

Frank & Karin,

1945



CHAPTER 18

FREEDOM INSIGHT

We cried for joy and thanked the Lord for bringing us safely to West Germany. We were notified a couple of days before that our destination would be Grassel, beyond the reach of the plundering Russian troops. The people in Grassel were given orders by the government to provide lodging for the refugees. We were directed to a place in town where we were to stay. Even though the people owned a flour mill and had a huge house, we were given a room in an attic. Still we were thankful to get even that. There was only one bed in the room so my parents, being the leaders of the group, had that and the rest of us slept on the floor, which we were now accustomed to. There were thirteen people in this one attic room...a dirty and raggedy bunch of refugees, filthy covered with lice from head to toe. Even Karin had lice on her sparse head of hair. Those annoying little creatures kept us awake at night and made us scratch until we bled.

I'm sure I had a few hundred on my head. It took Steffie three days to pick them all off my scalp and I did the same for her until we were free of them. There was nothing we could buy to kill those ugly critters so we went about exterminating them ourselves!

Of course, we had to burn all our clothing and everything else infected with lice. Good riddance to the clothes we had worn throughout our journey, filthy and smelly and vermin-infested.

I had to take Karin to the hospital right away. Her entire body was covered with sores. The nurses bandaged her like a little mummy, only her eyes, nose and mouth were left uncovered. It was heartbreaking to see her like that. She spent her first birthday, March 31st, in the hospital. She couldn't stand up, and hadn't learned to walk, having been confined in the cramped wagon in below zero weather all those weeks. She had a vitamin D deficiency which resulted in rickets affecting her feet. She had to wear special shoes for many years after.

German soldiers came and took two of our horses. Yes, my beautiful Luschi and Mitzi were confiscated by the German Army and they didn't even pay us for them! We didn't understand why they wanted the horses when everyone knew the war was coming to an end. As our trusted horses were being led away, I could feel my heart breaking. Those dependable horses who so valiantly led us to safety—we could never replace them—they were our only link to the farm in Konradshof, but now they were no longer ours. My beloved animals—they took them all away, I stand here bereft. Still more tears were being shed over all that we lost. The Army did not take the other two mares because they were still very weak and sickly.

We discovered real soon that even though we were Germans, we were refugees and the townspeople did not welcome us with open arms. Being treated as outcasts hurt terribly. Every family with a spare room had to give it up for the displaced persons. We were blamed for causing disruption in their lives, which was understandable. We realized again how the stigma heaped on the Jews felt and we empathized anew over the Jewish friends who were treated this way, and much worse as we found out later. In time, by hard work and honesty, the animosity toward us changed and people finally accepted and came to respect us. But I remember personally being the “*Unwanted untouchables.*”

Soon after we arrived in Grassel, on April 11th 1945, the American troops came through the village. We were elated to see them. But I sensed we were the only ones! The German people feared the Americans—after all, they were the “enemy.” The general population had been brainwashed into thinking American soldiers were going to pillage and rob and harm them. But we knew better.

As the troops took over the village, the people had to vacate their homes to allow the soldiers to set up temporary headquarters. We met some American soldiers and told them that we once lived in the United States for several years and about the circumstances that brought us back to Germany. These revelations, as incomprehensible as they sounded, moved the Americans to allow us to stay in our present home. The soldiers enjoyed talking to us and treated us as fellow Americans which made us feel good. They brought us coffee and other things, even some strings for my guitar. My father had made my guitar when I was just a youngster and it traveled with us from Milwaukee, Wisconsin, to East Prussia, Germany, and eventually back to the USA. (I must mention here that my father was an artisan who had a talent working with wood. Not only in

crafting musical instruments but he also made toys for us, and I mentioned before, he made skis for the kids in our village when Hitler took them away.)

One day while I was walking along the street, I overheard two American soldiers talking to each other. One remarked, "What a dish, I'd like to take her to bed with me." Thinking I was a German fraulein who couldn't understand a word of English, he blushed bright red when I retorted, "*Not me, you won't*"

We were warned by an American officer not to wear our rings or watches as some of the GIs couldn't be trusted. There were some soldiers who broke into farm basements to steal liquor that the merchants had stored there.

Frank, our English friend, stayed with us for five weeks after the war ended. He refused to leave until we were safe and had enough food to eat. He had an old pistol which he found and with which he kept surveillance for the farmers around there. Whenever anything was amiss, he brandished that pistol and scared the thieves away. In return for his protection, the farmers gave him milk, eggs, and butter every day. One day Frank and I saw two drunken soldiers standing in the road shooting at the feet of some young women to get them to dance for them. Frank put a quick stop to that and reported this incident to the American officials and that was the last we saw of those two guys.

We kept in touch with Frank after he returned to England. When he married, he sent us a piece of the wedding cake in an envelope. He had many, many stories to tell his friends about that ill-fated twelve-week journey with us. What a thoughtful person he was! We trusted him explicitly. We still keep in touch with him. He will forever remain our dear and loving friend.