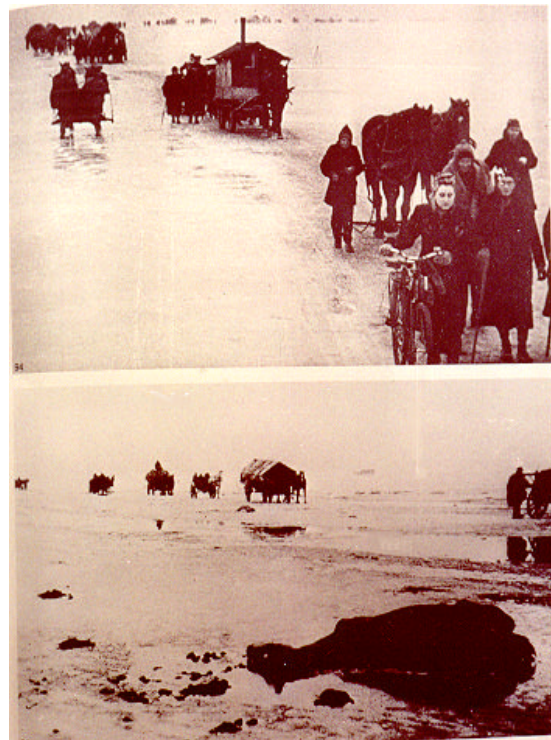


CHAPTER 20

TRAGEDY OF FATE

By word of mouth, we heard what happened to many friends and relatives. My father's parents had to cross the frozen lagoon, now called Zalew Wislany, >>> .with horse and wagon, as there was no other way to escape from East Prussia. The Russian troops had circled around them. Grandpa Heinrich Krebs fell off the wagon and broke his shoulder. He was taken to a hospital controlled by the Poles. Grandma Luise must have been going out of her mind worrying about Grandpa. They were inseparable, married 55 years



and still so much in love. Their marriage was ideal and I always admired them and hoped to have a similar life some day.

We were not living near Grandpa and Grandma and so weren't there to help and comfort them at that critical time of their lives, as we were facing our own crises. But we will always regret not being there through that desperate time of pain and suffering.

From reports we received later, the circumstances under which they both died were gruesome. Dad's cousin's ten-year-old son was in the same hospital as my Grandfather Krebs. He found a hand grenade and when he picked it up, it blew up in his hand. His mother went to the hospital to see him every day and she also visited my grandfather. Then one day when she arrived for her daily visits, she was told that both her son and my grandfather were dead. She suspected and the rumor proved true that all the German people in the hospital at the time were poisoned by the Poles.

Grandma Luise made it to Danzig (Gdansk). Many thousand fugitives waited in a ship's hull for the next ship to arrive to take them to West Germany. There was an air raid which destroyed the ship's hull. (The newspaper *WELT* reported that 73 ships were destroyed with refugees on board).

Many people were killed, including my Grandma Luise. I was overcome with sorrow when I heard about the horror of it all and I cried my heart out. Why did this happen to two people who did so much for others? They lived a good life, they harmed no one. The upheaval wrought by Hitler's stupid war was unbelievable.

A young relative who was among the people in the ship's hull sent us the shocking message of my Grandmother. This relative lost a leg in the aftermath of the blast. She related that bodies were strewn all over. As she went searching, she saw

Grandma's arm lying in the ruins. I believe it was the Lord's will for us to find out what happened, as in both places a relative was there, and later gave us the report. So many people never found out what happened to their loved ones so we felt fortunate to know what happened, as grim as it was.

Another person who met with a gruesome fate was the teacher who taught at our school in Konradshof. He joined the Communist Party and therefore thought he had immunity from persecution by the Russian troops. Hence he saw no need to evacuate. He was so sure they wouldn't harm him or his family because he was a staunch party member. How very wrong he was. He was tortured and killed and his daughters were raped. One daughter was sent to Siberia in a boxcar. Many people were shipped off that way. They weren't given any food and when the boxcars were opened all the people had starved to death. The other daughter, who had a reputation for being sexually active with many men, was raped repeatedly. Her insides were torn so badly, she couldn't stand up, so they threw her into a ditch to die. Her two-year son watched while this atrocity was happening. I wonder to this day what happened to that little boy and the other daughter's three sons.

