

Eight

GOODBYE, MOTHER

It was 6:00 A.M. as Mother and I scurried around the apartment getting ready to leave for the factory. It was an unusually gray late-January morning, and we dreaded the freezing streetcar ride and walk ahead of us. As I looked out of the window into the predawn sky, I shuddered at the familiar sight. It was the same lead-gray, overcast sky that I had seen in my dream several months earlier! Only the shoreline and the ship in the distance were missing.

“Mother!” I called. “Something will happen today, I just know it. It is as if God has conveyed an unexplainable message to me.”

“Don’t be silly, Anita.”

“I can’t explain it,” I said as I studied the sky for several minutes. “Do you remember the awful dream I told you about, Mother? I see the same sky this morning that I saw in my dream.”

I paced and stalled as we prepared to leave. When the dawn struggled to break through, I ran to the window again. This time I saw the Gestapo police wagon drive up in front of our building!

“They’re here, Mother!” I exclaimed. “This time it is for us! I know it because of my dream.”

“We’re protected by the Nuremberg Law, Anita,” Mother said too confidently. “Get your coat on now or we’ll miss the streetcar.”

I stood frozen in place as two men got out of the police wagon and marched up our front stairs. Could there be a remote chance that they were coming for one of the other few families in our building? Did I have the right to wish that awful fate on them just to save us?

The familiar marching steps came down our hall, but they

didn't walk past our door. This time the command of "Open up!" was clearly for Mother and me, and finally Mother realized that my ominous feeling and dream had not been products of my runaway imagination.

"You were right, Anita," Mother said. She opened our door, and the two Gestapo agents pushed their way in. My heart raced with fear! *Jesus, where is that peace you promised?* I prayed silently. *Why is it that Mother and I are riveted with fear now?*

"We've come to arrest Hilde Dittman," the spokesman of the two barked as he looked at Mother. "You have three minutes to pack one bag. We will label your furniture, for it now belongs to the state."

"No!" I protested in futility. "We are Jewish Christians! We are protected by the law!"

"The Führer is the law, and we are obeying his wish. You thank him that he still is compassionate enough to let you have your freedom, kid. He only wants your mother this time."

"I'll be all right," Mother said, trying to reassure me.

The other Gestapo guard, who hadn't spoken, looked at me almost compassionately with his Aryan blue eyes. Maybe he'd had enough of war and hate, or maybe God had even touched his heart recently. His eyes weren't seductive or flirting; rather, they were soft and kind as he saw my panic and fear. Somehow he seemed to want to communicate his kindness as he stood with his arms folded, the snow from his boots melting on the floor.

"You'll have to sign these forms," the other man commanded Mother. "They release all your possessions to the state." He took some papers out of an envelope and placed them on the table for Mother.

"Where are you taking her?" I demanded.

"Down to the synagogue today. Tomorrow the whole lot of them will probably be sent to Theresienstadt in Czechoslovakia. You will be notified."

Reluctantly Mother signed their papers, releasing all our possessions to Germany. I was allowed to keep just a handful of

items, including my bed. I would be allowed to buy back some of the other things from the state at greatly inflated prices.

“May I please speak to my daughter alone for a moment?” Mother asked.

“We have no time for that. She may come with us while we take you to the synagogue if she likes.”

“May I have just a moment to use the bathroom, then?” Mother said.

“Hurry up!”

Mother looked at me and motioned with her eyes toward the bathroom. Then she silently walked to the bathroom and came out almost immediately. Again her body language told me that she had left something for me there.

“I’m coming with her,” I said as Mother finished packing a few items in her bag.

While putting on my coat I quickly ran into the bathroom and saw that Mother had left a small purse. Opening it, I found the equivalent of nearly one hundred dollars in cash—no doubt her life savings that she had earmarked for a day such as today.

Finally the flood of tears came as I stood in the bathroom. Falling to my knees on the floor, I poured out my heart to Jesus. I desperately needed that inexplicable peace that I’d experienced before. It was one thing to mouth hopeful thoughts as the world around me went mad; it was something else to say it when that madness entered my own home.

