

*By Hands of
Strangers*

A Story of God's Providence

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ALICE LEWIS

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Printed in the United States of America

Redemption Press
PO Box 427
Enumclaw, WA 98022

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ISBN 978-1-63232-322-4

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number:
2005900563

Acknowledgment



I want to thank my husband Harvey without whose help and support, I never would have had the courage to write this book.

I am grateful that my memory of these events has been expanded by stories told to me by my mother and my Aunt Martha Affeldt. My Uncle Reinhold Teske and my mother's cousin Edward Teske have also added much to my understanding of these events. I have searched recorded history to find out where and when and how our stories have intersected.

Timeline of Events



August 1, 1944	The Polish resistance force in Warsaw rebels against the German occupation.
September 11, 1944	Allied troops enter Germany.
October 2, 1944	The German army crushes the Polish resistance.
October 9, 1944	Churchill, Roosevelt, and Stalin meet in Moscow to discuss the fate of Germany.
December 23, 1944	We flee Poland, heading to Schlesian.
January 11, 1945	The Red Army enters Poland.

January 12, 1945	My father flees Poland.
January 16, 1945	My brother Dieterich dies in Wittgendorf, Schlesian.
January 17, 1945	The German army is defeated at Warsaw, and the Red Army occupies it.
Late January 1945	The Red Army, under Marshall Konev, surges into Schlesian, heading toward Breslau.
January 26, 1945	We flee Schlesian, heading toward Sudetenland.
January 26, 1945	I am hospitalized in Zittau, Saxony.
January 27, 1945	Cousin Dieterich is born. Western Allies start round the clock bombing of all major German cities and many lesser ones.
February 13-14, 1945	Dresden, Saxony destroyed by Allied incendiary bombing.
Early March 1945	Mother finds me in Reichenberg, Sudetenland.
Early April 1945	Martha finds us in Auscha, Sudetenland.

May 8, 1945	Unconditional surrender of Germany.
Mid-May 1945	All Germans expelled from Sudetenland.
August 1945	We find Reinhold in Dessau.
February 1946	We move to Schlagsdorf, Mecklenburg.
April 1946	We escape from behind the Iron Curtain.
January 1947	My sister Ines is born.
December 1951	We emigrate to the U.S.

My Prayer and Praise



taken from Psalms 71:19

Thy righteousness, Oh God is very high.
Thou, who hast shown me great and sore
troubles,
Hast quickened me again.
And now
that I am old and gray-headed,
Oh God,
Forsake me not until I have shown thy
strength to
this generation.

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CHAPTER 1

The Last Day at Home



Death stared me in the face...I was frightened and sad...and He saved me” (Psalms 116: 3...6) The Living Bible. I didn’t know it then, but my life was about to drastically change to fit those verses. All I knew was that this day felt all wrong, right from the start. On most mornings when Nacia came into the bedroom to pick me up, she would play peekaboo with me for a while before dressing me. Nacia was my nanny, our live-in Polish maid. Like any three-year-old, I loved playing peekaboo, especially with Nacia. But today she just picked me up and got me dressed, barely talking to me at all. She seemed tense and preoccupied. She ushered me into the kitchen where Mutti

was nursing my baby brother Dieterich and continued out through the foyer to the attached animal barn to start her morning chores.

Mutti is the German word for *mom*. We were Germans, and though our family had been living in Poland for many generations, the language spoken in our home was German. Nacia, however, always spoke to me in Polish. I liked her almost better than my own Mutti. I would have felt very lonesome without her since Mutti always seemed to be preoccupied with my baby brother and other household concerns.

Today, Mutti was even more preoccupied than usual. There was something strange going on. I could feel it in the air. Excitement? Fear? I could not identify it. It made me feel jumpy, like there was a windup toy bouncing in my tummy.

Mutti didn't let me play outside anymore. Ever since we had heard the big guns all the way from the town of Wola, she kept me close to her. The Second World War was ravaging the European continent and Germany was losing. I didn't know what all of that meant, but I would soon find out.

After breakfast, Mutti went back into the bedroom, got a suitcase from on top of the wardrobe, and set it on the kitchen table. All

the doors between the rooms were left open, which was strange since they were usually kept closed. I could see the asparagus fern on the white wicker table under the living room window from where I stood in the kitchen, and if I looked in the other direction, I could look clear through the foyer and see the door to the animal barn on the other side.

“What are you doing, Mutti?” I asked.

“I’m packing,” she answered.

