

# The Ball

by Hans Peter Richter

We ran along the street. Friedrich kept close to the houses; I stayed on the curb. I threw the little rubber ball I'd been given in the shoe store. It hit the center of the sidewalk and bounced high. Friedrich caught it and threw it back to me.

"My father will be home any moment!" he called to me. "I must get back soon. We're going shopping today. Maybe someone'll give me a ball, too!"

I nodded and jumped over a manhole. I waited until a pedestrian had gone by, then hurled the ball back to Friedrich.

Friedrich hadn't been watching.

There was a crash.

The ball rolled harmlessly back to me.

Friedrich stared openmouthed at the smashed shop window. I bent to pick up the ball, not yet believing what had happened.

Suddenly, the woman stood before us. She grabbed Friedrich's arm and began to screech.

Doors and windows opened. A crowd gathered.

"Thieves! Burglars!" the woman shouted.

Her husband stood by the shop door, hands in his pockets, smoking a pipe.

"This good-for-nothing Jewboy here broke my shop window," she told everyone who cared to listen. "He wants to rob me." She turned to Friedrich. "But you didn't quite make it this time, did you. Because I'm always watching. I know you, you won't get away from me. You pack of Jews, they should get rid of you. First, you ruin our business with your department stores, then you rob us on top of it! Just you wait, Hitler will show you yet!" And she shook Friedrich violently.

"But he didn't do it!" I yelled. "I threw the ball, I broke your window. We didn't want to steal!"

The woman looked at me, eyes large and stupid. Her mouth dropped open.

Her husband had swept the broken glass into the gutter. He collected the rolls of thread, the stars of black and white yarn, the balls of colorful embroidery yarn from the display case and carried them into the shop.

The woman's eyes grew very small. "How dare you interfere? What are you doing here anyway? Away with you! You don't think you have to protect this rotten Jewboy because you're living in the same house, do you? Go on, beat it!"

"But I threw the ball!" I said again.

The woman lunged at me, without letting go of Friedrich. Friedrich cried. He wiped his tears on his sleeve, smearing his whole face.

Someone had called the police.

Out of breath and sweating, a policeman arrived on a bicycle. He asked the woman to tell him what had happened.

Again she told the story of the attempted burglary.

I tugged at his sleeve. "Officer," I said, "he didn't do it. I broke the pane with my ball."

The woman looked at me threateningly. "Don't you believe him, Officer!" she said. "He only wants to protect the Jewboy here. Don't you believe him. He thinks the Jew's his friend just because they live in the same house.

The policeman bent down to me. "You don't understand this yet, you're too young still," he explained. "You may think you're doing him a favor by standing up for him. But you know he's a Jew. Believe me, we grownups have had plenty of experiences with Jews. You can't trust them; they're sneaky and they cheat. This woman was the only one who saw what happened, so . . ."

"But she didn't see it!" I interrupted him. "Only I was there, and I did it!"

The policeman frowned. "You wouldn't try to call this woman a liar." I wanted to explain, but he didn't let me.

He took Friedrich's wrist from the woman and led him toward our house, followed by the woman and a long line of curious onlookers.

I joined the line.

Halfway there we ran into Herr Schneider.

Sobbing, Friedrich shouted, “Father!”

Astonished, Herr Schneider surveyed the procession. He came closer, said hello, and looked from one person to another, obviously puzzled.

“Your son—” said the policeman.

But the woman didn’t give him a chance to go on. In one burst she repeated her tales. The only part she left out this time was her insinuation about Jews.

Herr Schneider listened patiently. When she had finished, he took Friedrich’s chin in his hand and lifted his head so he could look into his eyes.

“Friedrich,” he asked seriously, “did you break the shop window intentionally?”

Friedrich shook his head, still sobbing.

“I did it, Herr Schneider. I threw the ball, but I didn’t do it on purpose!” and I showed him my small rubber ball.

Friedrich nodded.

Herr Schneider took a deep breath. “If you can swear on oath that what you just told me is the truth,” he told the woman, “go ahead and register a formal complaint. You know me, and you know where I live!”

The woman did not reply.

Herr Schneider pulled out his purse. “Kindly release my son, Officer!” he said sharply. “I will pay for the damage at once.”