“Hurry up!” came that familiar and impatient voice. Hearing the door open, I got up off my knees to join Mother as she was taken to the synagogue.

“What did Pastor Hornig say, Anita?” she reminded me. “He said God would protect us as long as we proclaimed His Word. Do you believe it, Anita?”

I wiped my tears on my coat sleeve as we turned out the lights. Mother picked up her small brown bag and with her other hand she grasped my hand. The Gestapo men walked behind us as we left the apartment for the synagogue. I reflected on the many

times Mother and I had huddled in our apartment while a family or an individual in our building was being taken away. Now it was our turn to experience the tragedy.

I envisioned the few remaining Jews in our neighborhood peering out their windows to see the sad sight. For those who didn't know the awesome power of God's protection, it must have been muted panic.

I held Mother's hand as the wagon sped off down the street, heading for the same synagogue where I had once visited Joachim. Mother and I couldn't speak as we went through Breslau. Instead, we kept our thoughts to ourselves and prayed that God would bring this bad dream to a swift end. Mother's grip on my hand told me not to be afraid. But I was only sixteen, and now I would be utterly alone in Hitler's hell. Even with the Hornigs and the believers at the church, it wouldn't be the same as having a close family member.

Mother was so unbelievably brave and calm that I wondered if God was ministering to her heart and giving her quiet assurance that His hand was over her. I pushed out the nagging voice of Satan that tried to tell me God had finally given up on the Jews and had left them to work out their own destiny.

As the familiar synagogue came into view, I remembered when I had told Joachim goodbye under similar circumstances. I had thought about and prayed for him nearly every day, wondering what further tragedy it would take before he believed in Jesus. I had trusted Joachim to Jesus, so why couldn't I trust Mother to Him now?

The police wagon came to a slow stop in front of the synagogue gate, and the Gestapo officers came around to help us out. I looked into the eyes of the guard who had earlier looked at me compassionately.

"May I go inside with her?" I asked him.

He hesitated and glanced at the other Gestapo policeman who already had climbed back into the wagon.

"For only a moment," he said softly. "Hurry."

Mother and I walked several yards to the front door of the synagogue-turned-prison. For some reason I couldn't release her and send her across the threshold of the building, affirming her total loss of freedom. Besides, a sixteen-year-old should not have to give up her mother on the whim of a lunatic dictator!

We embraced for several long seconds on the steps of the synagogue. I knew that inside the building huddled a mass of despairing people—most of them without hope. At least Mother and I had that!

"Don't despair, Anita," Mother comforted. "The war will be over before the Nazis do away with me. You obey their every order, do you hear? You work hard at the factory and do whatever they want, short of denying God. I gave you your father's phone number if you want to call him. He might be able to help you. Maybe he can send you some money to buy back your things. The Gestapo guard is coming to get you now," she said as she looked over my shoulder. "Do as he says. Remember how much I love you."

Mother kissed me on the cheek and went inside the synagogue as the Gestapo man with the soft blue eyes came and took me by the arm.

"You must go now," he said. "You will be notified where your mother is being sent."

With that he escorted me to the gate and gently pushed me outside. His eyes looked sadly into mine as he closed the gate and locked it.

"I'm sorry," I heard him say ever so faintly.

Wasn't he used to this scene yet? He surely wasn't the hardened Aryan that Hitler wanted him to be.

I stared for several long minutes as the door to Mother's freedom closed.

As I trudged aimlessly through the slush and snow, I wallowed in my own grief and self-pity. I fought to remember the comforting words Pastor Hornig had told me in the past. He had me memorize the Twenty-third Psalm at one time, and now I tried to bring it to mind. I decided to head for Pastor Hornig's where

I would call to notify my supervisor at work and be comforted by the pastor's wise words.

Later that morning I sat with Pastor Hornig in the front row of the church sanctuary. We sat silently for a few moments as he groped for the right words to say.

"The believers here at the church will be your temporary family, Anita," he finally said. "I know it is not the same, but we will try to love you as much as Hilde does, and we will pray every day that she will come home soon. Remember, you're really not alone. Even without me or the church you wouldn't be alone, for God will never leave you."

