

Translated excerpt

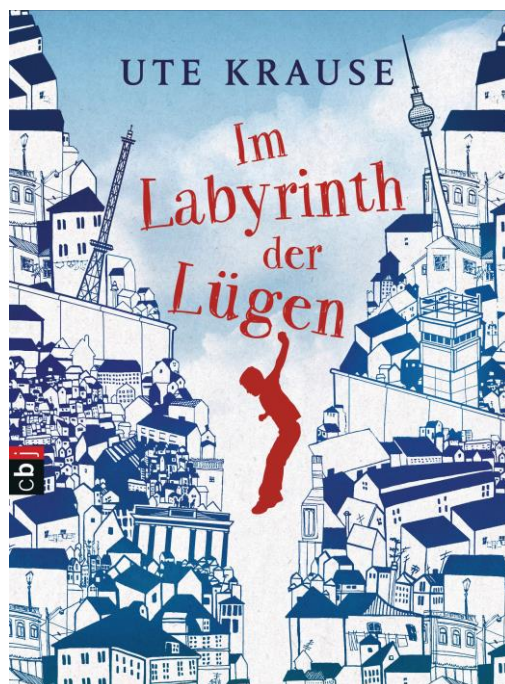
Ute Krause
Im Labyrinth der Lügen

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Ute Krause
In the Labyrinth of Lies

Translated by Zaia Alexander



The unknown land

Paul was beaming. It was beyond his wildest dreams! He could just see the upcoming newspaper headlines.

Berlin Morning News

Secret of eternal youth revealed? Researchers in Berlin make a sensational discovery in the Pergamon Museum. Secret knowledge of the Egyptians hidden within a stone on the Ishtar Gate. Pharmaceutical companies smell big business: the fountain of youth soon by prescription?

And it was all on account of Uncle Henri. Yet the story had begun quite differently. And nobody, he especially, could ever have imagined how convoluted and dangerous it would end up being...

It all began several years before on a perfectly ordinary Saturday.

“Come with me, I’ll show you a secret,” Uncle Henri had said to Paul in a deserted section of the Friedrichstrasse subway station.

Behind a barrier, stood a scaffolding covered by a canvas tarp. As soon as nobody was watching them, they climbed over the barrier and slipped behind the canvas. Hidden behind it was a light gray metal door. It led into a tunnel that disappeared into the darkness.

“That used to be a secret passage,” said Uncle Henri. “Back in the day, people fled from here to the West.”

“How’s that possible?” asked Paul. “Wait and see.”

Paul cautiously followed his uncle, groping his way forward until a brick wall blocked their path.

»Alle Züge enden hier. Achtung, alle.

“You see, nowadays you can’t get any further,” whispered Uncle Henri. “The border guards have walled it off. But pay attention. Listen closely, you can hear the West. Then you’re almost on the other side. Don’t forget that!”

Uncle Henri had put his cheek to the wall. Paul did the same and pressed his ear firmly against it. He heard the rattle of an oncoming train in the distance, the screeching of the brakes, and the voice on the loudspeaker. It was distorted by the echo, but when he listened closely, he understood what the man said on the other side: “All trains stop here. Attention, all trains stop here. Return journey to West Berlin from the tracks on the opposite side. Transit passengers proceed to passport control.”

Up to that point, Berlin had only been a word, a blank space in his school atlas. It was surrounded by a wall and was part of a foreign country called West Germany. It was very close, yet unreachable, because Paul lived on the other side of that wall in East Berlin.

His grandma said, you’re only allowed to go to West Berlin when you turn sixty-five, when it’s time to retire. That was the final crossroad before paradise. A detour before you meet your maker.

Paul would have to wait a long while before it was his turn –fifty-three years to be precise. Grandma was a different story, in two years she’d turn sixty-five. That meant, in two years she’d be allowed to travel to West Berlin.

The next morning the white spot in the school atlas gained an entirely new meaning for Paul. Now he knew why Uncle Henri had brought him into the tunnel the day before. Because now suddenly everything had changed. Sunday at breakfast, grandma had told him at the kitchen table that his parents now lived in the West.

“That's a stupid joke!” Paul had replied.

Grandma had shaken her head and given him such a serious look that Paul realized she wasn't fibbing. And then everything grew very quiet inside of him, so quiet that the faint ticking of the kitchen clock suddenly echoed loudly through his head.

“But how did they get out of prison?” he whispered. “And then over the wall?”

Almost nobody ever had made it through the “Iron Curtain,” which is what they used to call the Wall. Those who tried were arrested or even shot.

Grandma took his hand into her big soft paw and pressed it firmly. She stared at the jam stain on the kitchen table.

“Go figure, my boy, somebody paid a ransom,” she said to the jam stain in such a serious and solemn manner that it sent a slight shiver down Paul's spine. Grandma normally had a pretty gravelly, almost masculine voice. Uncle Henri said it came from puffing away at so many cigarettes, because Grandma never listened to the voice of reason. But right now it sounded pretty fragile.