“Why are you packing?” I scampered up onto the wooden bench that stood behind the kitchen table to see what she was putting in the suitcase.

“I’m packing because we are leaving.” She sounded angry. I wondered why.

“Why are we leaving?” I asked as I started to reach into the suitcase for something.

“Don’t touch that,” she snapped. “Quit plaguing me with your questions. I have a lot to do.”

Just then Dieterich started to cry and demanded her attention again. Since Mutti was too busy for me and I wanted to know everything that was going on, I got down from the bench and went out to the foyer to see what Nacia was doing. I held onto the door frame

with both hands as I stepped down the one step into the foyer.

This was one large room, connecting the house to the animal barn. It was used for many of the dirty jobs that need doing on a farmstead. I saw that Nacia was baking bread. Our huge masonry baking oven that stood in one corner of the foyer was fired up this morning and was warming the whole house. I saw six loaves of bread rising on a long flour-covered board that was sitting on top of the wash tubs near the oven. The boards on top of the wash tubs served as a table or counter during the times when no washing was being done. Papa had built the baking oven, just as he had built everything else on our farmstead. He had even made the adobe-like bricks that were used in its construction, out of clay found on our property.

Nacia had earlier built a fire directly in the oven where the bread would later be placed. As soon as the brick had absorbed all the heat it could and the fire had gone down, Nacia scraped the coals out of the interior and swept it clean with a goose wing duster. After that, she took that long board on which the bread had been rising, stuck it into the oven, and slid the loaves off the board right onto the adobe surface of the oven. Since the oven had no real

The Last Day at Home

door, she set a piece of sheet metal in front of it, and then went out to the barn to get some fresh, dripping cow pies. They were used like modeling clay and were smeared all over the surface of the sheet metal and around the cracks, sealing the bread completely into the oven. By the time the oven had cooled and the cow pies had dried into tinder, the bread would be done. I liked to watch the process of sealing the oven, although I could not picture myself ever doing it.

I looked up at the window and saw the row of face mugs smiling down at me from the windowsill as the low winter sun was shining through the glass. I liked the red one best. That dwarf had such a cheery, smiley face with squinty eyes, white hair, and whiskers. I thought he liked me. I winked back at him. I was wishing Mutti would let me play with him.

After Nacia had finished sealing the bread into the oven, she started sweeping the cement floor of the foyer. She then reached into a barrel of white sand which was standing near the door, took a handful, and started to sprinkle it onto the floor in little heaps. When she was all done, it looked like a gray cake with streusel

topping. That's how it was done on farms in Poland at that time.

I heard the animals shuffling around on the other side of the barn door. I imagined that they felt like they had windup toys in their bellies too. I heard our cow moo. Papa was in there. He was leading our horse Schimmel out into the yard. I heard the clip clop of his shoes on the floor. Our horse was named Schimmel because he was dusty gray. That is close to the word *schummer* which means twilight. In English, he would have been named Twilight.

I went back into the kitchen. Mutti was just finishing doing something with Dieterich. He was fussier than usual too. She put him down and walked to the door of the house. Just as she was opening the door, I tried to sneak past her and run out into the yard to Papa.

"I want to go to my Papa," I said. Papa was standing in the middle of the yard near our stone flour mill, shoeing Schimmel.

Mutti grabbed me and pulled me back before I could get even two steps away. "Are you almost done?" she yelled to him.

"Almost," he yelled back. "I'm just finishing up. As soon as I have the wagon out and the horse hitched up, I'll come and get you."

Mutti closed the door and led me back into the kitchen where she continued packing. Clothes for me, clothes for herself and Dieterich, official identification papers, family photos, and some pretty things of sentimental value to her, all went into the suitcase. She packed her hand-made wedding dress that was made of fine cotton batiste with hand crocheted lace insets and pin tucks on the bodice.

Finally, Nacia came in with the six loaves of fresh-baked whole grain bread, made from the grain that Papa had ground into flour out on our stone mill. The bread went into a large bag. A big can full of fried out bacon fat, some sugar, a hundred pound bag of flour, and a few other food goods were also put on the table to go with us on our journey.

Papa came in very soon after that. "Everything is ready," he said. "Let's get going."

"Help me with the bedding," Mutti said.

Papa helped Mutti stuff some goose down quilts and pillows into another large bag which had been sewn just for that purpose, then carried them out to the wagon.

Mutti put outdoor clothing on me and Dieterich. Then she put on her own coat and scarf, closed the suitcase, and picked Dieterich up to carry him out to the wagon. I followed along.