I didn't take my eyes off the cross hanging at the front of the church.

"It's that Cross, Anita," Pastor Hornig continued, "that enables you and me to endure anything, because Jesus conquered all manner of evil and wickedness on that Cross. He is the Victor in the end. Because of His shed blood, all of Satan's efforts can be defeated if we but claim the power of the Cross in our



Inside St. Barbara's Lutheran Church

lives. The shed blood of Jesus is the strongest weapon we have in the world. You must appropriate it now.”

“She was very brave,” I said.

“Of course she was. Your mother knows that even if she walks through the valley of the shadow of death, she need not fear any evil. She told me once that if they ever came for her, her only real fear would be for you. That is why you must correspond with her every week and assure her that you’re all right and doing well. Where are they taking her?”

“Theresienstadt, maybe.”

“She can receive mail and packages there. You send her some food every week, Anita. She will need it because she will work long hours there and probably get little food. Often the guards let family members visit the prisoners the night before they go off to camp. Why don’t you take your mother some food tonight at the synagogue? It is worth a try. Go next door and have Mrs. Hornig wrap up some sandwiches for you and your mother. I will call your supervisor and explain things to him. You may spend the day with us if you wish.”

Hope welled up inside of me once more as I entertained the thought of seeing mother again that evening. Mrs. Hornig prepared some sandwiches and fruit for us. I also wanted to take Mother her bathrobe that she’d forgotten, so I left the Hornigs to go home and put everything together and spend a few hours alone with my thoughts.

I could sense the prayers of the believers as Pastor Hornig spread the word about my situation. I was sure that eventually a sense of calm would replace the ache in my heart, for I knew that the believers from the church would be praying especially on behalf of Mother, me, and some other Jewish believers who were picked up that day.

Our dingy apartment seemed even more sterile as I walked into it toward noon. Mother’s obvious absence screamed at me from every corner of the room. I knew she would want the warm bathrobe she’d forgotten in her haste, so I carefully packed a bag

with the robe, the sandwiches, and fruit.

In the late afternoon, I planned to take the streetcar back to the synagogue with the hope that I could see Mother one last time before she left for Theresienstadt early the next morning.

I paced the floor and then sat in the rocker. Intermittently I prayed and read the precious Bible that Pastor Hornig had given me years earlier. After impatiently watching the January sun begin to set, I finally left for the synagogue about four o'clock that afternoon. The streetcar would probably soon be crowded with people coming home from work, but I simply couldn't wait any longer. Maybe my mission was an exercise in futility; perhaps the guards would turn me away and thwart my wish to see Mother once more.

The setting sun peeked over the horizon just enough to reveal about a dozen other teenagers crowding around the entrance gate to the synagogue. I walked more quickly and my heart virtually skipped a few beats when I saw some familiar faces. Steffi Bott along with Gerhard, Wolfgang, and Rudi Wolf were there—their mothers were good friends of Mother's. I soon learned that they had been picked up too. Mrs. Bott and Mrs. Wolf were also Jewish believers. Circumstances in Germany hadn't allowed their children to become my close friends, but the present situation would draw us to each other. All of them also had been left by their Aryan fathers, and their Jewish mothers had become Christians recently. Apparently many of Breslau's Jewish believers had been picked up today.

"Steffi!" I exclaimed as I drew closer.

"Anita!"

"Can we go in?" I asked excitedly.

"No," she answered, "the guards won't let any of us in."

We nervously observed the situation from outside the gate. By now about twenty-five teenagers were pacing around the entrance gate, wanting to see their mothers one last time. Many of them held a bag or a small suitcase, probably containing food or clothing that their mothers would need. Some cried and some cursed; few accepted the situation very well. But it almost

instantly drew Steffi, the Wolf brothers, and me together, since our mothers were all friends.

We all peered through the bars of the entrance gate to see if we could spot any of our mothers through the synagogue windows. Then Rudi Wolf looked curiously at the building adjoining the synagogue, and I could tell his mind was working. The building was a hotel that at one time had some type of association with the synagogue.