We had a widow friend with three daughters who traveled with us on our first journey in October 1944. The two girls were teenagers. The older daughter accompanied me to my Grandparents Krebs' home when Karin was so very ill. I spoke with this young friend in Berlin after the war and she told me the most horrifying stories about her family. When she was 17 years old, she and her 15-years-old younger sister were raped in front of their mother. The mother tried to protect the girls and was hit over the head with a gun that split her face wide open. She and her sister were taken

away, the 15-year-old never to be seen or heard from again. She herself fainted and had repeated seizures. The Russian bandits got tired of her and threw her into a ditch to die. Several days elapsed before some people found her; they put her in a wheel barrow and took her along, where ever they were going. She only weighed 60 pounds and couldn't walk. It's a miracle she survived. This young friend was so filled with hate, she told me she could kill any Russian on sight without any qualms.

If I had to go through an episode so horrific, I believe I might have taken the poison capsules my husband gave me. Thank God, I was saved from such a horrible fate.

Many of my relatives were captured and many girl cousins raped. One cousin became a mistress to a white Russian officer and was therefore safe from the others.

Some of the Russian soldiers were handsome men and I'm sure some of them did not have larceny in their hearts, nevertheless some were brutal thugs. We had distant relatives living in Russia who served in the Russian army.

A close friend told me she watched while her daughter and a friend, both twenty years old, were shot as they struggled to resist the drunken Russian soldiers who were trying to rape them.

My aunt Meta's neighbor was raped twenty-five times in one day. It was so shocking to her that she lost her mind. Aunt Meta, my Dad's sister, and her family almost starved to death, there wasn't anything to eat under the Russians. Whatever animals they could find were slaughtered, even cats and dogs. Somehow Aunt Meta and her children survived and came to live with us in Dibbesdorf. Her husband died of starvation in a Russian prison camp.

A friend told me she knew someone that was raped and when she told her fiancé about it he made her wear a black dress at their wedding. Why she married the cad after making a demand like that, I'll never understand.

Some of my cousins told me they hid in the barn under straw piles to keep from being assaulted. The Russian savages poked and probed in the straw with pitchforks, trying to find them.

My in-laws stopped in Rostock, which became East Germany. My father in-law could speak Russian. He had taught school in Russia for many years. The Russians made him mayor of that village they stayed in.

Many women would not talk about the trauma they suffered. My sister-in-law Herta was one that never spoke about the terrible things that happened. I know she hid out most of the time. She never revealed if she was raped.

Braunschweig was heavily damaged from the air raids. The castle in the city was destroyed. One cannot visualize how it was then and how it is now. Berlin also was badly damaged. Germany lost many, many buildings of historic value that can never be replaced, although many buildings have been rebuilt and numerous new buildings constructed. I visited Berlin a few days after the war and saw the destruction, but now you can't tell there ever was a war. One church in Berlin that was bombed was not rebuilt, just left as it was in the ruins as a powerful reminder of that dreadful time.

The ruins of the war were transported into hills in the city and beyond, piled up and topped with dirt, then seeded with grass and planted with trees. Beautiful parks evolved from the remains of war. No one can believe that such devastation could result in anything of beauty.

Just recently I've come in contact with a relative of mine and we have been corresponding by e-mail. After reading my story and the experiences my family went through, he wrote that it was similar to what his mother , Hilde Wiesner, went through during that same time for several years later.

