

Trapped

IN HITLER'S HELL

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*A young Jewish girl discovers
the Messiah's faithfulness
in the midst of the Holocaust*



Anita Dittman

with Jan Markell

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Trapped IN HITLER'S HELL

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P.O. Box 958, Silverton, Oregon

503/873-9092

editor@lighthouse Trails.com

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Dedication

Since my arrival in America in 1946, it has been my dream and prayer to share with others the glorious miracles the Lord performed during my twelve and a half years of persecution under the Nazi regime. However, in the Lord's timing, the book did not take shape until sometime in the winter of 1977, after I had reaffirmed my faith in Jesus Christ and renewed my total commitment to Him during one of Billy Graham's Crusades on TV.

I dedicate this book to the glory of God and with deepest gratitude in memory of my pastor and beloved friend the late Bishop Ernst Hornig of Germany, who through his perfect Christlike example first led me into a living relationship with my Savior when I was twelve.

My sincere appreciation also goes to my dear friend Dr. H. Allan Talley of Hope Presbyterian Church, Minneapolis whose care and concern for me have been a constant source of comfort and encouragement. He in turn introduced me to the talented young writer of this book Jan Markell. Her friendship and her spiritual depth have had a powerful impact upon my life. May the testimonies on these pages awaken each reader to the full realization that Christ is alive today and that His miracles, love, and forgiveness are unlimited.

Anita Dittman

This book is dedicated to my parents, Ben and Helga Markell.

My father's Jewish heritage gave me a passion to understand the truth of all things Jewish including the Holocaust. He died a believer in 2001. My mother prayed me through many serious circumstances in life including major illness. She was a Proverbs 31 woman who never gave up hope that her husband would become a believer and I would recover from these illnesses and serve the Kingdom of God in full-time ministry. She died of cancer in 1987, much too soon. I so look forward to our Heavenly reunion.

Jan Markell

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*Be merciful to me, O God, be merciful to me!
For my soul trusts in You;
And in the shadow of Your wings
I will make my refuge,
Until these calamities have passed.*

Psalms 57:1

One

A NEW ERA—“HEIL HITLER!”

They're here!" I gasped as I burst through the door. "The passports and visas are here."

"Oh, thank You, Jesus," Mother exclaimed softly. Even my sister, Hella, showed unusual emotion. Mother tore open the envelope and looked at the enclosed official forms, but her wonderful anticipation diminished as she read them. Her joy turned to a painful realization that only one of us had received a visa and a passport.

"Only Hella's papers are here," Mother sighed. "But they insist that your's and mine will be here by the end of August. At least Hella can go free, Anita. We must rejoice for her and trust God some more for you and me. We can meet Hella in London."

"Mother, Jesus won't let us down," I replied. "Pastor Hornig says we please Him the most when we have faith in Him. See what an opportunity we have to have faith in Jesus, Mother?"

The corners of her mouth smiled weakly as she set Hella's paper aside. "I'm learning to trust Him, Anita."

Since Hella would leave on August 31st, we frantically made preparations for her departure. Pastor Hornig gave her some money, surely taking food away from his family's table. We wondered if God was delivering Hella first because her faith was so small that she could not endure any more waiting.

A faint signal on our radio from an underground station told us Hitler was on the move and might invade Poland any day.

During the week, we'd been having mock blackouts in Breslau, which according to Mother spelled war. Without a doubt there would be a countdown from freedom for us before the war began. Only our trust in Jesus kept us calm.

August was slipping away so quickly, with no word yet. Each day's mail brought only disappointment. Thus, the day of Hella's departure produced a mixture of emotions: We were happy for her, but also conscious that our own papers had not arrived. As we bid her farewell, our tears of joy for Hella were mingled with tears of fear and confusion.

"Hella, you must thank Jesus for your freedom," I insisted. "He has worked a miracle for you." Hella nodded, but her heart had not mellowed toward Christ.

"We will meet you in London soon," Mother said as she embraced Hella, "and our prayers will be with you every day. Pastor Hornig's contact in London can be trusted. You do whatever they say, but don't send any mail to us here in Germany. We'll probably meet you within a month."