"There must be a connecting tunnel," Rudi finally said to us. "Let's go in the hotel and try to find it."

We were young, daring, and desperate. The fact that our suspicious behavior could be grounds for our own arrest made little difference to any of us.

"I'll go up to the clerk and ask for a phony name," Rudi said. "You try to find the stairs that lead to the basement while he's looking for the name. Once we find the basement, there must be a tunnel that leads to the synagogue."

We didn't even question the plan. Instead, the five of us marched up the hotel stairs. Apparently the hotel had at one time been a school associated with the synagogue; but since all the Jewish schools had been closed recently, it had been turned into a hotel.

Steffi, Gerhard, and I hung back while Rudi and Wolfgang walked up to the hotel clerk and asked for the fictitious name. When the clerk turned to study his book, the three of us scanned the lobby for some stairs that would lead downstairs. Spotting a door that looked like it might lead to the basement, we quietly made our way there. As the clerk continued to look for the name, we sneaked slyly through the door. Sure enough, inside the door were the stairs that led to the hotel basement. We wound around the endless flight of stairs, dodging the dead cockroaches that littered the stairs. We ran down them so fast that we were nearly out of breath when we finally hit the bottom. At the foot of the stairs was the tunnel door! I felt God must be in the scheme to direct us so quickly.

"This is it!" Gerhard exclaimed. "This will take us to the synagogue."

“Are you sure we should do this?” Steffi finally said cautiously. “Maybe we should try the guards once more.”

Gerhard didn’t answer but forged ahead into the pitch-black tunnel. It was so black that it almost looked like a dark wall in front of us; but as we felt our way along, we knew it was the corridor that adjoined the other building.

I didn’t care that I could be trapping myself permanently in the synagogue. I didn’t care that I could get a police record for this act of rebellion. All that I cared about was a chance to see Mother one more time and give her the food, the bathrobe, and my love.

We moved along silently now, feeling our way in the darkness. If we never returned, at least Rudi and Wolfgang would know what had happened and would report us to our few remaining friends or family. I prayed silently as we inched along the tunnel. We moved without speaking, Gerhard leading us carefully so we would not walk into something in the darkness.

Our steps sounded hollow in the tunnel, and even our heavy breathing seemed to resound off the walls. The tunnel couldn’t be but a few yards long, yet it seemed as if an eternity had gone by since we began the uncertain venture.

At last, we heard faint voices in the distance and saw a crack of light. The voices grew louder and the light brighter as we neared the basement of the synagogue. Finally, we came to a door that was open just a crack, and we saw some of the prisoners milling about the synagogue basement. As Gerhard peered through the open crack in the door, he saw a Gestapo guard planted right in the middle of the prisoners.

“What shall we do?” Steffi whispered.

Gerhard mouthed the word *wait*.

We were prepared to wait all night if we had to so that we might say goodbye to our mothers once more. Peeking through the door, we didn’t recognize any of the women. Suddenly the guard started moving around and passed just inches from us. Gerhard could have reached out and touched his ugly brown uniform. We stood silently and held our breath for at least half

an hour as the guard walked about restlessly. Finally he climbed some stairs leading to the main floor of the synagogue.

Gerhard opened our door a little wider and called to one of the women prisoners.

"Over here!" he whispered loudly.

The startled lady looked at us, amazed that we had come out of nowhere.

"We want to see our mothers once more," Gerhard continued. "They're Mrs. Wolf, Mrs. Dittman, and Mrs. Bott. Do you know where they are? Could you send them down here to the basement so we can give them some things?"

"You will be arrested," the confused woman said. "Don't be foolish, the guard will be back momentarily. He hasn't left us since early this morning."

"You must hurry then!" Gerhard pleaded. "We want to give them these packages."

Gerhard took the three packages and set them on the floor of the synagogue basement.

"Here they are. If we get caught, will you promise you'll deliver the packages to Mrs. Bott, Mrs. Dittman, and Mrs. Wolf?"

The old woman nodded her head.

"What are you doing here?" came an angry voice from the other end of the tunnel. Then a flashlight appeared and we heard the steps of Nazi boots coming down the tunnel behind us.

