

HOW WHITE LINEN
SAVED MY GRANDMOTHER'S LIFE

Spring, 1945: The front was closing in on Fürstenau, a small town in north-western Germany. Sirens sounded every day. Essential items were always packed these days and frantically grabbed as soon as the sirens began their wailing. The mad dash to the shelter. Who would not make it this time? Waiting. Listening to the whining of the bombers. Explosions. How close? Feeling the earth shake. Not us this time. Then back home, and repeat. And repeat. Distant artillery all day, squadrons of airplanes flying high across the sky to other destinations. Low, in the case of air raids. Only at night the fighting ceased. Käte and her children huddled together, heavy curtains and blankets covered the windows in order to make the town invisible. A black spot in the darkness.

One morning Liesel, Käte's daughter, played in the street. She did not hear or wanted to hear the sirens. Suddenly the planes appeared. Much quicker than usual they descended onto the town like an angry swarm of hornets. They chased through the streets, just above the cobble stones. So close to the houses that their wings almost scratched them. Everyone was in the shed that stood above the bomb shelter except for Liesel. And then Käte saw her, saw her running, her feet barely touching the ground, fast, so fast. Liesel with her tomboyish manners, her running around in the woods, the scabs on her knees and scratches on her arms. Now Käte was glad that

she was faster than all the boys in the neighborhood – but, God Almighty, would it be fast enough? Käte screamed when the airplane fired rounds of bullets at her child. Firing at a child! She yelled at the plane, wanted it to explode or crash with all her might. The corner, Liesel flew around it, and raced into the shed. The airplane howled angrily, its nose rose into the air, it circled higher to look for other targets. The bullets they found later were as long and as thick as a man's finger.

“Imagine!” “No!”

A few days later a bomb set the small brick town hall on fire and burned it to the ground. Käte's home stood between the smoldering remains of the town hall and the still intact church. She wanted to leave this place, it did not seem safe, nothing seemed safe. Heinrich had told her to stay put with their three youngest children. His word was the law - but could he have foreseen this? He was far away, teaching at a large boarding school further west, and had taken his oldest son with him after one of his rare visits.

“Separated we have a greater chance that part of the family survives.”

With Käte were the two girls: Liesel, seven, Annie, three, and the second son: Peter, five. The town was devoid of men. Men were fighting, dead or prisoners of war. Left were a few farmers, a policeman, the minister and those too old or too young to fight. In a very strange way it was a women's world. It was a women's world not by choice but by circumstance, encapsulated in a world dominated by men waging war. And a husband's word was still law, whether he was at the front, dead or teaching somewhere else. Men used to take care of everything important and

left the house and the children to their wives. Only now there was no husband to take care of the important things. Now he was gone and everything seemed important, surviving, getting food, knowing whether to stay or to flee. Käte still carried the Cross of Honor of the German Mother, bronze, for having given birth to four pure Aryan children. A symbol of the role of the German woman, inhabiting and guarding the *weiblichen Lebensraum* – the female space. It seemed utterly meaningless – there was not much female space left, everything slowly but surely reduced to rubble, burned to the ground, covered in ashes and blood. She could not say that to anyone, of course. You never knew who would hear it and what that would lead to. She had watched others disappear over the years.

Hildegard knocked on her door the morning after the town hall burned down. “There’s a school house in Klein-Bokern. Annemarie and her children are already there. They say it’s safer. A small village. Who would bomb that?”

“Heinrich told me to stay put until he returns.”

Hildegard shot her a sharp look of disapproval. “You’ll risk the lives of your children to obey your husband? Come, I have a horse and a cart. It’ll be safer. He’ll understand.”

“I guess he will,” she said quietly and set out to pack clothes, bed stuff, linen and towels, the remaining food and some of the family’s most valuable possessions: engraved silverware, some jewelry, and a few chosen pieces of china. The advancing Poles were said to steal like magpies and rape like wild animals – old women, young girls, babies. Another reason to leave. Heinrich surely would not want his daughters to get hurt.