The antiquated train gave a sharp whistle. Our goodbyes were short, for we were sure we would soon be reunited. Pushing forward to board the train were hundreds of frightened, fleeing people—people thankful for a new lease on life, but riddled with fear for loved ones being left behind—sometimes their whereabouts being unknown.

We all embraced one more time, and Hella turned and boarded, waving an enthusiastic goodbye to us. I took Mother's hand as we watched the rest of the crowd board. A few minutes later the train jerked forward, then it chugged away until it was out of sight,



but we could see its thick, black smoke dotting the horizon.

The next day Germany invaded Poland. Also on that day the German borders were closed, and Germany thereafter refused all mail from England. Our visas and passports were to come from England; they were in the mail but never made it to us. Two days later, on September 3, 1939, England and France declared war on Germany.

Mother and I were trapped in Hitler’s hell.

But the trap had begun to close for us six years earlier, when I was a small child...

The dance was beautifully performed by six-year-old Anita Dittman. Her skill and grace at ballet far exceed her years. Nevertheless, we Germans no longer wish to be entertained by a Jew.

Mother read the review to me from a morning paper she had found lying on the street. Her words, though spoken in hushed tones, reverberated throughout the house. They fell on my unbelieving ears and caused an instant flood of tears—tears of a child too young to grasp the meaning of such a word as *anti-Semitism*. All I knew was that my dream of growing up to become the world’s best ballet dancer had just been shattered. It didn’t matter that we didn’t understand why we were being persecuted. Jews, along with communists and other anti-Nazis*, were not allowed to question it. Soon we would have only one freedom: to die.



I was a first-grader in Breslau, Germany, at the time. It was 1933, and the Nazi fires were only kindling sparks. In time, they would erupt into a holocaust in which millions would be consumed by its hate, its lies, and its unfounded prejudices. Already I couldn’t come home after school without suffering a stoning or a beating. Particularly the little German boys, swollen with Aryan** pride

* Short for National Socialist, a political party of Germany.

** Although the term had no ethnological validity, Aryan was used by the Nazis to mean “a Caucasian of non-Jewish descent.”

and propaganda that told them to stamp out inferiors, delighted in ganging up on me. And this was just the beginning of what would be a twelve-year nightmare—twelve years of waiting for a knock on the door from the Gestapo; for a loved one to be dragged away by the hair or the beard to points unknown; for a boxcar ride, to be jammed in with hundreds of frightened, weeping people on their way to a death camp; or for a merciful bullet to end it all.

Among those unfortunate Jews, I was to be one of the few with a real home. I would come to know Jesus who was to offer peace in the midst of the turmoil. After all, wasn't He the Prince of Peace?

My mother, Hilde, was one of thirteen children born into an Orthodox Jewish home in Germany. Since they were a pitifully poor family, they could not afford to send Mother to a Jewish school. Public schools always taught religion, so Mother, along with other poor Jewish children, had to hear about Jesus of Nazareth. The name of Jesus was an offense to most Jews. Under the banner of the cross, millions of Jews had died throughout history. Yet something within Mother was awakened whenever she



**Hella, with a neighbor child, and Anita (3 years old)
1930, before the war.**



Hella and Anita - 1930

read about Jesus in her textbooks. She couldn't deny the tug at her heart as she studied His life, while Judaism left a spiritual vacuum this Man from Galilee beckoned to fill. She did not dare utter her curiosity aloud, yet she found herself saying quietly, "Maybe Jesus is the God I've been looking for."

But at nineteen she, like so many other searching young people, gave in to the lure of a cult: theosophy, which is similar to Hinduism and teaches reincarnation. Christ was placed on the same level as Buddha and Muhammad, and she could worship a multitude of equal gods. She renounced her Judaism and ran from Jesus. But the day was fast approaching when Mother would call upon the name of *Yeshua* ("Jesus") for mercy, protection, deliverance, and, most important of all, salvation.

Father was an Aryan German and a devout atheist. He was active in Germany's Social Democratic Party, Hitler's arch rival, and served as editor of *The Volkswacht*, an anti-Nazi newspaper in the city of Breslau.* We were comfortably wealthy and rented a row house.

