

# A WINTER CARAVAN

BY

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One pancake-two-please, I pay you any price. A man dressed in high boots and a fur jacket was standing in front of me. I shook my head. I had enough to do, to balance the big iron frying pan. A bucket without a bottom, tipped over some burning fence logs substituted for a stove alongside a snow and sleet-filled road. It was a bitter cold day in **February, 1945** in **East Prussia**. An endless row of wagons with refugees had come to a stop before the little town of **Heiligenbeil**. Enemy airplanes, bombarding the country town and surrounding areas bypassed us, and I had taken advantage of the halt to try to make some warm fond for the children on my own wagontrain. There were thirty-five children from my farmworker's families, their mothers, some older and young men, who had not yet been taken away from us for war or defense duty. I could not sell any pancakes, as much as I would like to help everyone - we did not need money - we had to survive.

For weeks we had been driving over **East Prussia's** icecovered roads to flee the encircling **Russian front**. I knew, that only a few miles away, my own husband and the father of my four children was in the war zone, unsuspecting that we had to leave our horrors and to try to reach safety somewhere.



Finally the planes disappeared, the rolling thunder of cannons in the far distance grew silent, and the endless chain of wagons moved on. We drove through **Heiligenbeil** on our way to a bay of the **Baltic Sea**, called **Frisches Haff**. We hoped that the water would be frozen enough so we could travel on it towards the south, to escape the war and avoid the almost unpassable roads.

I was riding behind my group of five wagons when suddenly I saw among all the other people, who were begging for a ride, a young, pretty woman, pregnant, with a basket on her arm and three small children clinging to her. In a hurry, we threw a crate with some of my belongings and a bicycle from the last wagon and helped her and the children up. Without delay the trek moved on and in many sad days to come, she was a source of great encouragement and strength to me.

Just as dark fell over the war filled country the wagon trains reached the beach. We fed and covered the horses, took care of the children and bedded them deep in the straw, close to each other to keep them warm. Their wagon was covered with rugs and canvas. We divided the able adults for one hour nightwatches. To keep us warm we shared a bottle of cognac I was lucky enough to have traded with soldiers for some pieces of salted pork. By now it was ice cold. The stars twinkled in all their beauty high above in the heaven. The sounds of the panting and stamping horses were mingled with noises of people in the night. Shadows scurried around. We had to guard our wagons closely. As always in such situations, there were those who would take advantage of the misery of their fellow human beings.

The night passed, and at dawn rumors flew along the beach that the ice was frozen thick enough to withstand the caravans of wagons. The Army had already sent scouts out to check the ice floes.

It was very welcome news.

Our hopes were easily satisfied. Suddenly I heard a heart-breaking outcry and lamenting from a neighbour wagon. I ran over, perhaps I could offer my help, they sounded so very unhappy; but all I could get out of some women, children and an elder man, was, that their good rug, which had been rolled up and hung beneath their wagon, had been stolen. I shook my head in disbelief and asked them: "Why are you crying over a stolen rug in a time like this? What does it matter to lose a piece of carpet?" Finally, tears running down her face, one of the women said: "But our dead grandmother was in it. The earth was frozen too hard to bury her and we had to move on; so, we dressed her in her Sunday best and rolled her in the carpet. We were hoping to lay her soon in a final resting place." Despite all the tragedy I could not help but smile just a little bit, when I tried to imagine the faces of the thieves, when they would unroll the rug, and find the booty of their nightly hunt to be nothing but a well-dressed and rather dead grandma.

Shortly after the sign was given for departure. Just when the horses of my first wagon set their hoofs on the ice, a pale tinter sun broke through and I saw in a good distance from either side of us the wagontrains moving slowly on the frozen surface of the bay of **the Baltic Sea**.

This is an historical moment, I thought to myself. An earth-bound folk of farmers is leaving its beloved land in fear of war, enemy and death. But I was still young and hopeful in my heart that someday we would return to our ranches and homes in this beautiful country, called **East Prussia**. How good that I did not know then, how much suffering and sorrow was waiting for us all.

Nobody ever returned.

