

CHAPTER 24

RETRACING OUR STEPS

In June 1993, my brother Wini, his wife Christa, and I decided to go back, back to the years before 1944 when we lived in a little village called Konradshof, in East Prussia. What is left of the village is now called Nagornia, Russia. It lies south of the Lithuanian border. Russia took possession of that part of East Prussia in 1945, at the end of World War II.

Many months went into planning this nostalgic trip to our childhood home, and as the time grew near my anticipation, as well as my anxiety, increased daily. After months of back-and-forth communication with my brother and his wife, I knew their excitement was as great as mine. We were all looking forward to this eventful and memorable journey.

I started out from my home in Ontario, California, looking forward to meeting Wini and Christa at their home in Braunschweig, Germany.

I left from Los Angeles Airport for Berlin, Germany, on British Airways with a stopover in London. At Heathrow Airport, I was met by Frank, our friend, the English or forty-eight years! at a time of reunion with cries and hugs.



Frank and Edith 1993

Sadly, he told me that he suffered from cancer with no hope of recovery. He talked about how he tried to find Steffie, the Polish girl who had been with us on our torturous trip. In the years since we last saw each other, I had a letter from Frank and he wrote that he continued to think about me and intimated that he had romantic feelings for me. He was so very fond of Karin and looked after her constantly, feeding her and cheering her up during our ordeal. He was very protective of all of us and feelings of infatuation in turn transferred to me, being Karin's mother.

My brother, his wife and I left Hanover by Russian Airlines to Kalingrad. Flying time was just an hour and a half, when in former years it took weeks to travel the same distance. On the airplane flying to Kalingrad (Koenigsberg), my thoughts went back to the time before 1944. I envisioned our home and the surrounding fields where we lived and worked and played. Konradshof was a small village with all the farm buildings in one location and a schoolhouse in the middle. It was a friendly community. As related before, we moved there when my parents became eligible for a land grant approved by Hitler. Wini grew up there; I lived my teenage years there; I fell in love with two handsome brothers, one of whom was killed at much too young an age. I got married there to the

blond brother Herbert. It is where my daughter Karin was born in 1944. We loved everything about our place.

So many memories surfaced, happy memories for the most part: the school that I attended for three years was just up the hill from our home; the teacher who played many different musical instruments who taught me how to play the guitar. I remembered the small and with guitars, mandolins and violins--how we enjoyed playing folk songs to entertain the neighborhood villages. I played a guitar which my Dad made for me. He was so talented, an exceptional craftsman, always building things with his hands out of practically nothing. Both my parents were talented in doing with what they had. My mother knitting and sewing, my father fashioning things out of wood and anything else that was available.

What would we find in our village home which we were driven away from almost fifty years ago? Would we succeed in finding even a remnant of our cherished possessions? Would the old well still be there? Or perhaps the house and the barn where we worked and played? Would the pond near our house be dried up these many years later? The apple and cherry trees surely have withered and died by now. But wouldn't it be a miracle if they were still producing fruit? My heart raced with anticipation. Would Wini remember? After all, he was much younger than I.

Memories returned to March 31, 1944, when Karin was born. I was living with my parents because my husband was somewhere in Russia where the fighting was. With the help of a midwife and my parents, Karin came into the world. A snowstorm was raging and it wasn't until the next day when my Dad was able to get a doctor to come to do the necessary suturing. Herbert wasn't to see his daughter until she was eight months

old and then not again until four years old. Karin has heard this story many times, but flying en route to Konradshof now, I wished she could be with Wini and Christa and me to share in the reality of the place where she was born.

As the flight attendant asked me what I wanted to drink, it brought me out of my reverie. In each hand she held an old-fashioned teakettle, one with coffee and the other with tea.

We landed in Kalingrad. The airport was just a small building. The bathroom was unbelievably filthy-- we hesitated to use it. To go through customs, we were taken singly into a room. It took about an hour for the three of us to pass inspection.

After a three-hour bus ride, we arrived in Gumbinen, a city about ten kilometers from our village. Time stood still in this part of Russia. We saw ruins left over from the war, as if Russia forgot all about this part of the country that once was part of East Prussia. Falling and decaying buildings were everywhere, stores were empty and we saw many children with outstretched hands begging for money. I felt a chill go through my body and numerous questions came to mind, "How can this be? East Prussia was once the breadbasket of Germany, now we see children starving?"