* This is the German name for what is now Wroclaw, Poland—a city returned to that country after WWII.

Only the very rich could afford to own a house on its own lot.

But the Nazis forced Father's newspaper to close down, putting all the employees out of work. Father was forced to train new Nazi personnel so the paper could crank out propaganda in Breslau and its surrounding province, perhaps Germany's largest stronghold of swastika supporters.

At the same time, they put unbearable pressure on Father to leave Mother, my sister, and me, for the Nazis discouraged any relations between Germans and Jews. Many intermarriages were dissolved or annulled by the state. It was considered a grave abomination to pollute the German race by marrying Jews.

Father's only real affection was for my sister, Hella, and he seldom tried to hide his lukewarm feelings for me and Mother. He often reminded me how disappointed he was that I wasn't a son. To protect my desperately hurt feelings, I pulled away from Father and cut him off emotionally. When he left our family, I shed no tears. Perhaps my inner longing for a loving father drove me to my Heavenly Father so early in life.

Father left us in 1933 to flee the Nazis, who were hunting all members of the Social Democratic Party. We went on welfare and had to move into a tiny, one-room apartment not far from our townhouse. But we were grateful, for though our quarters were cramped, the apartment was relatively clean and in a decent section of Breslau. Yet hardships were ever-present and growing. We had no money for anything but rent and a meager amount for food—the equivalent of about twenty cents per meal. My precious ballet lessons, which had been my only real escape in Nazi Germany, had to stop. When I danced, I danced away all cares and fears. I slipped into a make-believe world filled with all the normal delights of a six-year-old and felt totally free and fulfilled.

Living above us in our apartment complex was a Catholic family who invited me to attend church with them one Sunday. Mother, who recognized the same spiritual hunger within me as she had felt as a child, allowed me to go. I, too, was being exposed to Jesus in public school religion classes, which, ironically, the God-hating Hit-

ler had not stopped. As I sat through the cathedral service that Sunday morning, God's Spirit began to move in my young life. I gasped in awe at the breathtaking stained-glass windows depicting the life of Jesus. How graphically I saw His birth, life, death, and resurrection. Jesus had to be more than a carpenter masquerading as a king. With all the religious options I had as a six-year-old, it is incredible that I could discern that Jesus truly was God. I did not believe in the rituals of Judaism or Catholicism, or Father's ardent atheism, or Mother's wavering practice of theosophy. The Spirit of God touched a little girl; in a few years I would take up my cross and follow Him. Mother had allowed the sophistries of the intellectual world to lure her away from the God of the Old and New Testaments. Realizing her failure, she gave me freedom to seek the God of my choice.

Perhaps to me Jesus was just a father substitute or the fantasy of a child looking for security and love in a world of hate and fear. I don't know; at the time all that mattered was that I felt safe with Him. I knew He understood me, and I was sure He heard me when I talked to Him. He would become my best Friend even before He became my Lord and Savior.

Adolf Hitler came to power because the confused and senile President Hindenburg permitted it. In the early 1930s, Germany was in the throes of the economic depression that had begun on Wall Street in October 1929. The depression's effects had been felt in Germany almost immediately; by 1933 nearly one third of the country was unemployed.

During the 1930 elections, the Nazis made the most noise because they were violently anti-communist and had the backing of wealthy German industrialists. Scoring giant gains in the Reichstag, Germany's legislative assembly, their representation jumped from twelve to one hundred and seven.

By 1932, the Nazis had become even stronger as they rallied around the leadership of Adolf Hitler. With his staff, Hitler traveled to every village and hamlet to gain votes, his unemployment bandwagon gaining so much support that the Nazis more than doubled their parliament seats.

Then Hitler was offered the German vice-chancellorship peacefully and legally. He refused. He wanted nothing short of the chancellorship, which would give him power almost equal to Hindenburg's. Later in 1932, he was offered the full chancellorship, with limited conditions. Again he held out, protesting the conditions.

