

CHAPTER 15

THE NIGHTMARE CONTINUES

My parents had communication from my aunt that her sister-in-law Hilde, who was 18 years old and alone on a big farm, needed help. Both her parents were dead and her brother was drafted into the German army. So that is where my parents and Karin and I ended up.

Hilde had two English prisoners of war, Jim and Frank, working for her. Hilde did not look her age--by her appearance you'd think she was only about 15 years old. German soldiers were housed on her property, as well as being stationed by the numbers all over the village. I sensed that Hilde did not want me staying at her place. Being young, I think perhaps she feared that I would be competition for the attention of these equally young men. However, that thought was furthest from my mind as I was married with a little baby to take care of. My aunt also sided with Hilde by saying that there wasn't enough room for me and my daughter.

Although my parents were allowed to stay and work there, I was forced to make other arrangements. I decided my best plan would be to go to my in-laws who lived 80 miles away. The trains were still running so I didn't foresee any problem in getting there.

But before I left Hilde's farm, my father and I ventured to hitchhike back to our farm in Konradshof with some military trucks going that way. The Russians had been driven out of Germany so the fighting had ceased for a while. I left Karin in the care of my mother and we took off.

When we finally reached our former home, we could not believe the damage that had been inflicted. We realized we would never have survived the blasting our farm took. Every window in the house was blown out; big holes were blasted in the doors and walls. The chicken house was completely destroyed. There was a large hole in the ground next to the house where we figured a bomb fell. But miracle of miracles, there was my little dog Morchen. When I reached for him, he didn't recognize me. I realized then that he was blind. His fur had turned from black to gray and when I called his name, he could not hear me. I realized that he was also deaf. Besides the loss of his sight, the raging gunfire and heavy smoke had also robbed him of his hearing.

In those few weeks since our narrow escape, everything we owned and had worked so hard for lay before us in ruins. As we were walking around viewing the devastation, sadness so profound settled on us, neither of us could speak. When some German soldiers stationed nearby stopped to talk to us, I could not hide my blinding tears. I asked one of them to please put my little dog out of his misery after we were gone.

A long-forgotten refrain went through my head and wouldn't let up:

**They took them all away--my pets--
Not one was left;
I stand here, stripped of humble joys,
Mournful, bereft.**

The fields were scorched and there seemed to be no sign of life. Where had all my pigeons flown? Not a sign of a feather from the ducks and geese was in sight. Then, in a gully, we spotted a lone cow and a pig. We recognized immediately that they belonged to us, especially the black and white pig, as we were the only farmers around there who raised that type of pig. We asked the soldiers to kill it for us and we took along as much of the carcass as we could carry.

After returning to Hilde's farm, the time came when I must gather up my meager possessions and with my daughter travel on to where my in-laws lived. It was difficult to leave my parents—we had endured so much together and they were my sole means of comfort and support.

We boarded the train to Mosgau, Dt.Eylau, in West Prussia, where my father-in-law picked us up. From there I sent a telegram to my husband, "**HOME BOMBED . NEED YOU.**" He was stationed somewhere in Russia at the time. He was thereafter granted a ten-day leave and joined us at Mosgau and what a joyous reunion that was. The days flew by as Herbert, Karin and I were reunited. Herbert saw his daughter who was then eight months old for the first time. I saw tears in his eyes as he looked at his baby daughter, who didn't know this stranger. She was holding on to me, scared of her daddy. This did not last too long. The next day looked brighter for both of them. Herbert had a way with children, it worked every time, here too with his daughter. We didn't foresee that it would be four years before we would see each other again.

Although it was difficult for us to understand, we sensed that Germany was losing the war. What we didn't know and couldn't comprehend was how it was going to affect

us. We were young and too much in love to be anxious about the tomorrow's, if there be any. For the moment, time together was precious. Way too soon, Herbert had to return to his unit. No way could we fathom that in the next four years the whole course of our lives would be altered.