The hotel we stayed in was owned by a German travel company and was tolerable. We were able to get enough food there. On the days when we were out searching for our village or out sightseeing, the restaurant packed a food package for us to take along. There were no restaurants anywhere we went in the city or along the roads we traveled. In the morning we saw older women sweeping the streets with branch brooms, as they did many, many years ago.

At the hotel, we were amazed at how beautiful the girls were who worked there. It appeared that the desolation surrounding the area had not touched them. One day we were invited to the music school, which turned out to be one of the uplifting experiences of our trip. The voices of the young people were outstanding. It was love at first sight between me and a darling little blonde girl with pigtails and blue eyes. The performance they gave especially for us was truly enjoyable.

The second day we all went by bus to Kalingrad. It is still called by the German name of Koenigsberg, people told us. On the three-hour bus drive there were no rest areas in sight. The bus stopped and the bushes became our bathrooms! In the city there were no bushes to go to and we all suffered the same discomfort. We had a tour of the city, which was a waste of time. What we saw were mostly ruins of the war. We stopped at the ruins of the well-known Marien Dom. Then we drove to the resort town Cranz on the Baltic Sea which was once a beautiful, well-known resort town. The promenade on the ocean was just ruins. Another day the three of us drove to another resort town, Rauschen, on the Baltic Sea. The town was kept in good shape, no ruins there. On the streets were little stands with things to buy, mostly amber. I bought a few amber things—I've always loved amber.

We rented a taxicab to begin our search for our village. Victor, our driver, spoke German so we had no problem communicating. Before our journey came to a climax, we became good friends. He invited us to his home one evening and his wife prepared dinner for us. She spoke a few German words, otherwise all Russian. They had a beautiful daughter with dark blonde hair and blue eyes.

In our search for our village, we drove through other villages. Our first stop: a little town once called Sodehnen, where our church had been but now there was no longer any sign of the church. All that was left was a broken down shack where once we kept our horses while we attended church. The train station and all the tracks were gone, just a few run-down homes remained.

The next village, Ballethen, was only four km from Konradshof. Herbert and I were married there by the justice of the peace the day before our church wedding. There were collapsed houses everywhere. What was once the post office with a small store was now just a broken down building. Wini remembered buying candy at that little store. The road by this place was impassable with deep ruts, so we had to turn around.

We took a road that Wini and I remembered would lead us to Konradshof, but only about a mile or so, it too was impassable and we had to turn around. Confronted by so many dead ends, we were beginning to feel discouraged. Nevertheless, we persevered. By taking another direction, hopefully we would reach our goal.

Driving along, what struck us as being familiar was the number of storks that were still around--storks everywhere, in the trees, on the road, on top of the dilapidated buildings. We remembered the storks that nested on our barn roof in Konradshof. We had a good laugh one day when we came upon a nest of storks with the mother and three little fledglings. We stopped and Christa aimed her camera to take a picture. She shouted out, "*Now, you all look real pretty.*" The mother, sensing intruders, seemed to relay to the chicks, "Quick, hide, there is danger." Instantly, the three little heads disappeared from view. This small incident made us chuckle and lightened our whole day.

We headed towards the village of Trempen which we recalled was six km from Konradshof. As before, we saw caved-in buildings. The store where we shopped was no longer there. We found the dairy we delivered milk to, but it also was very dilapidated. I felt such sadness, tears running down my cheeks. What did Russia do to this beautiful land? What else will we find in a land that was once so bountiful but now was totally devastated?

Again we ran into problems finding a way to our village. Wini remembered the large lake a few miles from our farm. We saw two people walking down the road; Victor, our driver, stopped and asked them about the lake. They said yes, there was such a lake. So again our hopes were renewed. Going a short distance further, there it was. We stopped and, wonder of wonder, it looked the same! It occurred to us that nature had triumphed--it was easier to tear down man-made structures than to destroy a God-created lake.

As we drove on, coming over a hill, I cried out, "*There is our village.*" At first Wini was speechless, then like a little child at Christmas, he leaped out of the taxi and started to run in all directions. Christa and I couldn't keep up with him. The little pond we swam our horses in and ice-skated in the winter was still there and looked the same, only the surroundings were gone. All the buildings lay in ruins. We traced some of the foundations that remained and were able to point out where each family lived.