By then Germany's streets were loud with riots and political fights. Brown-shirted Nazis fought all opponents—particularly left-wing ones—openly in the streets as well as in dark alleys.

Finally in January of 1933 Hitler was made the chancellor of a coalition government; Hindenburg, nearly eighty-five and no longer able to read, remained president. A torchlight parade was held on January 30th. A new era of history had opened—the era of the Third Reich.* German democracy was dead. But with nearly six million unemployed, Germany had only a lukewarm devotion to democracy anyway.

The Nazi appeal contained a lot of idealism. The idea of living in a strong, virile country appealed to everyone, particularly the young. Everyone was wide open to the propaganda that assured relief from depression, inflation, and other tremendous hardships, and Nazism promised a near-welfare state.

Hitler was totally underrated by his opponents. The Communist and Social Democratic parties felt sure his incompetence would quickly be revealed and that the Nazis would topple with little impact. Hardly anyone expected the Third Reich to burn its swastika across Europe's landscape.

Early in 1933, massive book burnings destroyed once and for all the books containing opposing ideologies and philosophies. All that was free and joyful quickly vanished. Only one enthusiasm was permitted: enthusiasm for Hitler.

Suspicion was the new order of the day. Later it was revealed that Hitler was suspicious of even his closest associates. He had come into full power through the fists and guns of his Nazi

*The first German empire (or Reich) was considered to be the Holy Roman Empire; the second, the German Empire from 1871 to 1919.

storm troopers. Clearly, the law and Hitler were one.

Later in the year, all other political parties were forbidden in Germany. The newly established secret police, the Gestapo, were given complete freedom to be ruthless, which would epitomize its character during the next twelve years in Germany.

Eventually everything would suffer in Nazi Germany: religion, education, industry, business, and, most of all, human rights.

Hitler swore he would never leave the chancellory in his lifetime. To insure this, he immediately enrolled a bodyguard of forty thousand men. A particularly sadistic group of men who were a law unto themselves, this organization was called *Schutzstaffel* (literally, “protective rank”)—abbreviated to SS. Many of them were the dregs of society—the unemployed, drifters, perverts, and ex-prisoners. They viewed their job of being SS henchmen as a path to riches and a way to avoid real work. Overnight they rose from beer hall patrons to men with power, and that power went to their heads. Both Hitler and his SS men wanted a law to do without the law, and they soon had it.

The Gestapo were all members of the SS. Their duties were similar to those of the SS, and they were equally corrupt and power hungry. They all moved ahead by force, taking over government buildings, hoisting the swastika flag everywhere, and arresting any government official who opposed Hitler. President Hindenburg went along with everything except the persecution of the Jews. He even signed a decree in 1933, which freed all Nazis from prisons.

Every Nazi opponent or suspicious individual would be exterminated or driven out of the country. The lucky ones made it to safety, though they were few. Everything associated with the Jews would be the brunt of a particularly vicious attack, starting slowly in 1933 and culminating in an attempt at genocide or race annihilation. Hitler even had the Reichstag building burned to the ground in 1933 because it reminded him of a synagogue. In the spring, a boycott was ordered against Jewish businesses and professions to force them to pay large indemnities to maintain their bare existence.

That same year, an unfamiliar term gained prominence in the

world's language of despair: *concentration camp*. At first crude, primitive, and poorly run, in time they would become shrewdly run businesses that housed millions of Jews, Christians, and political opponents, as well as all the sick, insane, and elderly—including Germans. Hitler thought these groups were threatening the purity of the Aryan race. The camps were to become Mother's and my home. Only by hanging tightly to Jesus' hand would our journey into hell be bearable.

"We'll get you after school, you little Jew brat," came the menacing voice behind me in my first-grade class. I pretended I didn't hear and gave full attention to my teacher, even though moments earlier she too had humiliated me. Even my near-blonde hair couldn't hide my Jewishness, for my mother, Hella, and I had to register our race at a nearby district office. The names of the non-Aryans had been sent immediately to the schools and other places, resulting in our being watched carefully and subjected to varying degrees of persecution. In addition, Hella and I were the only children at our school who were not members of the Hitler Youth organization. They were nothing but a uniformed bunch of young robots proudly wearing their drab outfits and swastikas and mouthing "Heil Hitler" en-



Hella, Mother and Anita (6 years old)

thusiastically wherever they went. Many of them took special delight in making life miserable for a Jewish child. For some reason they singled me out much more than Hella—perhaps because I was so small and helpless. But Mother had strictly instructed us never to hit back because the Gestapo could retaliate and haul us off to jail.

