

### *A Christmas Story*

**T**his true story is about the first Christmas after the Second World War. Germany was defeated. It was occupied by the Allies who enforced strict laws on the civilian population. We had no food, no freedom, no presents. We just survived the cold in empty ruins—among the debris of a devastating war. Königsberg was a beautiful town, a cultural center in Prussia, a part of old Germany that now belongs to Poland.

The story goes like this. The pastor of a desolate and distressed congregation opened the door of his house for someone who was knocking quite faintly. He looks into the eyes of a little girl whose mouth quivers as she says, “Mother has not come home for three days.” “Mother” was one of those thousands of mothers that went out at night with shabby knapsacks, hoping it would be foggy so no one could see them as they foraged for food as far as twenty miles from where they lived.

There was a double terror connected with these nightly forays: one, that she might not find food anywhere; and two, that she could be arrested by the occupying military police—and nobody would ever know of her whereabouts. The atrocities of the war were still going on. Everywhere there was rape, fatigue, starvation, unspeakable sorrow. She must have been caught, was the pastor’s first thought. “Was she still alive?” was the question and hope of this little girl.

And then came the thought of the detention camp. Gott alone knew where this mother was. For the defeated and humiliated German people there was no Justice Department, no criminal police that could help. There was only God. God was for all needs the court of highest appeal—the only appeal.



And so the pastor assured the the girl, “Gott knows where your mother is. He will protect her. We will pray for her.” This was the redundant answer he had to give to all the needy people. After the prayer the little girl went back to the ruins among the debris of the war.

The next morning the girl came back beaming with joy. “I found mother. She is in a bunker at the Polish military command. There is a little window in the cellar at the street level. I could talk to her, but she has nothing to eat or to drink.” Then there were a few days when the child could bring her

mother some coffee and crackers from the pastor.

And finally came the morning when the girl appeared again at the pastor's house. She was sad. The bunker was empty. Mother's voice did not respond. "We have no other choice but to ask Gott for help," was the pastor's redundant answer. After the prayer the little girl went back to the ruins among the debris of the war.

Then comes Christmas Eve. Two children come to the pastor's house. The 10-year-old girl had hidden her baby sister, a toddler, all that time. The girls huddled together in the corner, with no trace of their mother. Hundreds of homeless women and children push into the pastor's house. They keep each other warm. And in the joy of the Christmas carols one can hear the sniffles of those little girls. The sermon to the congregation is the same: "We have to pray for the mother of those two girls."

On Christmas day there is joy. Two children cling desperately to their mother's hand as they enter the pastor's house and exclaim, "Mother is

home!" And the story unfolds. Day after day she was held captive in another bunker without the right of a hearing or of learning the reason for her detention because during the Christmas season the courts were closed. She sat on a cement floor, without food, without a bed, without hope. Her thoughts were always with her children as she fell asleep overcome by fatigue. At midnight a Russian soldier shines a flashlight into her eyes and asks: "Why are you here, it's Holy Night?" "I am a prisoner, I can not go home. I have no permit to be on the street," is her distressed reply. "No prisoner today, no permit today. Permit tomorrow. Today Holy Night. Go." And he unlocked her bunker.

The crystals of the snow provided light to find her destroyed building. As she heard the frightened whispers of her two children, she knew that a miracle had occurred on Christmas. It was her Blessed Christmas. And it was mine. For I was that little girl, her daughter. □

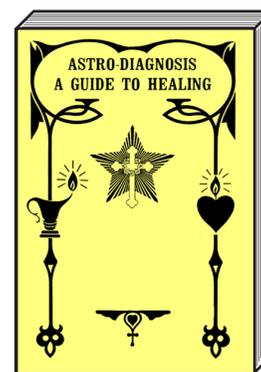
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