

CHAPTER 21

HERBERT'S DILEMMA

It seemed like an eternity since my husband and I said our sad farewells after his ten-day leave in the winter of 1944 when Karin was only eight months old. It's hard to believe that four years passed before he saw her again. I had not one word of communication from him for a whole year. Finally, through the efforts of the Red Cross, I was given an address I could write to—but only once a month and then no more than 25 words on a postcard. I had no idea where my postcards' destination was, but I faithfully wrote those cards every month. On one of those monthly postcards I pasted a picture of our daughter which, I found out later, he happily received.

I was unaware of Herbert's sufferings until he returned home, but my dread while he was gone ran pretty much true to what he went through. I knew he was serving with the German Army stationed in Russia. What I wasn't aware of was what followed when the war ended.

In the spring of 1945 after Germany's surrender, he and some other German soldiers attempted to walk back to Germany. He discarded his Army uniform and obtained some civilian clothes. They walked by night and slept during the day.

Herbert's goal was to reach Berlin where his sister lived. All of his other family was homeless, having been captured by the Russians when they made the terrible mistake of not joining the rest of us in our escape on February 10th, 1945, near Buetow.

Unfortunately, Herbert and his companions did not reach their destination. They were captured by the Russians one night in Czechoslovakia and sent to a Russian prison camp where he remained for almost three years.

The conditions in the prison were so dreadful, many men gave up the will to live. Herbert worked in a coal mine, bringing up coal in buckets with his bare hands. The only food they were given daily was a slice of dry bread and a bowl of soup which consisted of water with fish heads in it, and two cigarettes. They had to walk four km to the mine each day. Those who were too weak to walk were allowed a few day's rest in the camp. When it was learned that Herbert was a barber, he was made to cut the Russian officer's hair during his rest days. Their sleeping conditions were so crowded. They were lined up like sardines on straw, if one needed to turn, they all had to. Many of the men could not withstand the harsh conditions and perished.

Herbert related that one day as he walking to the mine he felt something squirming around inside his shirt. He was not allowed to stop and inspect what it was as the guards were ready with the Billy clubs to hit anyone over the head who stopped or fell down. Upon reaching the mine, he checked to see what was driving him nuts and found it was a mouse!

Herbert contracted malaria during the war and episodes of illness repeated every year for a long time. The camp doctor, a Jewish woman, reported that he had tuberculosis. She knew her diagnosis was incorrect, but felt compassion for this young

soldier by giving him an honorable excuse to allow him to go home. The Russians feared an outbreak of tuberculosis and were quick to release anyone who might be infected.

Yes, a so hated Jew in Germany helped a German to come home.

Herbert arrived at our home in Braunschweig weary and bedraggled. His body was all puffed up; his head was shaven; he wore wooden shoes with rags on his feet. All he carried with him was a small bag—in it were two stones that he used to light his cigarette when he tapped them together to produce a spark. After the years of absence and because of his changed appearance, I did not recognize him. He just didn't look like the Herbert I knew and it was very difficult for me to picture him as he was before. He was more like a stranger. Not only was his body out of shape, his mind was also emotionally damaged. After the years in confinement, he was lacking in self-reliance, empty of feeling; suffering through periods of depression. He did not wish to talk about his imprisonment or about the war, wanting to forget about all that sadness.

My beloved mom, bless her heart, took over and began to nurse him back to health. She fed him soft baby foods until he could withstand solid food. Many of the returnees when introduced to fatty foods right away died because their systems were not ready to digest the rich food.

At first it was almost impossible for Herbert and me to communicate with each other. Neither of us knew fully what the other had gone through. I could not visualize the conditions he lived in, neither could he fathom what Karin and I endured. We each had a unique story to tell but it was difficult to relate it to someone who wasn't actually there. We were like strangers trying to convey to each other the unspeakable terrors, the lonely days and nights, the worry about each other's welfare that we endured throughout

our absence. It became easier to retreat into our own private world instead of opening wounds. Herbert preferred silence rather than disclosing his sufferings to me who would in sympathy relive the pain. My ambition of someday patterning my marriage on the ideal union my Grandparents Krebs shared had eluded me and became more and more wishful imagination.

Nevertheless, faced with reality, I tried with God's help to make the best of it. I would not allow the wall of silence to prevail. Slowly, with love and perseverance and with Mom's good care, after about a year Herbert began to revert to his former self. He found a job in the city as a hair stylist. Later, he opened a beauty shop in the house in Dibbesdorf. He was friendly and outgoing and made friends easily. His love of singing was welcomed by the young people and resulted in the start of a village choir. Everyone joined in and the choir grew so big that we had to hire a song leader. His involvement with the youth was recognized by the people of the city and surrounding villages and his name is still often mentioned at their meetings. Also, through his effort, it brought the people of the village and the refugees closer.

Gradually, our lives returned to normal.

Going to America July 1950



Last day on the ship ^ >>>>



pictures of
Herbert, Edith & Karin on the
ship Europa