“Paid a ransom? What do you mean?” Paul asked totally confused. “Who bought them? And if they're free, why are they there and not here with us?”

He jumped up and bumped against the rickety table, which made grandma's coffee spill onto the coaster.

“So when are they coming back to us?”

Normally grandma wasn't so easily ruffled, but today it was different. Her lower lip trembled slightly and the furrows around her mouth deepened.

Paul stared at her. “They're coming, right?”

Grandma leaned over the sink and took the hanging there. In her tiny kitchen, the sink was conveniently next to the table, so they didn't have to get up for it. Paul saw her try to inconspicuously wipe the tears from the corner of her eye. He also suddenly felt like crying. Very carefully grandma wiped away all the spots and crumbs from the table. She took a lot of time.

Grandma was dad's and Uncle Henri's mother. Uncle Henri always treated grandma as if she were a little crazy, yet she was the kindest and bravest grandma anybody could ever have, because if it wasn't for her, Paul would still be sitting in that terrible home.

“So?” He shouted impatiently. “Tell me already!”

Grandma threw the cloth back into the sink, pulled a cigarette out from behind her ear and lit it. Slowly, she blew smoke at the ceiling. White plumes shimmered transparently in the morning light and curled slowly upward.

“They've been ransomed,” she said softly. “By people from over there.” She gestured vaguely with the cigarette towards West Berlin. “Sometimes they pay a ransom to free political prisoners. Your parents were incredibly lucky.”

She adjusted the glasses that always made her eyes look bigger and looked at him expectantly. When he didn't answer, she continued: “Look, your mom was not well in prison, especially last year. I never told you because I didn't want you to worry, but she had pyelonephritis and it really took its toll on her. Your mother desperately needs good doctors.” Grandma carefully tapped the ashes into an ashtray and murmured: “Your parents finally have the chance to start a new life.”

“A new life!” Paul looked down. “They're starting a new life - without me?”

Grandma leaned over to him and gently squeezed his hand. “Sweetie, they would do anything to be here with you, believe me. But after all that has happened, they are not allowed to come back here. They would arrest them immediately if they set one foot over the border.”

“But when will I see them again?” Paul asked quietly. The lump in his throat grew larger.

Grandma stubbed out her cigarette, pulled him into her arms before he could defend himself, and pressed him into her vast bosom. She rocked him back and forth, just like she used to do when he was small. She had once told him that her

mother had hugged her exactly the same way in the bomb shelter during the war while the bombs exploded around them. And now she was doing the same with Paul. But now that he was twelve, he felt too big for that, even if he was feeling miserable. He pulled away from her embrace and looked at her demandingly. “Tell me! When will I see them again?”

Grandma let the air escape through her lips audibly. “Only the good lord knows my boy. Only the good lord knows,” she murmured.

The next day it was difficult to pay attention in class because everything was swirling in Paul's head. It was as if his thoughts were riding a rollercoaster. That morning, while he was trying to tame his mop of hair in the mirror, his grandma tried to make sure he would not to tell anybody about his mom and dad. As if that would have been necessary! Paul had learned that it was sometimes wiser to keep silent. Anyway there was nobody in the class he would have been able to talk about it to.

Now Mrs Götze was staring at him. Her blonde perm bounced around her narrow head and her nostrils flared. Her pointy nose and receding chin made her look like a bird. A bird with a perm. Impatiently, she tapped the chalk on the blackboard and gave Paul a stern look. He tore himself away from his thoughts.

“I’d hate to bother you while you’re daydreaming Paul!” She said with a saccharin smile. “But we’re at school and we’re doing civics, which I know isn’t exactly your favorite subject.”

The other kids in the class giggled and threw him furtive glances. Ever since Paul was in the class, he was considered a dreamer and a little weird.

“The boy is a loner,” Frau Götze had once told Grandma during a parent-teacher meeting. “And extremely withdrawn.”

In reality, Paul had grown cautious. It's no surprise given what had happened in the summer two years before, when everything had changed. Since then, there were tons of things he couldn't talk to anybody about, nor was he allowed to. And if you have a sad secret burdening you, at some point you stop talking altogether.

Nightmares and Surprises

When Paul came home from school, nobody was there. The hallway smelled of coffee and coal dust. Grandma had closed all the doors to the hallway. She always did that on cold days so it would stay warm inside. Paul walked into the living room, opened the door of the old tile stove, and put a briquette on the coals. He had to use it sparingly, because Grandma's coal supply that winter was now almost used up.

He leaned against the heater, closed his eyes, and opened his arms. The warmth that radiated from the tiles crept into his body. On his way home, Paul had seen the first crocuses. Hopefully it would soon be spring. And hopefully, hopefully everything would return to ... Paul did not dare imagine, because nothing would ever be the same again.