Hildegard, her children, Annie and Peter set out the next morning by cart, when it was still dark. Käte and Liesel followed by foot. Twice they had to throw themselves into the ditch next to the road when tanks approached. It might have been German tanks but they did not want to take the chance.

The two-story, red brick school building already housed three other families from Fürstenau and Margaret, an old, careworn woman who had lost her husband in World War I and her only son in World War II. Every other house in the tiny village was empty, except for one farm on the outskirts. The owners held cattle and pigs and tended a large garden.

The school house had a radio. According to the propaganda everything was going exactly as the *Führer* had planned. It began to sound just a little bit hollow, but no one would even hint at that. Käte found it hard to believe that things still looked good for the Third Reich.

A small contingent of German tanks idly rested on the yard in front of the school. “Good, they’ll keep us safe,” Hildegard sighed, as the tired and grimy looking soldiers let them pass.

“What if there’s fighting here?” “You are right. We have to ask them to leave.” “We can’t do that!” Hildegard shook her head.

“Yes, we can and we must,” Margaret said firmly. “If there’s fighting here we will die.” In the end Käte and Margaret took Liesel and Annie by the hand and marched out to the soldiers to speak with the commanding officer. To their amazement the men glanced at the children and left without discussion. Their battered tanks disappeared noisily down a country lane.

For the women, war did not mean that certain things could not be well ordered. After they

had taken care of the tanks, they set up more beds and cots, dusted and swept what had become too dirty and carefully stacked the food in the basement. They would share what they had. It gave them a sense of comfort, of order in a world sliding into total chaos.

For a few days they enjoyed a strange sense of reprieve, despite the rumble of the front, the distant explosions, the columns of smoke, the air raids, the sirens in nearby towns. And then, to their horror the noise of tanks on the move was coming closer. It was like a huge bear prowling through the woods, plowing down everything in its way. Then they saw three tanks. Not the German tanks that had left a few days ago. These were American tanks, somehow much fiercer looking. They rolled into the village, stopped, the turrets turning as if to measure it all. Then, without warning, the gun honed in on the first house and fired. The windows in the schoolhouse rattled, the brick walls shook a little. And so it went on. Systematically, one by one they reduced the houses to rubble and ashes, without checking if anyone was living there. For some reason the farm house, cows anxiously mooing and running from one end of the enclosure to the other, was left standing.

“They won’t destroy the schoolhouse!” Anneliese said, a young mother of three boys. “It’s a schoolhouse. Like a church.” Margaret shook her head. She was war skilled, having lived through the Franco-Prussian war as a young girl, World War I and now this – *der Totale Krieg*.

“No. It’s only a schoolhouse if it’s one of your own.” The women stared at each other, frozen. They would all die. “Let’s run.” Another woman, panic in her voice. “Where to? Do you think your children can outrun tanks?” Käte looked around the room. There was no one here

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to think for her, to find solutions, to make it good. Had not been for a long time. Her gaze fell on a linen cabinet; it contained neatly pressed white table cloths, they had probably been used for special celebrations. Some women had put their pressed pillow cases and bed covers in it as well.

“The white tablecloths!” she screamed. “Hang them out of the windows!” Without hesitation everyone obeyed, they frantically jumped into action. Even the children were caught in the frenzy. Trembling hands tore out out the perfectly folded linens and cloths. Someone ran through the front facing rooms and opened all the windows. Children ran outside before anyone could stop them and waved makeshift white flags. They ran toward the tanks, which already faced the school house, about to take aim. White linen billowed out of windows, was waved and shaken. Some sheets fell in the haste, sailed to the ground, crumbled heaps of white on the dust behind the children. Time stood still for a moment. The women hung frozen in the windows, their knuckles as white as the linen. The children stared at the faceless tanks, unable to move. The tanks nervously vibrated on the spot.