It was difficult for me as a child to understand Hitler, this demagogue whose picture was everywhere—in our classroom, on street banners, and, later, even defiling church altars. Each morning my teacher, Fräulein (Miss) Kinzel, would pray toward the picture of Hitler. Her words still ring in my ears: “Dear God, protect our dear leader. Make him strong. Let us all learn to love him. May he have many years of glorious reign.” All of us had to fold our hands and bow our heads. Then we had to raise our arm in the proper Heil Hitler manner and sing the German national anthem with great gusto. Failure to follow this nationalistic ritual meant a beating or being turned over to the Gestapo. Whenever I met Fräulein Kinzel I gave her the Nazi salute and muffled some words, but I never really uttered an official Heil Hitler.

A birthday card arrived from Father on my seventh birthday, after we hadn’t heard from him for more than a year. He explained that he had been sentenced to jail because of his involvement in the Social Democratic Party. Later he escaped from prison and fled to Prague, but he was captured again. Now he was accusing Mother of betraying his whereabouts, but we had no idea to where he had disappeared. He was free now, but the Nazis had ordered him to divorce Mother because she was Jewish.

“Mother, Father wants to see Hella and me at his mother’s in South Breslau.” My voice was filled with cautious excitement, yet I felt anger at some of his accusations.

“You cannot trust him, Anita,” Mother replied. “The Nazis may have brainwashed him like everyone else. But you may go if you wish. However, you must watch every word you say, because he may be our enemy now. Jews are picked up every day on trumped-up charges or because they oppose the Nazis. Tell your father that you aren’t against the Nazis in spite of everything. Do you understand?”

Some Jews and other persons suspected of being against Hitler's regime were already being sent off to camps or prisons. However, in 1934 many of these people were released quickly and allowed to return home.

I found it difficult to dredge up any affection for Father. He had abandoned us, saying he could not help us financially. Actually, he knew the German court would never force him to help us because Mother was Jewish. The law was on his side, and he took full advantage of it. But Hella and I began to ride the street-car twice a month to the other end of Breslau to see Father.

Occasionally he slipped us each a small amount of money. He insisted that he hated the Nazis and that his political sentiment still belonged to the defunct Social Democrats. He did all the talking—almost monotonously so. A dozen times over, he told us stories about World War I, his flashing blue Aryan eyes zeroing in on Hella and looking right through me as though I didn't exist. To ease my hurt I retreated into my own world and drew pictures during our visits. But the visits made summer vacation pass a little more quickly. Perhaps my hunger for a father's attention prodded me to take the hour-long ride, followed by a mile-long walk, to see him. Or perhaps it was just a temporary diversion from the unpleasantness of Nazi Germany in 1934—from the stones and abuses hurled at me by the German children.

The most precious time for me was the time I spent with Mother. Eventually she would be forced to do heavy manual labor, hauling manure for long, hot hours before dragging her aching body home at night. But Nazi Germany was still young, and her leaders' diabolical minds were still scheming for worse times ahead. Persecution was present but bearable.

Our little radio was our most precious possession, for it kept us one step ahead of the plans of the Gestapo and Hitler. Mother awakened us unusually early one hot, sticky August morning in 1934.

"Anita! Hella!" she exclaimed with fear in her voice. "President Hindenburg has died. It is not good. He was against the persecution of the Jews!"

Sleepily we sat up in bed and gazed at Mother. Though Hella was only eleven and I was only seven, Mother talked to us like adults. She assumed we understood the ramifications of Nazi Germany; and perhaps God did give us understanding far beyond our years.

“You must take every precaution,” Mother continued. “Keep to yourselves and never utter anything against the Nazis. Don’t trust anyone. Do you hear?” We nodded our understanding.