He walked into the kitchen. On the table, next to a bag of sandwiches and a thermos of tea, was a piece of paper in grandma's shaky handwriting. It read: "*Dear Paul, I'll be back very late. Stew is in the refrigerator.*

The sandwiches are for you and Henri. A little surprise: You get to visit him tonight at the museum!"

That really was a surprise! Paul had never been allowed to visit his uncle at work in the evening. Paul never liked being alone at night in the apartment. But grandma said they didn't have a choice. Sometimes he still had nightmares and woke up with

his heart racing. Since then, he could only fall asleep with the lights on. When he woke up from a bad dream, it still took him a while to realize he was no longer in that horrible place, and then his heart finally stopped beating wildly.

Luckily, grandma didn't have to go away every night, only if she had a late shift. Grandma was the toilet attendant at the *Hotel Metropol*. She used to be a librarian. Paul could tell she'd have had much more fun caring for books than wiping off pee drops from a bunch of strangers. But grandma claimed she was glad to have a job: "Money doesn't stink, especially if it's from the West," she used to say. Paul understood what she meant. Sometimes Grandma got a tip in West German Marks and that was worth much more than East German Marks. Grandma saved until she had enough West German money to buy coffee or cigarettes or a bar of chocolate at *Intershop*. It was always like a small celebration, because coffee from the West was made from real coffee beans and not mixed with grains like the East German coffee that grandma disparagingly called, "Eric's Coronation." The chocolate from *Intershop* always tasted much better than it had from the *Konsum* market.

Uncle Henri was Papa's younger brother. He worked as a night watchman at the Pergamon Museum and guarded a famous altar that was almost two thousand years old and very valuable, that's what he liked telling people. Paul wasn't spared Uncle Henri's lectures on ancient Greek history either.

He had visited his uncle a few times when he worked at the museum during the day. Then Uncle Henri had shown him the famous Pergamon Altar and the antique collection. Paul wondered what it was that made a couple of old shards and stones so valuable, but he had to admit that this altar was pretty impressive.

Back when Paul had lived with Mom and Dad in Greifswald, Uncle Henri had studied archeology in Berlin. He could spend as much time as he liked with all that old stuff. Later, though, when everything happened with Paul's parents, he suddenly stopped. When Paul asked him why he preferred being a night guard instead of an

archaeologist, he pretended he had not heard the question, or quickly changed the subject. Maybe Uncle Henri also had a secret that he couldn't tell anybody.

Paul went back into the living room and turned on the television. It stood on the sideboard next to the bed and was Grandma's pride and joy. The TV images flickered in black and white. Paul pressed the buttons for the different channels. He stopped at channel 1, which was a TV station in West Germany. As always, when they looked at West German TV, they turned the sound down because creepy Herr Markovich, who lived across the way, was a "hundred and fifty percenter," as grandma put it - "and he's a stool pigeon." She said if he had to he'd tell the police somebody had been watching West German TV because you weren't really allowed to do that in the GDR.

"But everybody does it," Paul had retorted.

"Yes, but we have to be extra careful after everything that has happened," said grandma. They can take you away from me any time if they don't like something. Do you understand?" Since then, Paul was very careful not to let anybody hear the TV.

Two kids were running through a meadow in a commercial for margarine. The parents were beaming with joy and spread their arms. The father lifted his son and spun him around in a circle. Had his father done the same with him? He couldn't remember anymore.

Sometimes when he was alone, Paul imagined how his life might have been if Mom and Dad were still with him. They would still live in the historic section of Greifswald and go to the Baltic Sea on the weekend. Until yesterday, he had been waiting for the day when they would be released, and he used to hope everything would be the same as ever. But now everything was different. His parents were not allowed to come back to him.

His stomach clenched. He thought about his mom and how they had sat on a picnic blanket together during the summer and she had read to him. The reeds rustled behind them and the sea was glittering in front of them. He remembered the scent of his Mom's favorite perfume, which an aunt who lived in the West had sent her for Christmas. Something French.

When the wind blew in his direction, he could smell a whiff of it. He would never forget that scent, even if he'd never have a chance to smell it again. There was nothing French here. Would they have tried to escape, if they had known they would never see their child again? No, they would have stayed here. Paul was absolutely sure.

Back when Uncle Henri came to visit them in Greifswald, Papa and he used to rant against the country and about all the lies they were being fed.

“In the long run,” said Dad, “we’ll be suffocated by a world made only of lies.”

Uncle Henri had agreed with him and said, that’s why you have to try to change things. Papa answered, in this country you can turn old and gray before anything changes.

At that point, they’d send Paul out of the room, but he’d always found those conversations boring anyway. Back then he had no idea what his parents were up to and what it would mean for all of them.