After what seemed like an eternity to the mothers, in slow motion a hatch opened and a soldier glanced out and scanned the scene in front of him. He got out, jumped off the tank and then others followed. They marched toward the school house, cautious, weapons first trained on the women, then poking around corners. Their faces suspicious, hard, cold. Ready to kill. The women stood still in the windows, they did not dare move, only their eyes followed the soldiers as they walked past the wide-eyed children into the school house, then their ears strained to hear where they were going. Boots sounded loudly on the wooden floor, someone barked orders. The

men entered the room and stared at the women, their weapons still ready. The children snuck in behind them and ran towards their mothers, who protectively clasped them in their arms. No child cried – they had given up crying a long time ago.

“Where are the men?” a tall officer asked in broken German.

The women shook their heads. “No men here. All gone.” Silently another soldier crossed the room, his face angry. He went past the trembling little group to the Hitler portray and the flag with the Swastika. He tore both down and left the room, shouted another order. The soldiers went through every room, their hard steps vibrated. A men’s world again. They tore off all symbols of the Third Reich and piled them high in front of the school house. After they searched every room from attic to basement they burned the hated symbols, burned them until nothing but smoldering ashes were left. Mothers and children alike watched breathlessly. Would they be punished? Killed? Imprisoned? The children taken away?

The officer and another soldier returned to the room, their faces more relaxed. The officer went straight to Annie, bent down and picked her up with a smile. The women recoiled. What was he going to do? The enemy.

“Your daughter?” His broken German sounded strange, as if he was chewing on something. Käte nodded, shaking. Annie did not seem perturbed. “I have one just like that at home. Haven’t seen her in a long time.” He held Annie up like a trophy, to which she responded with a squeal of delight. The women’s eyes dashed between the officer and the second man, a tall black soldier. Probably straight out of Africa. Weren’t there still cannibals in Africa? Years of

propaganda had done their work. The children stared, too, but out of sheer curiosity – they had never seen a man so black. Then the black soldier took out pieces of chocolate wrapped in silver foil and gave it to the children. They grabbed it before their mothers could stop them.

“You and you.” The officer pointed and Käte and Margaret, “come with me.” As soon as the Americans left the room the women took the chocolate from the children’s hands. Probably poisoned! The children knew better than to wail or complain.

Meanwhile the two Americans marched into the basement, Käte and Margaret followed closely. They divided the food, half for the soldiers, the other for the women and children. “Not enough, it’s not enough for our children!” Käte said. Concern for her children gave her courage. The officer nodded curtly. “You’ll get milk from the farmer.” The only house they had not destroyed! When Käte returned to the others her knees suddenly buckled and she had to sit down. She could not stop herself from shaking.

The Americans set up camp in Klein-Bokern. During the day they left with their tanks but always came back in the evening. The women and children once again arranged themselves to a new routine. Every morning two soldiers walked a mother and some children to the farmer to pick up two cans of fresh, warm milk. The children loved these walks. They quickly got used to the soldiers who were always friendly, and who secretly gave them pieces of chocolate and chewing gum. For most it was the time they ate chocolate, a taste they would never forget. A taste discovered during the war and yet separate from it, something they forever connected with small moments of joy, with American soldiers. Their mothers remained guarded and wary of the

situation.

The shooting, the explosions were very close now, often the school house shook at its core. How much longer? Would they lose everything in the end? What would happen next? Would they be united with their husbands, what of their children? What of this country? The only thing they could do was to continue their daily routines. At least they had each other, a roof over their head and milk from the farmer. They prepared meager meals, swept the rooms, repaired clothes, disinfected a child's cut by applying tincture of iodine with great care and energy. It was as if they wished they could cleanse the world around them with the same vigor that they cleaned those cuts and scratches with. Little did they know that no amount of cleaning could vanish the wounds of this war, most of which were still waiting to be revealed.

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