their bread and the rest of their provisions were distributed among their rucksacks. Now they would be getting regular food ration cards, just like the people who belonged here.

Matthias had tucked his precious violin case under his arm and parked the cart in the small courtyard back of the house. Matthias always got the hang of places quickly.

"This is my oldest boy, Matthias," Mother said, and Matthias removed the cap from his blond shock of hair and made a bit of a bow. Margret felt proud of him. Not that she personally placed much importance on fine manners. But if the grey lady didn't let them stay—no, she couldn't bear to think of that! Manners were a small price to pay, if only they could stay.

"Oh, the dirt all these children will track in," Mrs. Verduz wailed, and her face twisted up as though she had a toothache.

"We can always take our shoes off downstairs," Margret suggested.

"And I can sweep the stairs on Saturdays," Andrea said. "I won't mind that a bit."

"Yes," Mrs. Verduz said. "I really cannot be expected to clean up after other people. My maid has just up and left

me again. There's no depending on people any more."

"The girls will be glad to help with the work," Mother said.

"That would be fine," Mrs. Verduz replied. The prospect evidently pleased her. (She'll keep us, she'll keep us, Margret rejoiced.) "Yes, I certainly could use a little help in the house. And perhaps the big boy could split some wood now and then and bring it in."

Margret gave Matthias a suggestive poke with her elbow. "I'll do that," he said, nodding. "And me too," Joey promised. "I can split wood and carry it in too—I'm almost seven."

"Well, then, you may as well get settled for the night," the grey lady said, with gracious condescension. "We'll see what tomorrow brings. Good night. Come, Caliph!"

As soon as she had gone Andrea took a hop, skip and jump. "It's fine here, I like it," she exclaimed happily, and dropped down on the sofa to test the springs.

"Be careful of the furniture," Mother warned her. "What do you say, Margret?"

"She's a witch," Margret said darkly.

Mother shook her head. "Just imagine what *we* would have said if an utter stranger with four wild-looking children were suddenly quartered on us and we had to give them our own bed linen besides."

"Why, Mummy!" both girls exclaimed together, and Margret added, "You would probably have said, 'How nice of you to drop in.' And you would at least have offered a good hot drink to people as frozen as we are."

Silently, Matthias unpacked their provisions. He could never see why other people talked so much.

“Eat quickly, children,” Mother said. “I’m looking forward so much to sleeping in a real bed again that I can hardly wait. Do you girls still remember how to make a bed?”

“We’ll learn again,” Andrea said. “I used to do the crib for the Polish woman. But the big beds were never made up as long as we were there, and we slept in the hay, thank Heaven.”

“Tomorrow I’ll go to the Economic Office about wood and potatoes,” Matthias said. “When we have something to run the stove with, it will be nice and comfortable here.”

Margret was sure it would be comfortable. Mother would have made a tent in the desert pleasant to live in.

“Then can we stay here?” Joey asked. “And will Father be able to find us?”

“Of course he’ll find us,” Mother assured him. “We left a trail of pebbles behind us, like Hansel and Gretel.”

“Oh, tell me the story, Mummy.” While listening, Joey chewed away at a thick slice of bread spread with fake liverwurst.

“You know that we wrote our names down everywhere, wherever we passed. In the camps and in the homes of the relatives in Berlin and Hamburg. And we left our names at the Red Cross and at the railroad stations. All Father has to do is to track us down. And now we’ll write letters to all those places again and give our new address, 13 Parsley Street. But go get some water now, children, so we can wash up. I saw the faucet right outside in the hall, to the left of the stairs.”

“Wash up?” Andrea and Joey said slowly, and Joey suddenly remembered that he was terribly tired.

"It's really too cold here to wash," Margret said.

Matthias, who was to sleep on the sofa, had already undressed and slipped under the blanket. "Good night," he said.

The others went to the bedroom, and while Mother helped a sleepy Joey to undress, the two girls skillfully made the beds.

"Do you think she'll keep us?" Margret asked as she slipped under the featherbed. "Don't you think she has to? There's nothing she can do about an order from the Housing Office."

"Everything will turn out all right," Mother said. "Isn't it good to be lying in a bed again?"

Andrea pressed close against Margret. The bedding was uncomfortably clammy, but gradually she began to feel warmer. "Being a refugee is very nice after all," she murmured, her teeth chattering.

"Nice?" Margret asked.

"Yes, you know there's something new every day. I've always wanted to live in an old house like this. And at home we were never allowed to sleep together and I'd freeze to death if I had to sleep alone tonight."

"Joey is asleep already," Mother called out. "Good night. We have a lot to do tomorrow." She shifted about once or twice, as though savoring the pleasure of stretching out in a real bed. Then there was no further sound. Andrea, too, fell asleep instantly. Like a warm little animal, she snuggled up to her sister, breathing softly. Margret alone remained awake, conscious of the calm, healthy, warm little body of her sister. What a happy creature Andrea was, carrying her house on her back like a snail, feeling at home wherever she was. I

will never feel at home anywhere again, Margret thought.

Home—that meant the old orchard under the expanse of clear sky in Pomerania, the white house on the outskirts of the town, Father's roses on the edge of the terrace where the family took their breakfast on warm summer days. Così would lie in the sun and drink in its warmth. And there was Christian, too. But all this, this strange city with its ruined streets, this old, old house with its steep stairway, this grey old woman who disliked their coming—this could never be home, could it?

Outside came the cries of the owls—many of them had nested in the ruins. Hoo, hoo-hoo-hoo, they cried, and it seemed to Margret that the city itself was wailing a complaint against the grey army of refugees who had descended upon it, and who had to be found room for. Suddenly Margret felt afraid. She was tempted to call to her mother as she used to when she was a small child, whenever something frightened her. But no, of course it would not do to wake Mother up. Mother was so tired, and Margret would not even have been able to say what she was afraid of. She listened to the silence of the sleeping house. Outside something rattled. A floorboard creaked. From the times she had spent in her grandparents' farmhouse in Silesia Margret knew that old houses often began to speak at night. Perhaps Caliph the cat was stalking about. What a beautiful animal he was, and how friendly he had been to her right away. Perhaps things were really not so bad. What was it the grey lady had said? He doesn't let strangers touch him! Margret smiled at this, and smiling, she fell asleep.