

CHAPTER 14

THE NIGHTMARE BEGINS

This is the beginning of my diary which I translated from German into English of the events that happened in the Fall of 1944 and Winter of 1945. Although a half century has elapsed since then, as I reflect on my writings, instead of resentment, a renewed feeling of gratitude swells up in my heart again and again that we lived through that horrendous time.

October 16, 1944.

We had word that the Russians broke through the German front into Germany for the first time. The invasion point was only 20 km from our farm in Konradshof, East Prussia. We had secretly been listening to daily news from England over the radio and although we learned early in 1944 that Germany was losing the war, it still seemed inconceivable that Germany's Weltmacht (world power) was now facing imminent defeat.

The Russians were now at our doorstep. They were pillaging the villages all around us. We had word that fifty people were slaughtered in the neighboring village of Nemmersdorf. They had remained behind when everyone else fled. Women and girls as

young as two years old were raped and murdered by the Russian soldiers. They felt they were entitled to these women and girls as a prize of war and in fact were promised the German women as a reward for doing a good job. We heard later from our cousins that the Russian Cossacks' sexual organs were so large the women were forcibly and brutally ripped apart. These were rough and ugly hoodlums without any regard for humanity. Accounts of violence were committed against the German men as well. The Russians cut the men's heads off and impaled them on fence posts around the village. Men's bodies were nailed to the barn doors.

This was the gruesome sight the German troops encountered when they entered the village. My uncle Willy Sorge, mom's brother, was called to identify the people. I have a picture of Nemmersdorf with the murdered people lined up on the ground for identification. A sense of moral outrage and sheer hatred abounded upon hearing reports of these atrocities. Upon hearing this, my stomach was in constant turmoil and I couldn't get to the outhouse fast enough. This happened frequently. I wasn't the only one—the rest of my family suffered the same reaction. The fear of what lay ahead was overwhelming-- how we continued to function under such tension is difficult to explain.

October 19, 1944.

We received a call from my uncle this evening giving us a first-hand report of how people were butchered and about the terrible things that happened in Nemmersdorf and just how dire the situation was. He warned us in no uncertain terms to leave, stressing, "Get out of there as fast as you can." The Russians are advancing rapidly, there's no time to delay."

This seemed so unreal to us, we could not fathom leaving behind all we worked so hard to acquire. The question kept churning in our minds, "What did we do to deserve this? Had we been living with the illusion that all that Hitler had promised and which the people believed was now all a horrible deception?" It seemed that the premonitions my Dad had about the Nazi dictatorship early on were all coming to pass. For a mere man such as Hitler to be idolized and hailed as a savior replacing allegiance to Almighty God had been against my father's moral conscience all along. We realized more and more how we had been misled by Hitler all those years.

As frightful as the situation was, any plan to leave could not be carried out until we had permission by the German official. Nevertheless, we began frantically to pack some things into two wagons. One wagon had to be used just for the feed for the horses. Our trusty horses were our only means of escape as we had no other mode of transportation. Dad made wooden covers for the wagons, as protection from the cold and snow.

October 21, 1944.

Finally official word was received and at 6:00 a.m., after a frantic sleepless night, our dreadful journey began. My mother was trying to gather whatever food she could forage. At the last minute, she put some loaves of bread in the oven to bake but before they finished baking we had to leave. We were both trembling from head to foot, tears streaming down both our faces. In our confusion, we kept saying "*Dear Lord help us.*" We did not know where to turn, but we couldn't linger any longer, we must be on our way. Our stuff was packed, the horses were hitched to the wagons. We felt fortunate that we had advance word from my uncle which gave us at least some time to prepare for

our exodus. We found out later that others were not so lucky. By delaying they suffered greatly.

Even so, we had to pry ourselves away from our farm, not knowing what the future held. Our actions were mechanical, time wouldn't allow a second look. We harbored the hope that this would be only a temporary upheaval and we would soon be back in our familiar surroundings.