"We've been found!" Steffi cried.

Chills ran down all of us. A glaring flashlight shone in our eyes now, and finally the form of a Nazi Gestapo officer appeared from the other end of the tunnel.

"You will all be arrested for this act of treason!" he yelled as the flashlight glared in my face.

"We only wanted to see our mothers once more," I pleaded. "We wanted to deliver some food to them, sir, that's all."

"Come with me," he said. "I caught your friends upstairs. I'm turning you all over to the Gestapo head."

We marched back through the tunnel, guided by the flash-

light this time. No one spoke a word. We silently hoped the lady prisoner would deliver the packages to our mothers and tell them of our desperate attempt to see them once more. The disposition of the Gestapo head would determine our penalty.

When we reached the hotel lobby, we were joined by Rudi and Wolfgang and then escorted by two men to the Gestapo office. Next we were taken by truck to the office of a Mr. Hampel, a short, squatty man with vicious eyes who scowled at our daring persistence to see our mothers.

After lining us up against a wall in his office, Mr. Hampel paced back and forth in front of us for a full five minutes. The anger inside him churned. Out of the corner of my eye I could see Steffi trembling, and I knew she was ready to break into tears. Gerhard, Wolfgang, and Rudi wanted to protect us, but they were helpless. The tension grew as Mr. Hampel paced and shot angry looks our way.

“You five are guilty of a major crime,” he said. “You tried to free prisoners, and that is punishable by death.”

“No,” Rudi pleaded, “we only wanted to say goodbye to our mothers. We each had a bag of food for them that we left with an old lady in the synagogue basement.”

The unspoken fear, of course, was that our mothers could be punished for our attempt—which had not occurred to us in the beginning.

“I love my mother!” Steffi exclaimed as she broke into tears. “I just wanted to see her once more. We had no escape plan.”

“That’s all any of us wanted,” Gerhard insisted. “Our mothers would never have gone along with what we did. It was all our idea.”

“I have no time for your silly sentimentality,” Mr. Hampel replied. “I am going to discuss this with someone. You will all remain here.”

Mr. Hampel sent in another guard to watch us and keep us from talking. The guard sat in Mr. Hampel’s chair and didn’t take his glaring eyes off us as we stood erect along the wall. I was sure we were all praying silently through the tears and our fear.

About thirty minutes later Mr. Hampel returned. Storming noisily into his office, he blurted out, "You are all on the Gestapo's blacklist. If any of you does the slightest wrong thing, it will cost you your lives. You will be watched every day. Get out of here now!"

"Thank you, sir," Rudi exclaimed. "God's blessing on you, Mr. Hampel."

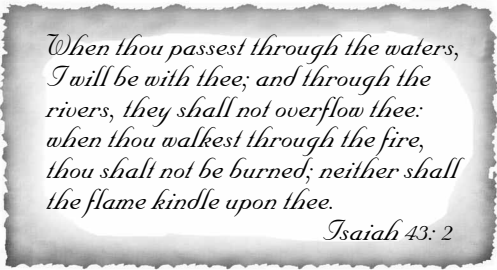
We silently filed out into the cold, dark night. After walking quickly for a block, we all stopped and broke into tears of relief and thankfulness as we embraced one another.

"We shall always be friends," I said as we shared our joy. "We must always do everything we can for each other and meet often to encourage one another and pray for our mothers. We have so much to be thankful for today."

The unspoken reality was that the Nuremberg Law protecting Jews once married to Germans was phony, and our time would be up eventually, too. Our earnest prayer was for a swift end to the war. If a prison camp awaited us, we prayed it would be with our mothers.

Now, along with the believers of my church, I had a new family: the Wolf brothers and Steffi Bott. Tragedy had united us in such a way that we couldn't be separated.

For information on *Trapped in Hitler's Hell*, [click here](#).



*When thou passest through the waters,
I will be with thee; and through the
rivers, they shall not overflow thee:
when thou walkest through the fire,
thou shalt not be burned; neither shall
the flame kindle upon thee.*

Isaiah 43: 2