We walked to where our farm used to be. We walked on the foundation of the barn where we milked the cows and fed the pigs. We found the entrance to the basement where I had hidden my wedding gifts that fateful morning in October 1944, when the Russians forced us to flee. The basement was dynamited and all that was left was a

gaping hole. Memories of that dreadful day crowded into my mind as I gazed into the hole where I had so carefully stashed my treasures. I had covered them with beets that morning to camouflage their existence. I shuddered, trying to cram down the emotions I had kept submerged for forty-nine years. But I could no longer hold them as a flood of tears erupted. My brother Wini stood beside me and he vowed that someday he'd come back with pick and shovel and dig around in that basement, and by some miracle he may uncover a dish or fork or a spoon, a piece of the heirloom handed down by Grandma Krebs—any long-lost relic that may have escaped the Russian massacre to connect us with the past.

As we walked along, we found the outline of the garden still there, just waiting for us to come back to plant some seeds. To our utter amazement, there was fruit on the apple and cherry trees. We helped ourselves to some cherries! Their sweet taste reminded us of the carefree days when we played in this orchard.

Wini was all excited when he discovered the well. As I looked around the high grass, I came across a lonely rosebush all in bloom with the lovely red flowers which I had long forgotten. I plucked a rose and tucked it into my knapsack to take home. The fields were overgrown with grass and looked green and lush. The ground had replenished itself which the buildings were unable to do. Again nature manifested God's presence amid waste and desolation.

More excitement! Wini spotted the shelter our father had built in the side of the hill next to the garden. Half of it was still there. My thoughts raced back to the time when I stuffed little three-month-old Karin into a pillow as we were running to the shelter during an air raid. She slid out and when I discovered her missing, I ran back and there

she was lying on the grass, shaken but unhurt. I could not have imagined that this was the forerunner of what this child was to endure in the months that followed.

Wini looked so sad standing at what looked like a piece of the chimney from our schoolhouse. I recalled that our school master and his family were killed by the Russians. He decided to stay behind when so many of us fled the village. Having joined the Communist Party, he was under the distinct impression that he would be welcomed with open arms when Russia took over. All that proved false, a sad ending for a misguided family. One of the daughters was banished to Siberia and never heard from again; the other daughter died after being raped repeatedly. We often wondered what happened to the schoolmaster's four grandsons who were left behind.

About fifteen minutes away we came upon the village lake. It was so beautiful and quiet there. I wondered how long it had been since anyone had enjoyed that lake as we once had. As we walked along, Victor slowly followed behind in the taxicab, leaving us with our own meditations of how things once were. The rain the day before had left deep ruts which made the roads nearly impassable.

Wini took off his shoes and socks and waded into the lake. He was going to go for a swim--trying to revive memories of a long lost time when he and his buddies were young and carefree. There were tractor tracks going into the lake and the water had an oil slick, so Wini gave up the idea. The water lilies were gone. It just wasn't the same.

Wini remembered a smaller lake over the hill where he used to go fishing with his friends. He ran off and disappeared over the top. A few minutes later we saw a hand

waving for us to come up. He found his lake! Standing on top of the hill, the scenery was breathtaking, too beautiful to describe. I stood there speechless while the tears kept coming. God gave us all this beauty, only now there was no one to enjoy it. So many questions came to mind which will never be answered: "Why was this beautiful land taken from us? What happened to all our belongings? Why did they confiscate our animals and everything we worked so hard for?"

Our journey to find our beloved home came to an end. We returned to Germany, resigned to the fact that, that chapter in our lives was now closed. Wini still lives in Braunschweig, Germany. I am happy in my home in Ontario, California. Karin lives a contented life in Richmond Virginia. Going back to the past, to our home in a little village called Konradshof, brought back many *tearful memories*. What will never be forgotten is the undeserved carnage Russia inflicted on this beautiful land called:

E A S T P R U S S I A



Ruins of Konradshof

Ruins of Konradshof; whats left of our barn



The Shelter my Dad had made into the hill during Russian air raids

The pond in Konradshof before 1944



The same pond in 1993-the same post in both pictures