

War Costs More than Money – Part III

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The Young and the Helpless

My brother was eight years old and I was not yet 15 when the security guards took away our parents. Left on our own, we had to find ways to survive. People in our apartment house were also stressed and, fearful to be seen with Germans, they momentarily went cold on us. We wanted to stay alive and well until our parents came home. My brother and I avoided any contacts. Most of our time we spent huddled up in our apartment. My brother and I were very close, and he stood up well under this situation. As time went by, we were down to one meal a day.

It was very cold outside - people could not remember when it had been so cold. To go outside was to risk getting sick. Desperate for assistance, we thought the church might help us. One day we went looking for a church, seeking help. When we found a church, there was not a soul around. The door was unlocked so we went in. What we found was a god-forsaken place. Benches had been moved aside and the aisles used to house troops. Behind the altar we found trash mixed with human excrement. The entire building was a ransacked mess, however the altar with the crucifix was still in place. As we looked around, we found a bookmark in the debris and also a booklet. We picked both up to save them. I remember so well how we stood there, totally lost. To us it felt we had hit the wall. Feeling sad, we left and went back to our apartment. That night, like any other night, we knelt down by the bed to say the prayers Mother had taught us when we were little. This time we had the two items from the church with us. Just going to a church left us feeling good. Despite the church being full of dirt and stench, the Lord gave us a gift that provided us with some peace of mind. It was a crucial time for us and helped us maintain our inner strength.

My parents were solid in mind and character. They had good hearts and they walked a straight line, never wavering. We children were expected to work for what we got. Mom and Dad gave us an open door to gain independence. They never used scare-tactics on us to keep us from sinning. If we did sin, Father told us what we did wrong and how to fix it. If we didn't take his advice, he helped us with the strap. We received such help anytime we needed it. They loved us and we loved them. It was our parents who led us to freedom.

In our life, God is the referee. The playing field is the world around us. To win at the game, we have to train hard. If we carried extra stuffing, we worked it off. We didn't need drugs or sermon artists to do it for us. In prayer, one comes to see himself - a true picture shows up within the person. With a signal from God, our conscience paints the picture well. Minds can work miracles, and often do. Today, I thank my parents for their wisdom and leadership. Starting early, I was taught to be strong and independent, standing on solid ground with advantages that we earned. There were victories and defeats, laughter and tears and many wounds. I thank God and the people in my life that I walked away from it whole.

The apartment building we were in had five units - Polish people occupied four of these. We were the lone

Germans and were not exactly welcomed. After a while it got better, but never came close to what one could call trust. We Germans were forbidden to have close contact with the Poles. The Polish people knew this, and also had no interest in becoming our friends. My mother was such a friendly person - her neighbors could not give her the cold shoulder for long. Soon the apartment building was like one family, with but one orphan. When our neighbors asked how we were doing, our answer was always "Very well." The trust of our neighbors that my folks worked so hard for, paid off in the long run. When Poland got their town back, the people in our apartment building did not report us, even though they were strictly instructed to stay away from any German, and and warned that if someone was caught helping a German friend or neighbor they would be punished.

Our neighbors refused to be intimidated, and stood by us. Two of our neighbors told us to bring our belongings to them for safe keeping. We did that gladly. What they couldn't prevent was a routine check by the local police. It was then that our parents were taken away, leaving us boys home alone. We soon ran out of most food items. There was no additional food available - you couldn't buy or even steal anything during the closing days of the war and for days after the fighting moved on. Our neighbors, Josef and Mieta Pieck had a teenage daughter, their only child. One day she mysteriously disappeared. Our neighbors were devastated. Mieta believed that if she would help us, God would help her daughter. A piece of bread from Mieta saved us from starvation. Mieta's change of heart toward us also helped us to get back in contact with our mother. We owed a lot to those people. After the war, I kept in contact with Mieta until she died. Mieta never heard from her daughter again. The world was frozen - people's hearts were cold, but Josef and Mieta had warm hearts and gave us a hand when we were in need.

" Sbosiba" -
Thank You

I can't say if the spelling here is correct. It is a beautiful word to me as is. I heard Grandpa say it to his Russian friends. I'm glad I remembered it, especially in Poland where I needed it most. The Soviets made a clean sweep against the city we were in. As Germans, we were trapped and in a fight for our lives. The Polish people were starving, and so were we. For us to get food was even harder than for the Poles, because we were the hunted. My brother and I were alone in our apartment. After two weeks in this situation, obtaining food became a desperate need for us. Nobody knew where the next bite was coming from. Everything outside was frozen. Dead horses had been partly stripped for their meat. People were fearful to go out onto the street; and when they did they quickly took the nearest meat they could find. However, I never could bring myself to eat horse meat. My brother and I were down to a few potatoes and bit of preserves. These we stretched by eating only one small meal per day.

Walking the street one day, I saw some Russian supply wagons. On one an old man was sitting, eating his lunch. As I walked by, I looked at him and smiled. He smiled back. I stepped back and was looking over his horses. He saw me doing this and called me over. I knew no Russian, but felt comfortable to go near him. He said something in Russian, then gave me a slice of bread. When I said "sbosiba," his face lit up. Quickly I gestured to him that I didn't speak Russian. The old man signaled me to wait. He went to the back of his wagon, got a loaf of bread, and gave it to me. I bowed my head and said "Sbosiba, Papa, sbosiba." I then left. A smile and thanks ended that little war. Then again, the old man and I never were in it.

The holiness of the dead.

The war left our town in Poland with a gruesome picture. Dead people were seen everywhere. Some people got caught waving white sheets from an upper floor window. Not trusting anyone, snipers picked them off with ease. Their bodies were left hanging out the windows, like bedding being aired on a sunny day. It took days before they were removed. A lady from our apartment house called me over one day and warned me to not go picking through the pockets of the dead. She told me that Russians believe dead people are holy, and that disturbing them is bad luck. I assured the lady that I was not planning on doing any such thing. Days later, men showed up to take away the bodies lying about. To see them work was like watching men remove rubbish. Only later did it hit me: In war, how sacred a dead person is. But a living one isn't worth saving.

I liked pigeons - so did Bogdan.

Bogdan was the son of a Polish couple who lived downstairs in our apartment building. The family was rather private, but friendly when we met. One day Bogdan saw me leaving with a travel bag, and asked where I was going. I didn't see him that often, and when I did he was always nice to me, so I told him I was going to my grandparent's farm. He asked if I could bring back a bag of feed for his pigeons.

"You got pigeons? Back home, I had some too," I said. "I haven't seen yours. Where are they?"

"At my friends place," he said. He promised that when I got back, he would let me see them. When I returned from my grandparent's farm, Bogdan wasn't around, so I gave the feed to his dad. I rarely saw him after that. Later, when the Soviets moved in, I saw him more often - he was a policeman. People in our apartment then told us that he had worked for the underground disguised as a street sweeper. He had no pigeons himself - the underground had carrier pigeons working for them. Bogdan and his parents strangely kept their distance from us. They didn't harm us, but they didn't help us either. I still like pigeons. I cannot blame the pigeons for what happened. In the war, they got confused and went the wrong way.

The final solution.

A 76-year-old grandmother was a healthy person. Caring for seven children on a farm she walked a bit bent over. The Plan Makers thought she might be a burden to the family settling in. She was put into a Care Home where she suddenly died of "pneumonia." Ironically, the relatives were not allowed to visit her for fear of spreading an illness. After the war the truth came out. It was not God who called these elderly people home.