A German soldier, now living in Nevada, stationed near Konradshof, wrote to me after the war. In it he wrote "**All hell broke loose on January 21st 1945.**" He continued, "**The fighting went through our village and major portions of it were destroyed.**" Of course, I already had first-hand knowledge of that when my father and I went there.



My dog Morchen & me
in about 1942

CHAPTER 16

FLIGHT AND RESCUE

January 21,1945.

We received notice at 5:30 a.m. to leave the village Mosgau, near the city of Freystadt (Kisielice), West Prussia, where I had been staying with my in-laws. The Russians were infiltrating further into Germany. We had to leave for our safety. How could this happen again? It was just a few months ago when we were forced out of our home in Konradshof with practically nothing but four horses and the clothes on our backs. Now again we must flee from the marauding Russians. Again, there was snow on the ground and a bitter chill in the air--the thermometer showed C 20 below zero.

Our group consisted of my in-laws, my husband's sister Herta, her son Wilfried and their Polish hired girl with her five day old baby, my daughter Karin and me. The Polish girl's baby was overcome by the cold and died a week later, as did most babies under six months old. The infants were just not able to withstand the cold without the proper provisions.

The entire village took flight when they heard the news that the Russians were advancing. Horses and wagons carrying women and children and crammed with their

precious belongings were on the road. Amongst the group were also my mother's sister, Anna, her husband Julius and their three children, Gertrud, Helmut and Ursel.

January 22, 1945

We drove through Riesenburg (Prabury) which was already deserted. We had been on the road two days and one night. The driving was extremely slow as the road was congested with a surge of humanity from both East and West Prussia trying to keep ahead of the Russians. It was estimated that a million or more people were trying to escape with no fixed destination in mind. The German army was also walking alongside us, which shows how close we were to the fighting.

In the first two days, Karin was badly frostbitten on her hands and face. We stopped at every Red Cross station on the way for treatments. She looked like a little clown with black spots on her face and hands. My father-in-law suffered such severe frostbite on his feet that he had to have one of his big toes amputated after it turned black.

My in-laws did not have enough room on the wagon for all of us, so we took turns riding and then walking, although the children, Karin and Wilfried, stayed on the wagon. I was very homesick for my parents; having been newly married and parted from my husband, it was especially difficult for me as I hadn't yet become accustomed to the ways of my in-laws. The prospect of better days ahead seemed very remote. The loss of sleep and daily deprivation of the bare necessities of life caused everyone's nerves to be on edge. It was impossible to maintain proper hygiene; the lack of an adequate diet and the unsanitary conditions made us feel out of sorts. Under the circumstances, being so very tired could have resulted in outbreaks of temper, but we kept ourselves in check realizing that by sticking together we could possibly overcome this horrible nightmare. I willed

myself to go on for the sake of my child. I truly believe that living through this time of conflict prompted us to grow in humility and dependence on God. Scripture verses arose from the depths of our hearts and were repeated silently: *"God is my refuge, a tower of strength against the foe."* *"I will take refuge in the shelter of your wings,"* and many others.

January 23, 1945.

It was the third day on the road. Just before the city of Stuhm (Sztum), I spotted a sign "7 km to Kolwe." That was where my parents were staying at Hilde's farm. In my longing to see them, I did a very foolish thing. I borrowed a bike from my cousin and without telling my in-laws where I was going, I left to find my parents. I shudder when I think of the risk I was taking by this impulsive action. There were throngs of people on the road. I had no guarantee that I would even find my parents. And if they weren't to be found, how was I going to catch up with my in-laws again? I had left my precious Karin with them.

I prayed all the way to Kolwe that my parents would still be there. **Thank God, my prayers were answered** --they were there!

My father and I then took a sleigh with horses back across the frozen ground, driving alongside the road searching for my in-law's wagon. Again **my prayers were answered** -- we found them! My daughter was overjoyed at the sight of me with Grandpa Krebs. I grabbed her off the wagon with our little suitcase and we hastily returned to Hilde's farm where my mother was. The joy of being reunited with my family was overwhelming. **Praise the Lord!**