We wanted to take our cattle with us but that was impossible--they ran in all directions. Before leaving, we opened up all the stalls for the animals to run free. We left behind many pigs, over 300 chickens, 60 geese and ducks, my brother's pet rabbits and my beautiful pigeons—animals and pets we had so carefully nurtured during those years on the farm. What would become of them? But at the moment we were faced with the challenge of saving our own lives. Fright was the emotion uppermost; escaping from the Russians and saving our lives were all that mattered. We kept praying, "**Please Lord, don't let us get into the hands of the Russians**".

Although the sun was shining, we could not see it. The smoke from the burning all around us darkened the sky. My little dog was quivering and wailing, terrified by the sounds of gunfire and the reeking smoke. He turned around and headed back home. I did not try to retrieve him.

We had no time to formulate a plan as to what our destination would be. My mother's parents lived in West Prussia and my father's relatives were along the route we set out to take, but we had no definite plan as to where our journey would finally lead us. It was wintertime in East Prussia, the ground was frozen, the temperature showed C-10 below zero.

After a week on the road, Karin who was now six months old became very ill. We had been sleeping in barns at night without any heat. In the morning our hair was covered with frost, even our eyelids were frozen shut. With every breath, steam came out of our noses and mouths. I feared for my child's life; the conditions were just too harmful for a little baby.

Early each morning we hitched up the horses and traveled on. We finally reached the village where my father's cousin lived. We looked forward to a good night's rest in a warm house, after staying in cold mouse-ridden barns. What a disappointment when the woman wouldn't even let us into her house. She stood at the back door with her arms folded across her chest glaring at us. The minute I saw her I sensed this wasn't going to be the warm welcome we thought we would get from one of our own relatives. In a stern voice she said, "There's no room for you here." Then she turned and locked us out, not even letting me warm some milk for Karin. I must admit we were a sorry looking bunch, but her unfriendly attitude really surprised us. Instantly, in my mind's eye I identified with the rejection Joseph and Mary must have felt when they sought refuge the night the Christ Child was born, **"There's no room in the inn."**

We had been traveling all day with very little to eat and to continue on was out of the question. Besides that, our horses also needed the rest. My Dad practically begged that woman for a place to sleep, if not in her house, at least in the hayloft of the barn. We didn't have much milk left for my daughter, so I prayed that her heart would be moved to give us at least a cup of milk for my little Karin.

She finally relented and allowed us to sleep in her barn! But as far as giving us milk or something to eat, her stern answer was "No, I don't have any to spare." I don't

wish to conjecture what her reasoning was, but I guess in those days with all that was going on she wasn't about to share her food and sustenance with someone she didn't know very well. It was "each man for himself and the rest be damned." I wasn't brought up that way—my family was willing to share with anyone that was in need. Many times I heard my mother say, "God will provide." She put her trust in the Lord as she handed out the last few potatoes we had. Too bad this woman hadn't learned the wisdom in that.

Although our stomachs were growling with hunger, we held no bitterness towards her, we were thankful for shelter out of the cold.

I heard stories later that this woman had a reputation for being mean-spirited. Sad to say, we heard later that her hired help did her in, by hanging her. I, for one, didn't shed any tears for her.

The trains in the village we came to were still running. So I took the risk of leaving with my daughter Karin and a friend Ilse to go to the home of my grandparents, Heinrich and Luise Krebs, who also lived in East Prussia, near the city of Zinten, south of Koenigsberg. When my grandma saw us, she embraced us and the tears would not stop. She felt so sorry for Karin. While holding her, she kept repeating, "You poor little thing, you poor innocent baby." She made a bed for Karin in a laundry basket. Indescribable relief settled over me and we slept peacefully in the care of these loving people. My Grandma Krebs was a Christian woman, the sweetest grandma you could have. Even as I write this, tears come to my eyes when I think about her kindness and how much I loved her. Grandpa Heinrich was a lay preacher and loved to help people, always knowing what to do. Grandma and Grandpa Krebs will always remain in my memories. I stayed with them for two weeks until my dad called that they had arrived at his sister's place in

Buchwalde, state of Stuhm, West Prussia. We left then to join my parents. It was the last time I saw my grandparents.



Nemmersdorf 1944