“Where are we going?” I asked as I clung onto Mutti’s coattail following her out of the house. I felt scared because the adults were not acting normally. They were too busy for me. Nobody was telling me anything. I blinked away some tears. “Where are we going?” I repeated the question anxiously.

“We are going to Grandma and Grandpa Teske’s house,” Mutti answered.

But this felt different from the other times we visited Grandma and Grandpa Teske. This time it felt all wrong. The bouncing windup toy feeling in my tummy told me so.

Papa went back inside to get the suitcase and our food stuff.

Nacia came out with a big black and green plaid wool blanket and several heated bricks. She had heated them during the bread baking. Mutti set Dieterich into the wagon, then me. Then she also climbed in. Nacia handed her the blanket and a brick. I was set down on the floor of the wagon box near Mutti’s feet, and the blanket was wrapped around me with the heated brick under my feet. Mutti sat up on the seat and held Dieterich close to herself wrapping another blanket around the both of them. She also had a heated brick at her feet. Nacia just stood there. She was sniffing like she had been crying. Maybe that’s why she

didn't talk to me much this morning. Maybe that's why she had turned her back to me when I came out to the foyer. She didn't want me to see her tears.

Papa came out with our suitcase and food bags. He put them into the back of the wagon next to the bedding, and then he climbed in at the driver's side.

Mutti's eyes looked around at everything. "Look around at everything real good," she said. "We won't be back."

My eyes followed hers. She looked at the *scheune*. That was the big barn where we stored our hay and straw, as well as all of our grain. The wagon and the surrey were also stored there, as well as all the other implements and tools needed on the farm. I was remembering the threshing process which took place on the floor of the *scheune*. I had watched as the workers had hand-flailed the wheat to separate the grains from the straw. The double doors were open on both sides. The women then would sweep up the grain after the straw was lifted off and put it into their sieves. They would swirl their sieves around, tossing the grain lightly into the air to allow the wind to blow away the chaff. Mutti sighed. I felt sad too.

I looked at the roof of the scheune. A family of storks had a giant nest up there next to the cupola. They would stand on one leg, then on the other, clacking their beaks. The low meadow on our property by the banks of the Wkra River provided plenty of frogs to feed their family. The storks had flown south long ago. Now it was time for us to leave as well.

Next, Mutti looked in the opposite direction, past the well. I had often watched Mutti, Papa, or Nacia lower a water bucket into its depths and then hand-crank up a bucket of cold, fresh water. Just beyond the well stood our root cellar. To me it looked like a big hill with a door in it. It was full to capacity with potatoes, carrots, turnips, cabbages, kraut, and all the fruits of my parents' labor through the entire summer.

Then Mutti looked back at the house one last time. It was not large, but it was home. There were some chickens scratching in the yard. She started crying, then scolding I don't know whom. She bid Nacia good-bye. "Take care of everything as though we were still here."

Nacia didn't have to leave because she was Polish.

Papa clicked his tongue at Schimmel and gave the reins a slight slap. Our wagon moved out through the open gate. I saw Nacia close it behind us. "God be with you," she called out to us. She waved her handkerchief at us, dabbed her eyes with it then waved again until we were out of sight.

I felt butterflies in my stomach. They even sent a chill up to my head and down my spine as I looked past the stubble of our now empty wheat field. I saw the wind bending the bare branches of our neighbor's trees.

"Look, Mutti," I said. "Even McKoskies' trees are shivering."

"Get down into your blanket," she said. "It's a long trip to Grandma and Grandpa Teske's house." She tucked me in better and even put a flap of blanket over my head.



Grandma and Grandpa Teske lived in Kicin, several hours away by horse and wagon from our home in Platzichewo, Poland. We went there often, but this time it was different. This was not for a family feast or picnic. It was an evacuation. Germany was losing the war. The Russians had defeated the Germans at Stal-

ingrad and had driven them back as far as the Polish border. It was unsafe for German civilians to remain in Poland any longer. Our people had lived peacefully in Poland since the time of Catherine the Great. That all changed when Hitler started World War II.

The Polish people were beginning to vent their anger against all Germans, even innocent women and children. They blamed all Germans for the atrocities and devastation that the Nazis had committed against the Polish people when they first occupied the country in 1939. Right now, the Russian army was just on the other side of the Vistula River, getting ready to invade Poland. They were to be feared even more than the Polish for their fierce hatred of anything German.