I feel her story should also be told as she has probably kept those painful memories repressed for all those years. Although writing about them is said to be a release, the pain of bringing them to the surface and relating them seems at times to be unbearably difficult. I'm glad I have finally been able to write about the trials my family and I endured and to possibly bring to a satisfactory closure the trauma that those events caused. Hopefully, I have been of some help to those relatives and friends who suffered the same fate and hereby encourage them to also write about it. After all, time is fleeting and these things should be talked about before it's too late. Even now, there are few of us left to tell these heartrending stories to the younger generation who take for granted the freedom to live their lives as they please.

For such atrocities to have occurred in our time, in the Twentieth Century, in so-called civilized society is hard to believe. But Hilde and I can verify to the reality of such inhuman treatment, having seen and experienced it first-hand. We survived it and recorded it and it will never be completely erased from our minds as long as we live and breathe. Hopefully, future generations will have progressed to where similar cruelties will never ever happen again.

The following is Hilde's story related to me in simple facts, without elaboration.

In translating it from the German to English, it is almost impossible to imagine, much less put into words the terrible trials she and her family suffered. I can identify with all that she wrote, except my immediate family survived whereas her loved ones did not.

Only by the grace of God.

Hilde Wiesner's story

(Translated from the German by Edith Riske)

In January 1945, my parents, sisters Herta and Otilie, and I were also trying to stay ahead of the Russians. First, we moved from Volhynia to Kutno in Poland and then started out for Germany as the Russians advanced. Unfortunately, we were overtaken. The Russians confiscated our wagon with the horses and we were forced to walk across the frozen ground. My mother had asthma and was not able to walk very far. Since she could not keep up with the rest, she was left at a concentration camp where there were many older people. We never saw our mother again, as she died there of starvation.

The Russians took my father and brother Herbert to a sugar factory where they were forced to do hard labor with very little food. When my father was unable to do the work, he was put into a different concentration camp where he also died of starvation. Herbert was sent to Siberia to work in the coal mines (he was 17 at the time). My two sisters and I were left with out our parents and brother.

They took the three of us girls to Kutno in Poland where we were put to work at a train station. Our job was to pull the heavy railroad tracks and carry cement blocks. We were near starvation as we were given only one ladle of soup a day. Whenever a sugar beet wagon came by, we tried to grab some beets to eat. We slept in barracks on the floor on which was scattered a thin layer of straw. We had nothing to cover up with except our coats which were sometimes wet from working in the ice cold weather all day. The only clothes we had were those we wore when we were forced to walk after the Russians took our wagon. Our bodies and clothes were infested with lice which made sleep almost impossible, in spite of being completely exhausted. That we survived is indeed a miracle.

After about 2 months the three of us girls ended up working for a Polish farmer for meager scraps of food (some days we got none, other days we got watered-down soup and an occasional crust of bread). The people themselves did not have much food. We didn't receive any pay for our work. We were often beaten for no reason.

In May 1946, my sister Herta became very sick. I believe she had pneumonia. Nobody saw to it that she received medical attention and she died without any help.

Now all that were left were my sister Otilie and I. In 1948, we ran away from the Polish farmer. A Polish woman had given us a small amount of money to get to Szczecin (Stettin). We were hoping that somehow we could cross the German border somewhere. That was risky undertaking as a girlfriend of ours was caught and put into prison for trying to cross the border.

In 1958, Otilie and I received papers from Potsdam (East Berlin at the time) and we moved from Stettin to East Berlin where we stayed with my aunt Martha Wiesner, the widow of Uncle Julius Wiesner, until we escaped to West Berlin and then to West Germany. The red cross helped us get into a camp in Berlin and later an apartment where we stayed for a few months till we left for Insheim, near Landau, Pfalz West Germany where we stayed over 2 years.

Brother Herbert was put into a concentration camp in Russia. After he was released in the 1950s he was brought to Canada by his brother Eduard Wiesner who had moved to Canada in the 1930s.

In June 1960. With the help of Herbert, we came to Canada. Sadly to say Otilie died of cancer in 1974. My brother Herbert and also I am living in Kitchener, Ontario, Canada.

I thank the Lord for being so good to me. I never had it so good until I came to Canada.