

ON A COLD WINTER'S NIGHT

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January 10, 1945 in **East Prussia**. A little village, close to the military base **Stablack** with its surrounding giant prison camps **Stalag**, sits hidden from the main road by high snowdrifts. As I looked from the window of the upstairs nursery, I saw peace interrupted only by the machine gunfire of fast and low flying small Russian airplanes, which we called the "moths". Our farmhouse was filled with families from our main ranch (about 120 km. away between **Angerburg** and **Goldap**), which we had already left in **Fall 1944** when the Russians broke through the retreating German front, deep in the heart of **East Prussia**. Thrown back for a few short winter weeks, they were rapidly approaching from all sides and we no longer knew what to do. My foreman and I had been out riding beyond the base to check on the conditions of the roads and an eventual escape. It looked impossible.



Refugees with bundles on their backs or pulling little hand-wagons, were mixing with infantry, tank troops, and military truck; which were moving in all directions. The fleeing people told horror-tales of rape and merciless killings by the Russians. Discouraged, we returned. I carried the heavy burden of responsibility for the families of my farm workers, families without fathers, young mothers like myself with children, some old people, invalids, and some prisoners of war who had already been working for us for several years and were our real support for help and courage.

In a few days I would be thirty years old; I had four children, nine months to six years, and to protect them and the 30 children entrusted to my care, to lead them safely out of this chaos of an unbelievably cruel war and human destruction, was my only reason for a will to survive so strong, that today when I look back, I wonder how I ever had the courage to try this impossible task.

My husband, sixteen years my senior, had been drafted three months before into the Army. That day he suddenly returned for a very short furlough. He look altded and worried as he told of the war, of the disorganization and confusion of the troops, and that we had already lost the war. Then he told me that he was not returning to his military post and I listened in disbelief when he suggested that we perhaps could make friendly arrangements with the overtaking Russians. I could not understand my husband. I realized that he no longer had any hope for us. He had always been a fighter against the Nazi regime and we had suffered a lot because of that. He had always been so strong in his beliefs of right and wrong - he was never afraid - but we both knew that the destination of an A.W.O.L. (*absence without leave*) soldier caught at that time was the nearest tree, and there were enough party fanatics around to give themselves the satisfaction to do a "good deed" in this way. I could not cry, I could not scream, I could not think. I only knew that I did not want the man I loved hanging from a tree. I felt so alone and cold inside; there was nobody else I could talk to, but I talked all night to my husband. How? Like a mother to her child? Like a wife to the man she wed for better or worst? And when we grew silent and another dawn crept up on this ice cold winter day we both knew that we had to obey the rules of those in whose service we stood, in this case the Army. Even in a time like this **January 1945**, if we had any kind of hope for a future for us, our children, and the people around us, we could not afford to loose our selfrespect as humans. How ever should we face a world afterwards?

By midmorning we sat silently in a sleigh on the way to **Pr. Eylau**. Our foreman drove the horses on. Softly rang their bells, as it began to snow again. On the edge of the town the sleigh came to a halt. From here I was to return home on my horse, for the sleigh had to go thirty km. more to the point where my husband's troop was stationed. We were unable to speak. For a short moment he held me in his arms and to try kiss softly the tears of my eyes. Then he suddenly grabbed the reins of the horses and they drove off. I kept standing and looking till the sleigh disappeared in the grey of the landscape and snow. It was a lonely ride home. I never saw my husband again.

Two days later, after a military order to leave the farm, off went five wagons with thirty-five children, and everybody who had been with us since our first trek in the **fall 1944**, over roads packed with fleeing people like ourselves, and military of all kinds. I rode behind my wagons, praying that I would have the strength to take care of those in my trust, desperate in my thoughts of the man whose strength and guidance I now needed more than ever. Indeed I did not know at that time that I had to go through so much suffering and sorrow as never a human heart could bear and still live on. I lost my oldest son during a Russian artillery attack, but found him seven and one half months later on the other side of **the Baltic Sea**.



I had to lay my sweet baby girl four months later to rest in a white coffin with four other infants, all taken away by measles epidemic, and in a strange country. I would have liked to lay right down with her, but there were two children still waiting for their mother to return from the cemetery. We were all sick from diseases, hunger and cold. We had lost everything we had. I never gave up hope for my son lost in **West Prussia (Neustadt)**. I found him safely in **Denmark**, an unbelievable miracle, like many others which brought us alive out of **Gdynia (Gotenhafen)** across **the Baltic Sea**. We were two and one half years in a refugee camp, but at least I had three of my children with me. The family of my foreman with children and grandchildren had safely reached **Denmark**; he himself was taken off the ship before we left, despite his 65 years, to help dig defense ditches. All of the others had reached safely a town in **Pommerania**, but did not want to flee again when the Russians were standing before the town. It took them many years before they were exchanged to **West Germany**, and they and their children had to do hard labor. My husband had died in a Russian prison camp in **Lithuania**, never knowing that we had had to leave our home and country without ever a possibility to return; his thoughts had been in a happy way with all of us and a future on our farm. Diphtheria had ended his life.

Despite that destiny had brought me to the edge of destruction, despite the tragic loss of my little daughter and husband, we escaped the horrors of the inhuman sufferings of those who stayed behind or did not manage to escape, and of those who died on their way to **Siberia** or whose ship sank to the bottom of **the Baltic Sea** under the onslaught of bombs.

Once on our unhappy journey, I caught my two little sons standing with wondering eyes, staring up at a tree. A soldier, who had been caught, was dangling in the cold: I knew that our decision had been right. My children have grown up with respect for their father and a loving sorrow for his early leaving.

Now living in **the United States** for fourteen years, and married to the man whom I thank most for the return of my lost son. I have a young daughter again and three wonderful children all married. Time has healed the wounds of the heart, but I have not forgotten, and I am so grateful for every day of living.

Stalag I-A was a German prisoner-of-war camp -
- located near the village of **Stablack** -
- about 8.5 km (5.3 mi) north-west of **Preußisch Eylau, East Prussia**
(now **Bagrationovsk** in Russian **Kaliningrad Oblast**)
The camp was built in late **1939** by Polish prisoners of war.
In **1940** the Poles were joined by Belgian and French prisoners -
- and by Russians in **1941**.
Some British and Italian prisoners were also there.
On **25 January 1945**, as Russian troops approached -
-the camp was abandoned and all prisoners evacuated to the west.

Gdynia

The city and seaport were occupied in **September 1939** -
- by German troops and renamed **Gotenhafen** after the Goths -
- an ancient Germanic tribe, who had lived in the area.
Some 50,000 Polish citizens, who after **1920** had been brought into the area
by the Polish government after the decision to enlarge the harbour was made,
were expelled to the General Government.

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