

From Chapter 3 – The Last Trip to Grandfather

That's all over now, my mother said, those days will never return. In the summer of 1944, I traveled to Grandfather's as always while Omi stayed home with you and your sister Bettine. Little did I know that it would be for the last time. When we sat together at the kitchen table after supper on the first evening of my arrival, he asked me all of a sudden, "What do you think, Elfriedchen, things are not looking good. We are going to lose this war, too, only this time it'll turn out much worse."

I didn't dare to answer as Grandfather continued to talk about the eventful history of Upper Silesia, which inevitably turned into an extraordinary tale of people and places and times long past that stirred up my imagination, taking on a legendary character for me. "For centuries our family has lived here, first under the Austrians, then under the Prussians, but we never concerned ourselves with politics because it was our land and nothing else mattered. I never paid much attention to the secular authorities, as long as they left me alone, and up to now our family fared well with this attitude. I couldn't have changed things anyway. Napoleon marched his army across Europe not far from here, but my father, your great-grandfather, took little notice of it. We were farmers, and the news of such upheavals often didn't reach us until much later when everything was long over. Bismarck built a new Reich without Austria, then came the great war and finally the Weimar Republic, but again it did not touch us, and that is how it remains until today. We labor, sow the fields, take care of the animals, bring in the harvest, prepare for winter, just like it's always been—until..." he hesitated, searching for fitting words, "until these scoundrels came to Berlin who brought us this war."

Thus spoke Grandfather, but it wasn't true that he didn't care. I could tell from the tone of his voice, which betrayed his agitation and deep anger. During World War I he had given a war loan of 100,000 gold marks. He never got his money back and worked even harder after the war to make up for the loss. When the Nazis came and also asked him for money, he gave them nothing, and when they came a second time, he chased

them off his property. They were furious. Many village dwellers had been watching his success with malevolence, but they had to leave him alone because he continued to take care of the people in the area. Grandfather was not only a good farmer, he was also a clever businessman who went with the times. He had a sense for new things, and knew instinctively what the people in the cities were looking for and what they would buy from him.

“Come along, Elfriede Hildegard, that is your complete beautiful name, isn’t it?” he said the following morning in high spirits, laughing loudly. “You and I, we are going to take a coach ride all the way around our land so that you will see the whole estate. We’ll take along the baskets with the tomatoes and stop at the market place in Zülkowitz, and afterwards we’ll drive over to Leobschütz to pick up my pocket watch from the watchmaker. I want Rolf to have it some day, remember that.”

From Chapter 26 – Care Packages from the East

As always, the greatest help came once again from Omi in Dresden. My mother had barely arrived with my two younger sisters when the first packages started coming. From the time of our escape to the west until her grave illness, of which she died in 1964, she sent us three or four packages a week to the great surprise of the mailmen who wondered what good things could possibly come from East Germany. The packages contained everything she could find: material for dresses and drapes, underwear, nightgowns, socks, stockings, sheets, pillowcases, blankets, tablecloths with matching napkins, dish towels, hand towels, candy by the pound, noodles, sugar, flour and cookies. She sent house shoes, plastic sandals that never lasted very long, books from second hand stores, amongst them such treasures as the collected works of Goethe, Schiller, Lessing and Fontane, as well as the novels of the great Russian poets, which are all still standing on my book shelves today. She sent writing paper, envelopes,

pencils, scissors, kitchen brooms, cutting boards, clothes brushes, dinner plates, soup plates and bowls of all sizes. During the colder months we received smoked sausages and smoked meat. She used all her free time after work and went to the stores in Dresden and stood in line until she had what she was looking for. She bought whatever was available and thought we could use. It proved as difficult to procure the sturdy cardboard boxes, wrapping material and heavy string that would survive the long trip to West Germany as it had been to find many of the items because everything was always in short supply in East Germany. She also sent us toys, board games, doll carriages, a scooter with air tires, as well as dozens of the carved wooden figures, pyramids and smokers for Christmas from the Erzgebirge, where the women would make them in their homes while the men worked in the mines. She found beautiful vases, pitchers and bowls in pottery factories, wooden candle holders, carved boxes with lids, silver bracelets, necklaces, rings with semi precious stones, amber jewelry and the first wrist watch for me. Many of these items I still have today, and whenever I see them I think of her. These were regular care packages making their way to us in the other direction. It was like a cornucopia, which emptied itself week after week for decades onto our kitchen table. How would we have ever made it in the west without her help?

Citizens of the GDR were only allowed to mail one package per month to West Germany, but we got several every week. When she came to visit us for three weeks in the summer, she would tell us how she took the streetcar to far away post offices after work, no matter what the weather was like, so no one would notice how many packages she actually shipped. She rode to Dresden Neustadt, and all the way to Radebeul, Radeberg, Weinböhla or Klotsche, and had to hurry with the heavy packages so she would be there before the post office closed. She was so frugal and modest and needed so very little for herself. Everything she gave to us, her beloved children.

When I came home from school I saw the contents of a package spread out on the kitchen table. "That's incredible, it's like a miracle!" I exclaimed as my mother brought me my noon meal. I did not know then that these days with her were numbered and

that I would never again experience her like I did at those times when I loved her so very much. Within a very short time this intimacy between us was lost forever.

“You are right, it is a miracle,” she would agree. She sat down next to me, her left elbow propped up on the table, resting her face in her left hand and her legs crossed. Often she was quiet and very restless. I didn’t know what to say either and thought of other things. Seldom would she ask me about school, and if I told her something she would not really listen, but looked out of the window or studied her well-manicured fingernails, which she filed daily. I saw her, sensed her closeness and breathed in her eau de cologne. Sometimes she mentioned that we still had to buy a pound of coffee and mail it to Omi. For all the packages, Omi wanted nothing in return except one pound of coffee beans every two weeks. Now and then she asked for half a pound of cocoa and a bar of chocolate or a pound of raisins, but usually she wanted just coffee. It was difficult enough for us to send her the coffee, because we had hardly any money. In the late afternoons I would run to the post office before closing time to mail a parcel for Omi.