Mother paced our tiny one-room apartment. “All Hitler talks about is the pure German race; it is an obsession with him. He screams and his face is contorted with violence and emotion. Everywhere the crowds roar their approval, but he looks at them with contempt.”

Legally there should have been an election for a new president. But Hitler was not in the mood for an election, so he simply abolished the title and the office of the presidency, appointing himself *Der Führer*, “The Leader.” He also named himself commander-in-chief of the army.

However, the German people were invited to register their approval of his actions. Nearly 88 percent of the population said they were pleased, and then Hitler was in complete control.

All Jews were deprived of their civic rights in 1935, and the Law for the Protection of German Blood and German Honor was issued. Again it was hammered home to the Aryans that they must maintain and protect the purity of their German blood. Marriages between Jews and Germans were forbidden and some marriages were annulled. Jews were not allowed to display the German flag.

That winter most of our non-Jewish friends told us they could no longer associate with us. A few would visit us bravely in the middle of the night. I overheard one dear friend of Mother’s saying, “Hilde, you know we still love you. You must understand. We oppose the Nazis, but they are threatening our lives if we are kind to the Jews. You’ll have to break it to Anita that our little Gunther can no longer play with her. I know how disappointed she will be.”

Mother knew too. Even the midnight visits of friends bringing baskets of food to compensate for our pitiful rations couldn’t compensate for the loss of my friendship with Gunther.

My teacher was still Fräulein Kinzel, who continued to make school unbearable. She openly hated me for not being a member of the Hitler Youth, and she delighted in hitting me with a ruler on the back of my head or hands. Teachers were allowed to spank children who were a discipline problem or who didn't keep up with assignments. She made full use of those rights with me, always exaggerating my failures.

Three times a week our class went to another room for religion studies where I could learn more about Jesus. It was a breath of fresh spring air in a howling blizzard of disappointments. Jesus began occupying more and more of my thoughts and attention. I learned that His life was a paradox and His death wasn't final. He taught that by dying we really live, and by giving away we gain. Years later I would hear Him called "the hound of heaven." Indeed, it seemed as if He was following me in a loving and protecting way, not for selfish reasons, but because He wanted to give me a gift.

Finally, Mother was forced to do heavy labor to earn her pitiful welfare money. All day long she did manual labor, and Hella and I were left alone until evening. We were given a hot meal at a nearby Catholic day-care center that still dared show an ounce



Anita's Mother, Hilde

of kindness to a Jew, but I could hardly eat. My lonely heart ached for Mother’s company, and Hella began retreating into a world of books and philosophy. Mother dragged herself home after dark and spent the evening repairing our worn-out, hand-me-down clothing. Mother and I talked about God a lot, while Hella buried her nose in a book.

“Which God do you pray to, Mother?” I asked enthusiastically.

“Oh, just any God. Whichever one is listening. I don’t know whose God it is—the Jews’ God or the Gentiles’ God. I don’t know if it’s Jesus or Buddha or Muhammad. You pray to Jesus if you want, if it makes you feel better.”

“Oh, Mother, it does! I just know Jesus hears me. Have you ever prayed to Jesus, Mother?”

“Once I did, I think. I don’t know, though, a lot of Jews have been killed by people bearing His name.”

In spite of our poverty, Mother made birthdays and Christmases special for Hella and me. We always received a gift, even if its worth was only a penny or two. At Christmas that year, I particularly strained to hear the carols coming from the church steeple several blocks away. The birth of Jesus had a special meaning to me for some reason. How strange to have such a friend as Jesus. We’d never met, but His presence was unmistakable.

“The Christmas carols from the church steeple are telling Jesus’ story, Mother!” I exclaimed with delight. “I know the words to the carol. I learned them at the Catholic day-care center. Could I sing them?”

Mother smiled while I carried on in festive merriment. It was a brief interlude in the absurdity of life in Nazi Germany.

And so life crept slowly on. Some weeks it dragged mercilessly because I’d been cut off from my friends and Mother was gone until evening. Except for religion class, school continued to be unbearable.